

Children Making History in the Sutter's Fort Environmental Living Program

This paper serves as an introduction/orientation to the ethnographic performance “Off to Sutter’s Fort We Go.” In the following pages, I describe the historical and pedagogical context of the Sutter’s Fort Environmental Living Program (ELP) for a class of fourth graders who participated in the program in the spring of 2007. This case study is part of a larger dissertation project investigating how children engage with historical narratives through performance-related activities. Although the students of Ms. P.’s class participated in a number of activities, both in preparation for and during the ELP, this paper and the accompanying presentation will focus on one component of the experience: the Sutter’s Fort journals. The journal assignment demonstrates one of the central arguments of my dissertation: that participating students created written and oral versions of the past that reflected their own interests and priorities—sometimes in sharp contrast to the goals of supervising adults (i.e., teachers, parents, etc.)

Data for this project was gathered in 2007 when I was invited to join Ms. P.’s fourth grade class as they prepared for their overnight trip to Sutter’s Fort. During this time I engaged in a traditional form of ethnography, attempting to immerse myself in the culture about which I wanted to learn. To this end, I attended “Bobcat Elementary” as if I were a fourth grader. I went to school every day from 7:45 to 2:20. I completed all homework assignments, went to typing, library, and school assemblies with my class, and accompanied them to lunch and recess. While it was always clear that I was not *really* a fourth grader, I made an effort to fit in by dressing and, to a certain extent, acting like my classmates. Wearing pigtails, a tight athletic bra, and pink and white tennis shoes, I still towered over the rest of the students, but I looked more like them than like a teacher’s aide. I rarely took notes during the school day because I did not want other students to feel as if they were under scrutiny. As soon as I arrived home in the afternoon I

recorded the day's events, writing down conversations I had had as well as those I had overheard. In addition to my field notes, I took photographs, saved my graded homework assignments and class handouts, and obtained photocopies of the rest of the students' Sutter's Fort journals.

Historical Background

In the 1830s, wagon trains began leaving the young republic of the United States, heading west. Families and single men from the ever-expanding nation and from Europe emigrated thousands of miles in search of adventure, greater political and religious freedom, and economic success. For most settlers, terrain, weather, and inhospitable residents made the expeditions dangerous as well as arduous. My class focused on two wagon trains: the Stephens/Townsend/Murphy Party and the Donner/Reed Party. The former, a fifty-person group made of ten families, left Council Bluffs, Iowa in 1844 and was the first wagon train to cross the Sierra Nevadas into California. Every member of the group survived (and in fact two babies were added on the way). Members of the ill-fated Donner-Party, perhaps the most famous group of pioneers in American history, left Springfield, IL in 1846 and formed their train after parting ways with the larger Russell Party in search of a shortcut known as the Hastings Cutoff. The detour proved to be a mistake and the group became stranded in the Sierras where many did not survive the exceptionally severe winter. By the time a series of rescue efforts recovered the survivors throughout February, March, and April of 1847, the original party of eighty-seven had been reduced to forty-eight. Most notoriously, members of the party were forced to resort to cannibalism during their prolonged confinement in the mountains. Despite the disastrous reports, hundreds of thousands of emigrants followed the Donners' westward move, and the discovery of gold in 1849 brought an even greater swarm of wide-eyed prospectors and venture capitalists to

California, which was ratified as the thirty-first state of the US in 1850.

Of course, white explorers, many of them French and Russian, had been present on the western seaboard long before pioneers sought an overland route. Trappers and traders formed business relations with the Spanish and Mexican *Californios* who had been established in the region since the eighteenth century, as well as the population of American Indians who had arrived millennia earlier. Most trappers arrived by boat; this was also the mode of travel for an entrepreneurial Swiss immigrant named John Sutter, who arrived in Alta California in 1839. With the help of a massive land grant from the Mexican governor, Juan Bautista Alvarado, he constructed the first white settlement in the region. Initially calling his community New Helvetia (New Switzerland), Sutter envisioned an agricultural empire that would grow into a center of trade, industry, and culture. At the center stood the Fort, roughly the size of one large city block, surrounded by a fifteen-foot adobe wall. With the help of considerable American Indian labor the settlement flourished for several years, a way station for emigrants and government officials as well as a hub of commerce. But the Fort could not withstand the considerable changes brought on by the discovery of gold in 1849; most of Sutter's employees hastened to the mining fields, and squatters occupied the farmland outside the Fort's walls. The population of the area grew, and since building materials were scarce, parts of the abandoned Fort were gradually torn down to use in the construction of the growing town of Sacramento. By 1850, only the Fort's central building remained standing. Retiring to Washington, D.C., Sutter spent the last years of his life petitioning the US government for compensation for his contribution in securing California's entrance into the Union.

After lying in disrepair for many years, the Fort gained the interest of a fraternal organization called the Native Sons of the Golden West, who began restoring the structure in 1891. The Fort

became state property in 1947 and was subsequently named a State Historic Park. It is distinguished as the oldest restored fort in the United States, and was named a National Historic Landmark in 1961. Today thousands of tourists visit the Fort each year. Once inside, they peer into the restored bedrooms, storerooms, and shops built into the thick adobe walls. Roughly twenty rooms help convey a sense of the material culture during the Fort's more prosperous years; there are also restrooms and a gift shop. In the center of the Fort stands the two-story building that is the only remaining original structure. As visitors traverse the Fort they may also listen to a free audio tour, and on a few days during the year, curators will be present to deliver information on specific topics, such as gunmanship or frontier medicine.

Environmental Living Programs

According to the ELP's "Resource Manual," the Environmental Living Program model was first introduced at San Francisco's Fort Point in 1973. Sutter's Fort held its first ELP workshop in 1976, and the program has been running since, now servicing over 1,000 students every year. Designed for fourth graders who are studying state history, the ELP offers an interdisciplinary and hands-on approach to learning about the past. As the "Resource Manual" defines "Environmental Living," "the basic concept of the program is to re-live history. Looking into the past, students gather information on how a particular culture survived in the area where they now live" (1). "Re-living" history, for the ELP, means dressing in period clothing and engaging in the same chores and recreational activities as the Fort's 1846 residents. The theory behind the ELP's pedagogical efficacy is articulated in a "Chinese proverb" included in the "Resource Manual's" introduction: "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand" (4). Echoing John Dewey's now-familiar claim that children learn by doing, ELP advocates believe that physically engaging in the actions of settlers leads to a deeper and more

lasting connection to the historical past.

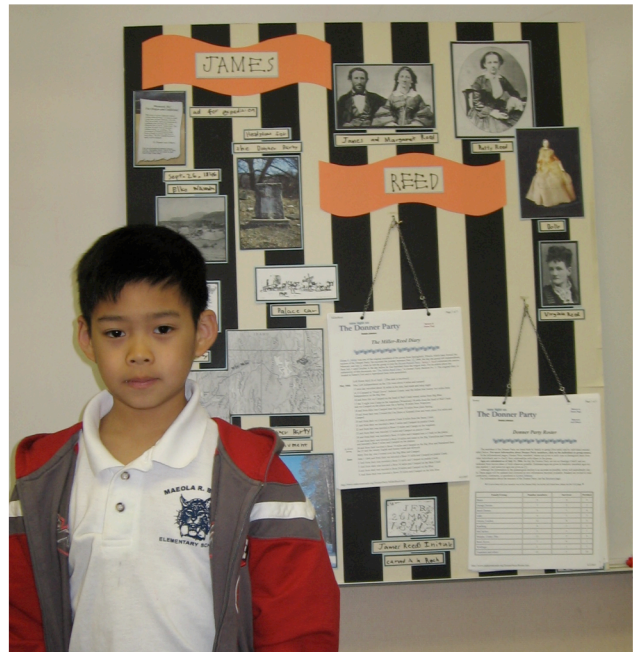
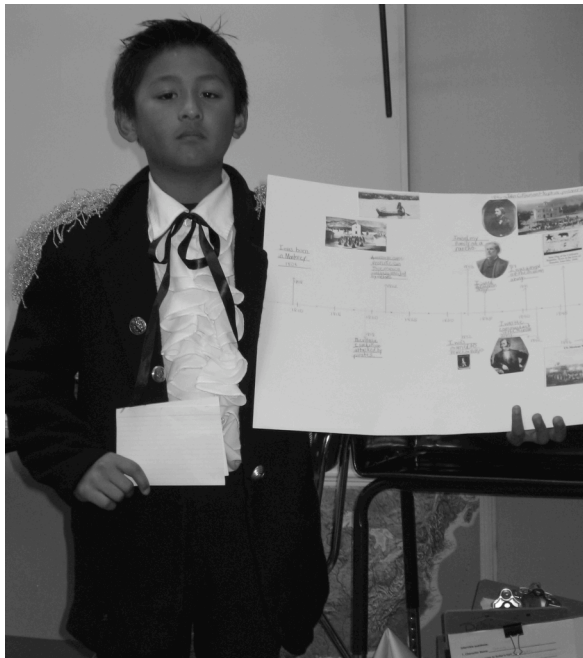
Preparing for the ELP: The Sutter's Fort Journal

Students must spend a good deal of time and effort getting ready for the ELP. When I joined them in March 2007, Ms. P.'s class had been discussing the trip since September and actively working on related projects since January. Students had read the novel *The Pioneers Go West* and were starting a second book, *Patty Reed's Doll*. They had also recently begun work on the central assignment of our ELP: the Sutter's Fort journal. Ms. P. had assigned each student an historical character, and we were required to create a ten-entry journal describing our character's trip west. Characters fell into three categories; the majority of the class was assigned to be members of the Donner/Reed Party, the remainder was mostly cast as folks from the Stephens/Townsend/Murphy Party. A few were assigned to portray characters already living in California in 1846; they included James Fremont, James Beckwourth, James Marshall, John Sutter, and Mariano Vallejo.

The journal assignment was an opportunity for students to engage in independent research. Ideally, such an assignment would provide students with an intimate sense of the past through the in-depth understanding of one person's experience. The journal also gave students a chance to be storytellers, crafting their own versions of history, which they would share during a three-minute oral report that was to be delivered in character.



Students prepare for their oral presentations



Students with optional visual aids for oral reports

There were many sources from which we could draw material for our journal entries. One version of California history was offered in the class textbook designed to satisfy fourth grade state content standards. Facts were also woven into the plots of both historical novels that the class read. While textbook material remained general and concentrated on “significant” events such as the Gold Rush, the novels contained longer, more descriptive, and more personal accounts of overland travel to California. We were expected to explore additional sources to gather biographical information about our characters, looking at encyclopedias or the Internet for material to augment our journal entries. Historical content was also presented in the form of slides and photographs, typically in support of the textual materials; for example, after reading a chapter in *Patty Reed’s Doll* which described the snowbound Reed family’s dire situation in the Sierras, Ms. P. showed us a slide of the Donner Monument, which indicates the exceptional depth of that year’s snowfall. In addition, the ELP “Resource Manual” contained line drawings of various Fort figures (trapper, vaquero, Indian woman) that illustrated costumes and hairstyles of the period.

Ms. P. scrupulously reviewed drafts of each entry for content and grammar before we were permitted to copy it into our homemade journals. The overall content of the assignment was somewhat flexible; the first entry was to regard leaving home, the tenth described arriving at Sutter’s Fort, but in between authors could use some discretion in deciding how to chronicle the journey. The structure of each entry, however, was rigid. They were to be three paragraphs long: the first paragraph describing where we were, the second outlining what we did there, and the third stating how we were feeling. In the first weeks, most entries had to be rewritten at least once, either for content issues or spelling and grammar. Once a student had the formula down, s/he was usually able to speed up production, but there were some students who struggled with

the format the entire time. Ms. P. repeatedly told students Charlie and Tanya that they were doing “too much.” Although she exhorted the writers who were list-inclined to “tell me a story,” the feats of derring-do recounted by Charlie were, for Ms. P., too far off topic. Students like the silent, conscientious Alice were able to find a suitable mix between fact and personal reflection. For those who could not, Ms. P. preferred a journal entry that went by the book—literally. When Eduardo returned to his desk with his fourth entry for what seemed like the fifth time, he put his head down and cried quietly for a few moments before picking up his battered copy of *Patty Reed’s Doll* with new resolve. Shaking his head, he began leafing through it, searching for the factual details that Ms. P. told him were missing from his entry. Finding the chapter on Independence Rock, he carefully copied the description of the terrain, his lips silently moving as he transcribed the passage for his ultimately successful draft.

Like Charlie, Tanya was a student who had been advised by Ms. P. that her journal provided unnecessary and inaccurate details, and she too was flooded with instructions to revise. Tanya was a passionate girl who towered over everyone else in the class (except Ms. P. and myself). Alternating between aggression and charm, she navigated between the class’s two cliques of girls with an air of disinterest belied by a certain awkwardness. Her closest friend, Marisol, was a droll Guatemalan girl who loved to act silly and was uninterested in academics. Tanya had been cast as Virginia Reed and Marisol was portraying the Reeds’ cook, Eliza Williams. When Tanya’s first entry described how she and Eliza played together after dinner, Ms. P. pointed out that the daughter of wealthy Mr. Reed would never play with an adult servant, particularly on the night the family was packing to go to California.

Instances like this point to the complexity of asking children to imagine themselves as historical figures, either physically or in a first-person writing exercise. I suggest that for Tanya,

indirectly including Marisol in her journal was a kind of intertextuality that made the journal entry both more meaningful and more realistic for her. For Ms. P., however, this transgression was not acceptable. On the other hand, the journal assignment contained significant discrepancies that did not concern Ms. P., such as the fact that the Stephens Party, represented by almost a third of the class, never went to Sutter's Fort. In this case, having a standard requirement for the majority of the students took precedence over historical accuracy. By contrast, Tanya sought to individualize her account of the trip, perhaps considering her own feelings when writing about Virginia's experience.

While some students, like Alice, strove to meet Ms. P.'s expectations, others had different goals. Many students' journals contain at least moments of adventure, friendship, domesticity, or scenes in which they figured as heroes. Such was the case with Charlie's oral report on James Marshall. As discussed above, Charlie and Ms. P. were in perpetual disagreement about the quality of his journal entries, and Charlie cynically proclaimed that he was never going to get it right. The day of our oral reports, he had another opportunity to share what he had learned about Marshall, the carpenter who achieved notoriety as the first person to discover gold in California. It was about a week after Prairie Day (a day we had spent engaged in prep activities including trying on our period outfits), and we had been instructed to bring our costumes back to school for the presentations. Charlie had never brought a costume, and Ms. P. had directed him to pull something from the boxes of extra clothing she had stored at the back of the room. When he dawdled, she threatened him with a Consequence (the disciplinary currency of the classroom), and he half-heartedly pulled on an oversized flannel shirt and a straw hat.

One by one the reports were delivered; nearly every student had meticulously copied out their presentations word for word on note cards. Amrit spoke in a loud, clear voice while Alice's

detailed report was barely audible through her clenched teeth. Hugo had supplemented his report with a timeline of Vallejo's life, and Alan had made a poster of the Reed family. Allie had brought slices of beef jerky to share. When Charlie's name was called, he swaggered to the front of the class, sans notes. He had just gotten a buzz cut, so his ears stuck out even more than usual—and he began in his loud, flat voice.

I just decided to go to California, for no reason. So I packed everything....like my guns, and my ammo. Except I didn't have any guns. So I had to buy some. So I got some guns...and some oxen. Then, when we got to Fort Laramie, I realized I was out of ammo, so I had to find a gun store. Which I did, but all they had was shotgun ammo, and I didn't have a shotgun. Then for some reason I just got one, I have no idea how. The same thing happened at Fort Bridger again, for some reason....Then, we got to the Great Salt Desert. For some reason, I had all this water and I was saving all these kids, and they were coming up and hugging me and giving me a watch and stuff, I have no idea why.

Charlie's story continued in this vein for a long time, full of details about his stash of weapons, but short on geographical or biographical information. The final line, delivered in his matter-of-fact tone, was, "And I died poor and alone." At this, the class laughed

Charlie's report was unique in the class. With varying degrees of success, the rest of us stuck to reciting verifiable facts that we had gleaned from the fictional and nonfiction accounts of westward migration we had read and seen. Charlie was the only student who created a story of heroism and adventure based on his own fantasies. If Ms. P.'s responses to his journal entries were any indication, she did not consider the report to be a success. But in many ways, Charlie's presentation demonstrates the aspects of the emigration narrative that made the most significant impressions on him: the prevalence and necessity of guns, the danger of helpless children

running out of water in the desert, and, perhaps most discouraging, Marshall's inglorious end. Contrary to the adage that doing one's best ultimately leads to achievement, Charlie's story suggests that Marshall's risks, labor, and honesty had come to nothing.

The Sutter's Fort ELP offers fourth graders an opportunity to engage with history and specific historical figures with an atypical depth. Of course, there were exceptions, such as the ELP organized by a local Waldorf school. The lead teacher told me that her students were in the middle of devising a production on Norse mythology, and already had too much material to memorize, so she had decided not to work with particular characters and to simply focus on the activity stations. For the most part, however, students invested time researching and writing about one person from the past. In Ms. P.'s class, the ELP preparation included movies, print and internet sources, visual materials, independent research, embodied participation, and imagination. In contrast to a typical textbook-based lesson, both the journal assignment and the subsequent ELP gave students some freedom in deciding how and to what extent they engaged with the material. In this context, children had the opportunity to disagree with or depart from the interpretations offered by their teachers, albeit with mixed results. Particularly in instances such as Charlie's oral report, students "playing pioneers" forged their own connections to the past. Likewise, in these telling examples, storytelling became not only an opportunity for producing those connections, but a medium by which those on the outside might glimpse what children thought or felt about the historical material.

"Off to Sutter's Fort We Go..."

In writing my dissertation, I have tried very hard to represent the perspectives and priorities of children. As I recount my observations and offer analysis, it has been challenging to balance my thoughts with the thoughts of my young informants. In other words, while I have

insisted that we must be more attentive to the words and actions of children, I have found myself in the same trap as many other scholars who are compelled (or required) to offer “adult” conclusions regarding their research. The play I am currently writing is an attempt to bring my classmates back to center stage. In it I dramatize their school lives in the month leading up to the ELP, including their experience in the classroom, on the blacktop, in the lunchroom. I hope to demonstrate that the ELP—and any educational experience—does not occur in a bubble, but remains tied to multiple daily concerns, including social life, academic pressure, and personal challenges.

The excerpt you will see does not accomplish all of these goals. However, it does bring children’s words to the forefront. The scene is a fictionalized one in which the students are asked to read parts of their Sutter’s Fort journal aloud in front of the class. All material is taken from the actual journals of the students portrayed. As you watch and listen, you might consider the following questions: how does the historical narrative of westward migration change in the hands of each young storyteller? What do these changes illuminate about US history and/or about individual students? What, if anything, does the performance suggest about children’s culture?