

Prairie Visions

Standard

SS4H6 The student will explain westward expansion of America between 1801 and 1861.

- a. Describe territorial expansion with emphasis on the Louisiana Purchase, the Lewis and Clark expedition, and the acquisitions of Texas (the Alamo and independence), Oregon (Oregon Trail), and California (Gold Rush and the development of mining towns).
- b. Describe the impact of the steamboat, the steam locomotive, and the telegraph on life in America.
- c. Describe the impact of westward expansion on Native Americans.

Overview

"Although our region was once covered with 18 million acres of prairies, only one percent of those remain," explains White Bear Lake, MN, school parent volunteer Anne Reich. "Our students are used to seeing grasses in lawns, but had little clue about the amazing beauty, diversity, and adaptations of grasses and other native plants in a prairie ecosystem," she adds. So with an eye toward creating a living learning laboratory and discovering more about the state's history, a group of school parents, teachers, and elementary students worked with an ecological consultant to transform a lawn into a simulated prairie.

After a spring "sodbusting" party, students measured their site, then researched native prairie grasses and forbes (nongrass plants) before mapping out plantings. "We turned this into an art project by assigning the fourth and fifth graders to construct life-sized plant replicas using paper mache, cellophane, and other art supplies," says Anne. "This helped us visualize how things would look when full-grown and flowering," she adds. While each student initially enjoyed the instant gratification of planting prairie plant seedlings from a native plant nursery, first graders now raise prairie seedlings in classroom GrowLabs.

But what would the neighbors say about such a project? Their concerns about weeds or invasive plants prompted research and discussion about the definition of "weeds," native species, and so on, reports Anne. Students followed up by raising their own native plants for a community plant sale, providing information to help customers recognize the importance of using a diversity of plants well adapted to local conditions.

"The prairie has provided a wonderful sanctuary where students can reflect and write in journals about the life and interactions they observe," says Anne. "Next year we hope to incorporate more prairie literature and history, explore flowers and seed dispersal, and focus on plant/animal interactions," she adds.

Note: There are many organizations located throughout much of the midsection of the country who are concerned about the loss of native prairies. Many of these groups assist schools with prairie restoration or simulation projects. To find out if any such resources or projects exist in your area, consider contacting your regional botanical gardens, Natural Resources Conservation Service, or similar agencies.

<http://www.garden.org/articles/articles.php?q=show&id=872>