

SENSE OF PLACE THROUGH TALL TALES

Sense of Place: The way that people experience and give meaning to their experiences of a location.

ARTS INTEGRATED CREATIVE WRITING PROJECT

Related to her book, *Calliope Kate and the Voice of the River* (Pelican Publishing 2022), teaching artist Karen Konnerth offers a creative writing centered, arts integrated project connected to language arts as well as social studies goals and objectives for use by grades three, four, and five with elements also appropriate for grades one and two.

<https://www.karenkonnerth.com/calliope-kate-and-the-voice-of-the-river>

Learning goals include:

What is a tall tale?

How are tall tales related to geography and culture?

What traits and behaviors can show where a character is from?

How do exaggeration and humor contribute to a story?

How can a template help construct a story frame with a beginning, middle, and end?

The activities are intended to be inspired by reading the book, which is illustrated with the author's hand-carved marionettes. The rollicking tall tale heroine in the folk tradition of Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill, adventures down the Mississippi River, rides a giant catfish, and tames a hurricane with the instrument of her dreams: the blaring steamboat calliope. The story was inspired by the raucous cacophony of the steamboat Natchez steam calliope, blasting daily across the river to the author's studio in New Orleans.

English Language Arts Standards Learning Goals

READING: Recount stories, including fables, folktales, and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.

WRITING: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

SOCIAL STUDIES Learning Goals

CULTURE: Through experience, observation, and reflection, students will identify elements of culture as well as similarities and differences among cultural groups across time and place.

CONTENTS:

The project packet includes worksheets which lead students through the following steps. It is recommended as a collaborative learning project, with students working together in groups of 4 - 6 members, and may also be used to create individual stories.

STEP # 1: WHAT IS A TALL TALE?

• Curriculum Connections:

Social Studies: map skills, land forms, and geography.

Language Arts: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

• Activity: TALL TALES WORKSHEET: Students are introduced to various tall tale characters to sketch and locate their place of origin on a United States map.

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STEP # 2: HOW ARE GEOGRAPHY AND CULTURE CONNECTED?

- Curriculum Connections:

Social Studies: people, places, and environments

- Activity: SENSE OF PLACE WORKSHEET: Students make a list of plants, animals, land forms, cultural populations, weather, traditional food, music, trades in the target region (their home community).

STEP # 3: CREATE A TALL TALE CHARACTER!

- Curriculum Connections:

Language Arts: Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text

- Activity: BUILDING A CHARACTER WORKSHEET: Students create their own tall tale character from a specific place.

STEP # 4: WRITE A TALL TALE!

- Curriculum Connections:

Language Arts: organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally

- Activity: TALL TALE WRITING TEMPLATE: Students use a story template to build a story about their character.

The template serves to build a story structure. Students may go on to write a more detailed story, including descriptive language and dialogue. Students may also write additional episodes in their character's life.

OPTIONS TO SHARE THE STORIES:

Students may share their story by:

Reading the story aloud to the class

Expanding their story to include dialogue and illustrations in a simple book format

Share the story using simple shadow puppets.

TEACHING ARTIST Karen Konnerth is an award winning arts integration specialist, with experience providing teacher instruction at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts as well as for the U.S. Embassy English Language Specialist Program in Central America, Asia, the Middle East, and South Africa. She is also artistic director of world traveling Calliope Puppets, presenting thoughtfully interactive puppet theater for children, families, and art lovers of all ages featuring hand made puppets in a wide variety of techniques, as well author and illustrator of books for children Calliope Kate and the Voice of the River (Pelican Publishing 2022), and The Snowman Waltz (Sleeping Bear Press 2022).

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AMERICAN TALL TALE CHARACTERS

Before TV and radio, people told stories to entertain themselves in logging camps, on shanty boats, around campfires, or on front porches. Stories about any one character could have endless variations. Some, such as John Henry, were based on a real person. Following are just a few.

Notice that each one is connected to a real place by what they do. Also notice that, although they can do things ordinary people cannot, they are NOT super heroes. They do not fight bad guys. They are more likely to be helpful to people with their strengths.

Read about each character and find clues to decide what part of the country their stories come from. Draw them around the map and make a line to where they belong in the country.

NAME: Paul Bunyan
APPEARANCE: Giant size, bearded, plaid shirt
PERSONALITY: Hard working.
JOB: Lumberjack
LOCATION: Logging camp
TOOL: His ax
SIDEKICK: Babe the Blue Ox (giant blue ox)
STORIES: His footprints made the Great Lakes.
He used trees for toothpicks.
His crew greased his giant frying pan to make his pancakes with bacon slabs on their feet.

NAME: Pecos Bill
APPEARANCE: Cowboy
PERSONALITY: Wild, animal loving.
JOB: Cattle drives (herding cattle from one feeding ground to another)
LOCATION: Desert and prairie
TOOL: His lasso is a rattle snake named Shake
SIDEKICK: Horse named Widow-maker
STORIES: He fell out of his family's covered wagon as a baby and was raised by coyotes.
He dug the Rio Grande when his horse got stranded in the desert without water.
He once lassoed a tornado.

NAME: John Henry
APPEARANCE: Extremely strong Black man
PERSONALITY: Determined, proud of his strength
JOB: Digging tunnels through rock for railroad lines
LOCATION: Eastern mountains, when railroads were first built to connect cities
TOOL: His 30 pound hammer
SIDEKICK: His "Shaker": man who holds the chisel he strikes with the hammer
STORIES: He was born with a hammer in his hand.(often told in song)
His hammer blows made sparks and could be heard for a mile away
If he got sick, his wife Polly Ann took his place, "driving steel like a man."
He won in a contest with a steam drill machine, but then died

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NAME: Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind
APPEARANCE: Wears a hornet's nest bonnet and skunk perfume, old fashioned dress
PERSONALITY: Daring, adventurous.
JOB: American frontier explorer
LOCATION: Prairies and desert
TOOL: Her fearless thinking
SIDEKICK: A panther
STORIES: She could talk, swim, and run at birth, all better than her brothers.
She tames a panther by dancing with it.
She makes a rope out of rattlesnakes to free a man whose head got stuck in a tree.

NAME: Old Stormalong
APPEARANCE: Very tall giant, a sailor
PERSONALITY: Helpful to other sailors and ships
JOB: Captain of a sailing ship based in Boston, Massachusetts
LOCATION: Atlantic Ocean
TOOL: His ship, the Courser, was so tall it had hinged masts to avoid catching on the moon.
SIDEKICK: He had a life long rivalry with the Krakan, a sea monster.
STORIES: He created the Panama Canal by ramming Panama with his ship.
His ship was so big that the crew kept horses to get from one end of the ship to the other.
He ate whole sharks for breakfast.

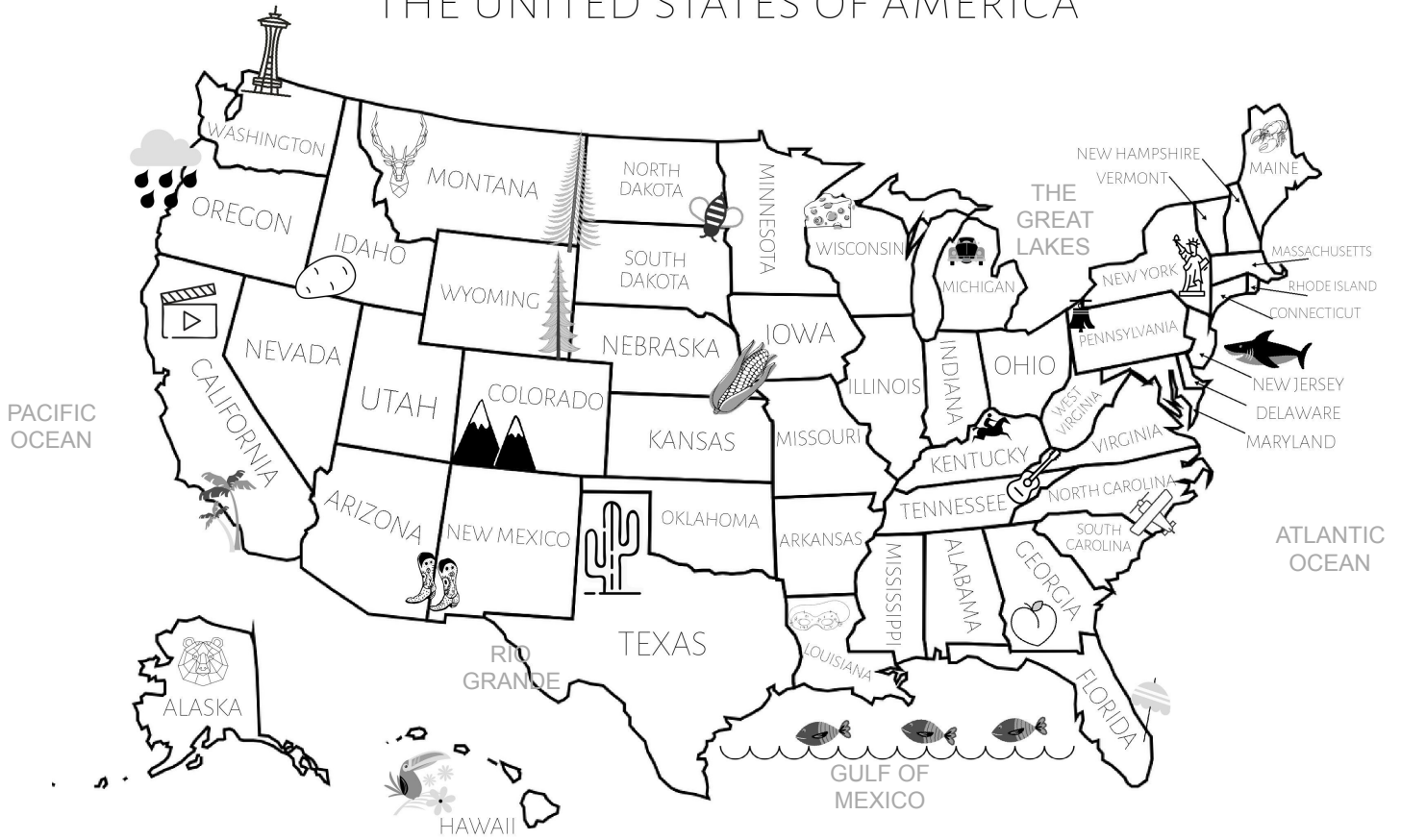
NAME: Annie Christmas
APPEARANCE: Seven foot tall Black woman
PERSONALITY: Very tough, strong, and proud
JOB: Keelboat captain
LOCATION: Mississippi River
TOOL: Not a tool, but she wears a long pearl necklace, with each pearl representing the defeat of someone who challenged her.
SIDEKICK: Her twelve sons.
STORIES: She could walk off a flatboat with a barrel of flour under each arm and a third balanced on her head.
Single-handed, she towed a loaded keelboat from New Orleans to Natchez, running so fast the boat skipped over the water like a swallow.

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AMERICAN TALL TALE CHARACTERS

Sketch each character and draw a line to the region they come from.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



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WHAT MAKES A SENSE OF PLACE?

What makes the place where you live like no other? What elements create a sense of “Place”? The people, plants, animals, land forms, climate and weather, traditional food, music, man-made environment, history, trades, the way you play, and more are what makes one place different from another.

Think about the place where you live and list a few elements in each category.

- FEATURES OF THE LAND: (rivers, mountains, forests?)

- PLANTS, TREES, CROPS

- NATIVE ANIMALS

- PEOPLE (of different races, cultures, languages spoken)

- CLIMATE, WEATHER, NATURAL FORCES

- TRADITIONAL FOOD (food your family cooks)

- MUSIC (Live music you hear. Where do you hear it?)

- TRADITIONAL TRADES (JOBS) (work your family and neighbors do)

- PLAY (indoors, or outdoors, how do you play?)

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BUILDING A CHARACTER

Now you will create a tall tale character from the place where you live. Refer to your Sense of Place list to make up a character who is clearly from this place, and no other. Refer back to the tall tale characters you read about. Your character may be a giant, ordinary size, or very tiny, but they must be spectacular in their ability to do what ordinary people cannot. They can be funny, have a sidekick animal who helps them, or who they have tamed. They have a job similar to jobs people here have, BUT they succeed in their job with their amazing abilities. Remember, they are not super heroes. There are no bad guys. They are not magic.

NAME:

APPEARANCE:

PERSONALITY TRAITS:

JOB:

LOCATION (Where were they born? Where do they live?):

TOOL (or other thing important to them):

SIDEKICK (human or animal. If animal, did they have to be tamed?):

STORIES (Something amazing they did with their special abilities? A land form they created?
Something unusual about the way they live, their home, what they eat, a tool they use?
An amazing feat they accomplished?)

On the back of this page, draw your character.

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TALL TALE STORY TEMPLATE

STORY TITLE _____

STORY AUTHOR _____

_____ was born _____
(MAIN CHARACTER) (WHERE?)

His/her parents noticed right away that _____
(SOMETHING AMAZING)

He/she ate _____ for breakfast.

When _____ grew up, he/she was very good at _____
(MAIN CHARACTER) (WHAT?)

One day, he/she met a _____
(WILD ANIMAL)

He/she tamed it by _____
(DOING WHAT?)

Then, they always _____
(DID WHAT TOGETHER?)

Once, when they were going to _____, they saw _____
(WHERE?) (WHO HAVING A PROBLEM?)

Right away they _____
(DID WHAT TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM?)

Everyone always remembered them because _____!

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ADDITIONAL OPTIONS IN ARTS INTEGRATION

Completing this project with the written tall tale is a rich experience in creative writing, geography, and collaborative learning, however, sharing student work using an arts integrated format such as puppetry deepens learning.

What is arts integrated learning?

Definition from the Kennedy Center:

Arts integration is an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject and meets learning objectives in both.

This approach to teaching is grounded in the belief that learning is actively built, experiential, evolving, collaborative, problem-solving, and reflective and incorporates:

- Drawing on students prior knowledge
- Providing active hands-on learning with authentic problems for students to solve in divergent ways
- Arranging opportunities for students to learn from each other to enrich their understandings
- Engaging students in reflection about what they learned, how they learned it, and what it means to them
- Using student assessment of their own and peers' work as part of the learning experience
- Providing opportunities for students to revise and improve their work and share it with others.
- Building a positive classroom environment where students are encouraged and supported to take risks, explore possibilities, and where a social, cooperative learning community is created and nurtured.

If you are interested in going further with your students into an exciting and simple experience in the ancient and magical technique of shadow puppetry, please contact me for a step by step hand out which includes all necessary materials lists (very simple and easily available), project worksheets, rubric, etc. This is a project I have presented many times to children as well as educators.

I am also available for school author and teaching artist visits.

CONTACT: karen@karenkonnerth.com

In addition, for a variety projects, my book *THE SOPHISTICATED SOCK: Project Based Learning through Puppetry* offers many classroom developed projects for arts integrated learning across the curriculum.

AVAILABLE HERE: <https://www.karenkonnerth.com/sophisticated-sock>