

Strawberry Schools in Florida
By Jo Caldwell, Oscar J. Pope Elementary

I. Lesson Summary

Summary

Polk County played an important role concerning the strawberry industry. There were six strawberry schools in Polk County in the early 1900's. Kathleen High School graduated the very last class in 1954. Children who were a part of strawberry growing families went to school from April to December so that they could be home to help pick the strawberries for market. Monetarily, they were very poor but they did not live impoverished lives. They were a close-knit frontier community who fought many battles with nature, wildlife, and with their fellow man while they tried to prove that strawberry growers and cattle ranchers could live harmoniously once changes were made. Lois Lensky, the author of the book "Strawberry Girl," has taken accounts directly from the people who were known as the "Florida Crackers." Many of them resided in Lakeland; some still do. In this lesson, students will engage themselves in "Readers Theater" activities (included in the Activities" section). One "Readers Theater" is fictitious and written for humor. The other "Readers Theater" is based strictly on the novel, "Strawberry Girl."

Objectives

Students will:

1. Become familiar with the historical accounts of strawberry schools in Polk County using handouts, resources and listening to the read-aloud of "Strawberry Girl;"
2. Participate in the "Readers Theater" activities;
3. Compare time eras by using double bubble mapping or other thinking maps of their choice;
4. Put the information that they mapped into paragraph form.

U.S. History Event or Era

This lesson concentrates mainly during the time of the early 1900s, a little more than a half-century after the last Seminole War.

Grade Level

This lesson could be used for 4th or 5th grade students.

Materials

One copy of 'Strawberry Girl,' one copy (for each student) of one or both scripts of the "Reader Theater" handouts, and one copy (for each student) of a double bubble map (or other comparative map).

*Teacher can go to web for additional information (see "Resources" section)

Lesson Time

The lesson time would vary due to the read-aloud, and the amount of time that is available for the "Readers Theater."

II. Lesson Procedures

Procedures

1. Introduce the unique history of Florida's "strawberry schools" by sharing with your class some chocolate strawberries. Presenting this lesson during our strawberry season would be the perfect time.
2. Share the reading passage titled "Strawberry Schools" (found in the "Activities" section of this lesson) with students. This will present the history of our state's "strawberry schools."
3. During two periods, have your students read one of the "Readers Theater" scripts (or just choose one of the scripts yourself). Give the students a chance to read it silently. Allow your students to volunteer for different parts. Ask the music teacher from your school if you may borrow music stands for placement of the scripts. **Reminder:** Scripts are not memorized nor do you need props. The more students practice, the better they will sound in their expressions and fluency. When you feel they are ready have them perform it before another class, or do it for your televised school-wide news.
4. If your students perform the "Readers Theater" titled "Mary, the Merry Berry Lady who Married Barry, the Strawberry Man," it would be appropriate to review homonyms.
5. Do a daily read of "Strawberry Girl" by Lois Lenski.
6. Have students work in small groups to read and discuss the characteristics of the strawberry schools after reading "Pioneer History" from Socrum Elementary School's website (this reading passage is included in the "Activities" section; the website is <http://www.schools.polk.net/se/Socrum%20Tour.htm>) and how these schools compare to modern-day schools.
7. Have students concretely show the similarities and differences using a thinking map that they have created (i.e., a double bubble map), then put their findings in paragraph form.
8. When the unit is completed, top it off with a strawberry shortcake dessert or other tasty treat! Recipes can be found at the end of the "Activities" section.

III. Activities

Readers Theater #1: “Mary, The Merry Berry Lady Who Married Barry the Strawberry Man”

Characters

Narrator #1
Narrator #2

Narrator #3
Mary

Group of neighbors #2
Group of neighbors #1

Setting: Plant City, Florida

Narrator #1: Mary, the merry berry lady, married Barry the strawberry man. They lived in a land where strawberries were plenty, though this was not always so.

Narrator #2: Now Mary, the berry lady who married Barry the strawberry man, heard the taunting of all of his neighbors.

Group of neighbors#1: We laughed and jiggled and wriggled our fingers as we pointed while he was busy with all of his labors.

Narrator #1: Mary wondered as she watched Barry her strawberry man busily at work amongst his would- be strawberry patch. She silenced her doubts and fears that she felt and only stood by as she watched. But her neighbors.....

Group of neighbors #2: We also laughed and jiggled and wriggled our fingers as we pointed while he was busy with all of his labors. Any fool knows sand cannot grow a strawberry patch.

Narrator #3: Now Mary, the merry berry lady earned her name rightly so. For you see, Merry Mary when she was young, lived among berries from toe to toe. The land with its rich black soil pushed out berries further than your eyes could go. Merry Mary made jars of jams and jellies...yes, cans and cans. Berry pies and stacks of cakes piled a mile high.

Narrator#1: The clothes that she wore...! Patches of Berries were paislied and plundered on belts, buckles, blouses galore. Even on her bloomers, ribbons, and bows. On everything these sweet delights...on everything berries were bestowed.

Narrator #2: So Merry Mary who married Barry the strawberry man was not so merry in the beginning, this was so. This new land that was filled with sand, sink holes and taunting neighbors would surely appear to bring a lifetime of woe.

Narrator#3: In this land where cattle roamed freely to much of their dread. The stress of it all was spinning her head. The sand was plenty and taunting was to. She was wringing her fingers, and crinkling her toes, right out of her shoes.

Group of Neighbors #1: So Mary, the merry berry lady who married Barry the wanna-be strawberry man was feeling quite contrary, much older than twenty, and not quite that merry.

Group of Neighbors #2: But lo one day, when the sun was high, their homestead trembled with a great surprise!

Narrator #1: Green sprouted up!

Narrator#2: And danced all over.

Narrator #3: Red eyes bloomed and defeat was over.

Narrator #1: Neighbors were now silenced as they stood by and watched.

All: Now Mary, the merry berry lady who married Barry the Strawberry man.....

Narrator #1: She earned her name rightly so. Her cheeks now red and aglow. She once again lived among berries from toe to toe...

Narrator#2: And knee to knee, the fields now greater than her eyes could see. Her cupboards once again were filled with strawberry jams and jellies. Yes, cans and cans. There were also strawberry pies and cakes piled a mile high. She wore her patches of berries on buckles and bows, blouses and bloomers, she was covered from head to toe.

All: Now Mary the merry berry lady who married Barry the Strawberry man, lived happily then, now, and, thereafter.

Readers Theater #2 (Adapted from Lois Lenski's "Strawberry Girl")

Characters

Narrator 1	Narrator 2	Bunny
Shoestring	Buzz	Birdie
Zephie Slater	Joe Slater	Dan
Gus Slater	Essie Slater	Dixie
Dovey		

Setting: Characters from "Strawberry Girl" are sitting around reminiscing about their early years as strawberry children.

Narrator #1: The former students are standing around reminiscing about their childhood as strawberry children. The years they are looking back on are between 1942-1944. The year that they are presently in is about twenty years later.

Shoestring: Well, it sure is good to see everybody. I was trying to think about what really summed up our years before our Pa changed his ways. I decided to write this poem. I does better with my writin' then I does with my talkin'.

(Joe and Gus Slater start snickering and elbow each other.)

Joe and Gus (Howling with laughter): You??? Write?

Birdie: Hush up and listen. Shoestring did apply himself after that incident when you boys beat up the teacher.

Joe: OK, lets hear it!

Shoestring: OK....here it is....If any one laughs...I'll blast ya !!

Cows roam aimlessly
Eating fresh leaves
Because there is no food
For their stomachs' ease.
Jeff done tole li' Essie
New folk is here.
Unknown to Pa as he lays
Stupored from his beer.
Mama holds steady;
"The Boyers." she replies.
A strawberry family all the way
From Caroliny.
There may be trouble
As our cows does roam.
They are a-feasting
On greens and fruits
Thats not their own.

Birdie: Wow! That sure says it in a nutshell. The problems between your pa and mine!

Shoestring: Things weren't that great between your ma and mine as I can recall. Remember the day we came for a visit? We were kind of curious since no one lived on that ole farm since the Roddenbery's because of the Big Freeze in 1895. Ma wanted to borrow a cup of sugar, but she first saw what she thought was a bed cover on the eatin' table. Such a surprise to her eyes...a tablecloth to us then was unknown. Ma thought your ma was just

being mean and uppity. But then I saw this open door and what I thought was a ridiculous sight was your pa in that thar field trying to grow strawberries. I thought everyone knew Floridy was not the proper environment for strawberries.

(All cast members freeze in place while the narrator speaks)

Narrator #2: Now the Boyers learned about the growing of strawberries from a man named Galloway and how it's to be done. So the laughter of Shoestring bothered no one. The Slaters, under the Boyers skin they did git...as their starving cows did roam their land, every bit. Fencing laws did not exist, so Boyer had a plan to keep the cows and other critters from his land.

Birdie: Well, I must admit there were things that we didn't understand about you as well, such as not feeding your COWS.

Shoestring: Ma didn't understand why you fed yours!! She thought there was plenty of grass and that was all they needed.

(Everyone laughs)

Birdie: I remember when the hogs got into the strawberries in the middle of the night.....

Dixie: I remember that first night it happened. We were all sleepin' snug after a hard day a-workin' pickin' mountains of strawberries. The squeals of the pigs were so loud I thought that I was a havin' a frightful dream.

Bunny: But then I heard Pa a-yellin' and carryin' his shotgun. There was such a commotion.....

Buzz: All the hogses got away but one...

Birdie: For the longest time I thought that hog was a goner. I thought that Pa had done killed the poor thing.

Dan: I remember even when we were workin' by ourselves in the fields when Pa was not around, we still did not dare talk about it.

Dovey: Pa was never one to give in to violence.

Shoestring: Never given to violence?!!! Remember that time your Pa whipped me for not doing what he asked me to do?

Birdie: Yes, when we found your cow in the open range, stuck in the mud, and you weren't willing to take care of her. Well, you know how we Boyers love animals. Overall, though, Pa was pretty patient. He would put up a fence and Mr. Slater would take his wire cutters and cut it down.

Shoestring: Our hogs, though, didn't git through no open fence. Those critters just crawled under it. Why, if they git the notion, they could knock over a house...

Birdie: I heard my Pa tell Mr. Slater that if he would just feed his hogs they wouldn't try to come onto our property to eat the corn and strawberries.

Dan: And sho' 'nough those hogses came back and this time one of them lost part of an ear after Pa cut it off.

Shoestring: All I could think about was what we was gonna do to keep them from shootin' each other.

Birdie: Well, it sho' helped things a whole lot when you started feedin' 'em.

(All cast members freeze.)

Narrator #1: Now at this time all the little children went to school. If I tried to name them all I'd be a fool. Learning was stopped short one very first day when the Slater boys beat the teacher to the floor. Now school, mind you, was closed from December to April. The children worked in strawberry fields picking one strawberry after the

other. They thought it was fun at first, but it was back-breaking work. Remember this when you complain to mother about your own chores.

Shoestring: One day Pa sold a steer. Everyone was happy, indeed...so happy we all went a-shoppin'. For me, it was overall jeans...

Essie and Zephie: For us it was new hats, dry goods for Ma, and even maybe a stove.

Joe: But Pa drank away the steer money...every bit, I mean! That is ...after he finished gambling most of it.

Narrator #2: There was not only a storm a-brewin' at the Slaters, but a storm from the sky showed itself at Polk County, too.

Birdie: That happened around the same time as that real bad storm hit when we were in church.

Dovey: We sure had a hard time getting' around all of those fallen oaks and pines.

Gus: The wind tried to lift our wagon asunder.

Essie: The wind would blow around the moss and it would sting our eyes.

Shoestring: There were many times nature would be our friend or our foe.

Dan: Remember the time when I had a real bad tooth and the travelin' dentist came? They did not have anesthesia in those days for such things. When he took me in the barn and started pullin'....

Birdie: You could hear him a-yellin' all over Polk County!

Dan: Then, after that, he lumbered on over to our cow and pulled HER tooth!!!!

(Everyone laughs)

Bunny: Well, what about the ant hills that seemed bigger than me.

Birdie: A little bit of an exaggeration there, Danny, but they did have a way of finding you.

Birdie: Even though we had some hard times we had some good times, too.

Dovey: I remember us singin' songs when we were scrubbin' the floor with a cornhusk broom.

Essie: When we got older, Zephie and I got to helping with the cratin' of the strawberries....

Zephie: That our older brother said would never grow.

Essie: We'd sing this particular song.

Essie: What was that song we used to sing?

Birdie: Oh, yes, we learned it at the cane-grindings. Let's see it went like this:

"How happy was the miller when he lived by himself,
The wheel rolls around and he gathers in his wealth;
One hand in the hopper and the other in the sack,
The wheels rolls around and he hollers out, 'Grab!'"

Essie: At the cane-grinding the dancers would grab a girl, but we would grab a strawberry.

Dovey: Pa did not particularly like it when we would eat the strawberries.

Dixie: "Eatin' all the profits," he'd always say...except at that time I did not know what he meant by the word, "profit."

(Everyone laughs.)

Dixie: Well, the cane-grindings were always fun. I always loved seein' all that pummy as it fell to the ground.

Shoestring: It looked like ole soapy wash water.

Birdie: But it did taste like sugar candy to me. Why, even our enemies would come around during cane- grinding time.

Shoestring: Are you referring to my Pa?

Birdie: And afterward the yard plays and the candy pulling would begin. In spite of the rift between your pa and mine, your pa would call out the dances and have the pliers in his pocket to cut down our fence.

Shoestring: No way!!

Birdie: After your Pa decided to change his ways, your ma told me so. Remember that very morning after the cane-grinding when your cows trampled all over our strawberries? The fence was cut bit to bits! Both of our Pas got into a terrible fight about fence laws. It was said that Florida would never be a peaceable place until that question was settled.

Dan: Our ma sure found a way to settle it peaceful-like for a while, anyway. I remember Mr. Slater bringing all of his cattle. Ma started sprinkling all of this white powder all over the strawberries. Well when Mr. Slater saw all of that he high-tailed the cattle right out of there because he thought it was poison.

Shoestring: Yep. Dad was pretty shook up. Never thought ole Boyer would go that far. He drank that night. I only wished it had all stopped there. The day finally did come when the pigs went back again, and your pa finally.....

(Everyone freezes.)

Narrator #2: This reading will now end for I must move along. Their life was not easy. If you thought so you're wrong. Get the book yourself. Put the Nintendo away. Find out what happened with the Slaters and Boyers, even on the next day. Enemy rivals, their lives do heat up. So sit up and listen to a story that's true. It happened in the neighborhood right next to you.

Strawberry Schools

Kathleen High School of Polk County was the last school to graduate students from a “strawberry school.” The school is now known as Kathleen Middle School. This took place in 1954. A “strawberry school” was one that students only attended during the summer months from April to December when strawberries were not yet in season. The purpose of this was so that the children could stay home and help pick strawberries in the fields during the winter months. This practice started in the early 1900’s. In Polk County, there were six of these schools. These farming communities were very poor and had to use their children for the picking process. In those days if a man had five acres of strawberries, he had a big patch. Today, if you have fifty, you don’t have much.

Many children wore clothes made from feed and flour sacks. They did not know what it was like to have a bathroom inside of the house. Their entertainment was drive-in movies, cheap restaurants, and driving through orange groves.

Other strawberry schools were Duette Elementary, Polk City Elementary, and Lavilla School (erected in 1867, this was the first school in Dover). Dover flourished as a shipping and trading center for the surrounding groves and farms, and only ranked behind Ichepucksassa (now known as Plant City).

The area off of Ward Road to about one-half mile west of Highway 98 is designated as “Historic Socrum.” In the early 1840’s pioneer settlers began moving to this tranquil, scenic wilderness area. They braved Indians, swamps, and wild animals; suffered many hardships; and lived under very primitive conditions. Socrum was once known as “Soak-Rum Territory” because people soaked their rum to keep it cool in Indian Pond near present-day Bethel Baptist Church, which is just around the corner east of the school. Fort Socrum was built south of the church to protect the community from hostile Indians. The last Indian skirmish occurred in 1856. Sometime during the 1850s the community’s name was changed to Socrum.

The first Socrum school was opened in the 1850s and was one of the first schools established in Polk County. Some of the original buildings doubled as a church on Sunday and school during the week. Professor S. L. Collins taught at the Socrum school in 1909-1932. Until 1932 the schools of this area were known as “strawberry schools.” Interestingly, records show some of the earliest schools were only in session about three months out of the year because children had to help with many of the agriculture crops, not just strawberries, during most of the school year. The last wooden school burned down in the mid-1930s, and there was not another school in the community until the current Socrum Elementary School opened in 1991.

Some of the differences that the strawberry growers encountered were the attitudes of those around them. They were ridiculed for trying to grow strawberries in Florida due to the sandy soil. The cattle ranchers did not fence in their properties and allowed their cattle to roam freely (fencing laws did not occur until the 1950’s), and they did not appreciate those who fenced in their properties. The strawberry growers were frustrated about the freedom to roam given to the cattle, as well as other farm animals; this freedom caused the destruction of the farmers’ staple crops in many cases. Disputes would occur when the crop growers attempted to protect their properties with a fence.

Socrum Elementary's Pioneer History

The area from Ward Road off Kathleen Road to about one-half mile west of Highway 98 is designated as "Historic Socrum". In the early 1840's pioneer settlers began moving to this tranquil, scenic wilderness area. They braved Indians, swamps, wild animals, suffered many hardships, and lived under very primitive conditions. Socrum was once known as Soak-Rum Territory because people soaked their rum to keep it cool in Indian Pond, near present day Bethel Baptist Church that is just around the corner east of the school. Fort Socrum was built south of the church to protect the community from hostile Indians. The last Indian skirmish occurred in 1856. Sometime in the 1850's the community's name was changed to Socrum.



Indian Pond, also known as "Church Lake," as it appeared over fifty years ago. Bethel Baptist Church is seen in the background.



This is a picture of the first schoolhouse in Socrum. It was located just east of the present Bethel Baptist Church on the property of C. M. Witter, Sr., grandfather of R. Maloy. The building was also used as a Primitive Baptist Church on Sundays.

The first Socrum school was opened in the 1850's and was one of the first schools established in Polk County. Some of the original buildings doubled as church on Sunday and school during the week. Professor S. L. Collins taught at the Socrum school in 1909-1910 and was principal at Kathleen High School when the first class graduated in 1932. Until 1953 the schools of this area were known as strawberry schools. Instead of a summer break, they had a winter break when strawberries were in season because the children needed to help pick the strawberries. Interestingly, records show some of the earliest schools were only in session about three months out of the year because children had to help with many of the agricultural crops, not just strawberries, during most of the year. The last wooden school burned down in the mid-1930's and there was not another school in the community until the

current Socrum Elementary School was opened in 1991.

Family life in early Socrum required children to help out with the chores around the home place before and after school, so they did not have much time to get into mischief. Also different from children today, they usually had only a couple of dresses or overalls for school and had to change into their work clothes as soon as they got home.



This is an early 1920's picture of one of the local strawberry fields in the Socrum community. It was located a couple of miles east of the present day school. You can see all the children helping pick the berries in the field.

Strawberry Recipes

Strawberries and Fondue

Place a large bowl of fresh strawberries, washed and drained beside one or more of the following fondue dips. Leave green caps on to keep berries fresh. Have long toothpicks on hand for dipping berries.

White Chocolate Fondue

12 ounces white chocolate
Add ½ teaspoon cherry or vanilla extract.
8 ounces heavy whipping cream

Combine chocolate and cream in double broiler. Stir until chocolate melts completely. Mixture should be creamy; do not overcook. Mix thoroughly. Put mixture in a fondue pot and keep low flame on to keep it warm. Serve with any type of fruit or firm cake.

Basic Chocolate Fondue

½ cup cream
1 pound milk chocolate

Warm cream in saucepan over low heat. Stirring constantly, add chocolate, broken into small pieces. Continue stirring until chocolate is melted and well blended. Serve in fondue dish over candle or very low heat.

Caramel Fondue

1 14 ounce package of caramels
1/3 cup cream

Melt in double broiler – stir frequently. Add dash of salt – pour into fondue pot.

~ Just for Fun ~

Strawberry Butter

1 pint strawberries or 10 ounce package frozen thawed and drained.
½ pound butter, softened.
1 cup confectioner sugar (1/2 cup if using frozen strawberries.)

Place ingredients in food processor or blender and process until smooth and creamy. Chill. Especially good spread on a bagel or morning toast.

Super Easy Strawberry Sherbet

2 cups buttermilk
1 ½ cup strawberry jam

Stir buttermilk into jam. Pour into refrigerator tray. Freeze until firm. Cut into frozen mixture. Place in chilled mixer bowl. Return to tray. Cover and freeze until firm. (Can also freeze in ice cream freezer according to manufacturer's directions.) This is light, refreshing and delicious!

Strawberry Salad Dessert

1 large box strawberry gelatin
1 cup boiling water
2 packages frozen strawberries
1 medium can crushed pineapple, drained
1 package dream whip
3 ounce cream cheese
½ cup nuts

Dissolve gelatin in boiling water. Add juices, strawberries and pineapple. Prepare dream whip. Blend in cream cheese. Top with nuts.

Strawberry Filled Angel Cake

1 angel food cake mix
1 (10oz) box frozen strawberries
1 large package strawberry gelatin
1 cup water
1 pint whipping cream

Bake cake according to package directions and cool. Heat strawberries in saucepan over low heat. Add gelatin and 1 cup water; stir until dissolved. Chill until partially set. Whip cream until stiff peaks form. Beat gelatin mixture into whipped cream. Cut 1 inch layer crosswise from top of cake. Remove cake from center of cake, leaving one inch wall around cake. Fill cake and whipped cream mixture and frost remaining mixture after returning 1-inch layer to top of cake.

Fresh Strawberry Pie

1 (3oz) package strawberry gelatin
¾ cup sugar
1 ½ cup water
3 tablespoons cornstarch
1 quart strawberries
1 (9 inch) pie shell

Cook gelatin, sugar, cornstarch and water until thickened. Cool. Clean and slice strawberries. Bake and cool pie shell graham cracker crust or regular shell. Place berries in pie shell. Pour gelatin mixture over. Chill. Works well with other fruits. Just use gelatin that is the same as fruit (peach, red raspberry, etc...)

IV. Assessments

1. Students will break up into their small groups and discuss the likes and differences of the type of schools that they now attend, and their lifestyles with the lifestyles of children of strawberry schools.
2. Students will make a list of the likes and differences separate from their group partners.
3. Students will make a thinking map to present their findings. (example - create a double bubble map).

*You may also wish to use any of the following multiple-choice items.

4. A "strawberry school" was:
 - a. a school that students only attended from April to December in order to harvest strawberries from January to March;
 - b. a school where strawberries were grown in a field on school grounds;
 - c. a school that served strawberries with lunch more than twice a week;
 - d. what an "A" or "B" school was called in the 1940s and '50s.
5. Which of the following was NOT a former strawberry school?
 - a. Duette Elementary
 - b. Kathleen High School
 - c. Lake Gibson High School
 - d. Polk City Elem.
6. How did the community named "Socrum" allegedly get its name?
7. In your opinion, why did cattle ranchers and farmers often clash in Socrum and in other areas of rural central Florida prior to fencing laws?
8. How different is your life compared to the lives of children that attended strawberry schools? How does your summer vacation differ from the winter break for a typically strawberry school child?
9. Our traditional school calendar was originally made many, many years ago to allow a long break in the summer in order to provide a way for students to help their families harvest crops in the summertime. Now that the great majority of students, and their families, are no longer involved in agriculture, should all schools adapt their schedules to allow students to attend throughout the summer with a shorter break provided? Explain your answer in a well thought-out 5-paragraph essay.

V. Resources

<http://www.schools.polk.net/se/Socrum%20Tour.htm>

Mahoney, Rebecca. "Remembering an Era." *The (Lakeland) Ledger*. January 30, 2004.

Lenski, Lois. Strawberry Girl. Harper & Row, 1945 (reprint – 1987).

"Strawberry Girl Reunion" by Jo D. Caldwell

"Mary, the Merry Berry Lady, Who Married Barry the Strawberry Man" by Jo D. Caldwell

Gannon, Michael. Florida: A Short History. University Press of Florida: Gainesville, FL (1993).

Kathleen Historical Society