

Teaching with Folk Sources: On the Job!

This example illustrates how educators and their students can use folk sources.

What Are Folk Sources?

What are included as primary sources from ethnographic and folklife collections might surprise you. They include historical documents, as well as photographs, recorded interviews, artifacts, recipes, music, maps, and more.

What does this mean for your classroom? How do you think about “truth”?

Oral histories and ethnographic materials present complicated issues and topics by comparing and contrasting life experiences, voices, and vantage points. **Although they do often reflect historical truth, primary sources are valued as powerful reference points for understanding individual and community perspectives on memory, meaning, and identity.**

The Occupational Folklife Project (OFP) began in 2010 as a multi-year project by the American Folklife Center (AFC) to document the culture of contemporary American workers during an era of economic and social transition.

A “Collection” refers to a group of items in an archive that are related by collector, content, or some determined common factor.

The screenshot shows the Library of Congress website for the Occupational Folklife Project. The page is titled "Occupational Folklife Project" and includes a "Featured Content" section with five interview thumbnails. The thumbnails are: Sarah Fortin interview conducted by Fred Calabretta, 2017-02-03; Kim Spicer interview conducted by Setare S. Arashloo and Jaime ...; Raquel Volaco Simoes interview conducted by Josephine McLeister ...; Jack Briggs interview conducted by Sarah Bryan, 2017-02-08; and Patrick Wellington interview conducted by Candacy Taylor, ... The page also includes a sidebar with "About this Collection", "Related Resources", "Rights and Access", and "Expert Resources". The main content area has a "Listen to this page" button and a detailed "About this Collection" section.

Students may notice in this screenshot the diverse occupations and workplaces because the example include locations and material artifacts featured in the collection, from fishing nets, a journey wire-woman (electrician), LGBTQ resource center, funeral home services, and African American barber.



One example of a primary source from the OFP collection is a photo of an object (top left image). The caption reads:

“An Iron Workers Union (IWU) Local #63 pin honoring work on the Chicago "bean" [Anish Kapoor's "Cloud Gate" sculpture] in Millennium Park in downtown Chicago. Many members of IWU Local #63 worked on various projects during the Millennium Park's construction.”

Within the collection, we can discover that this photo is one of 35 images connected to an audio file: An interview with a living member of IWU #63, Richard Rowe conducted by Clark Douglas Halker. A quick scan of the images also brings up a photo of Rowe (bottom left image). The caption reads:



“Richard Rich Rowe, business agent for Iron Workers Union (IWU) Local #63 and unofficial iron worker historian, at IWU Local #63 Headquarters in Broadview, IL.”

Taking time to review the photos and associated captions offers students an opportunity to begin assessing the context of the item they are both connected to: The interview.

Both images above can be found in this collection: Rowe, Richard, Interviewee, Bucky Halker, Interviewer. “Richard Rowe interview conducted by Clark Douglas Halker,” July 8, 2011, in Occupational Folklife Project, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017655522>.

“Timecode” refers to the audio or video time elapsed from the beginning of the clip.

Offering students a two-minute excerpt of the interview (I am using timecode 11:30-13:30 in this example) offers one member’s perspective about how unions fought for an eight-hour day, the steelworkers making the first Ferris wheel for the Chicago World’s Fair, and the formation of unions through and across ethnic lines.

A “transcript” refers to a written text of an audio or video clip with timecodes.

“When word came that Chicago was going to host the World Columbian Exposition in 1893... All these little shop unions decided to band together and they founded the Architectural Ironworkers Union of Chicago. That union had 1500 members. They had so many members that they split it up into three separate locals. They were an independent union, not affiliated with anyone. They were the Architectural Ironworkers Union of Chicago and they had three locals. One local conducted their business in English, one in German, and one in Bohemian. ... we went on strike. And this was during the building of the World Columbian Exposition. That was ironworkers working on the big Ferris wheel, W. Ferris’ observation wheel that he called it. They were working on the Ferris wheel and all the different buildings for the World Columbian Expedition. And this time, we won recognition for a union and we won the 8 hour day.”

—Richard Rowe



Highsmith, Carol M, photographer. Artist Anish Kapoor's "Cloud Gate" stainless steel sculpture at AT&T Plaza in Chicago, the largest city in Illinois and as of 2020 third-largest in the United States. United States Illinois Chicago, 2017. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2020721850>.

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(See also transcript, available with the interview as a PDF excerpted on the left.)

Narratives connecting to the Haymarket Square Market “Riot,” International Workers of the World, and significant architectural advances in mortar, cast iron, and steel all can be found in other sections of the recorded audio.

Students may recognize through a visual analysis exercise or through reading the caption that this pin is shaped like the “Chicago Bean,” officially known as Anish Kapoor’s Cloud Gate—a well-known destination in Millennium Park for tourists and residents. Realizing that something experienced today links to a deep occupational labor history that reaches into history narratives that connect over a hundred years of work can establish an important starting point to understanding why primary sources prove powerful in offering multiple perspectives and new voices for challenging history.

This Curriculum Guide offers scaffolding to Discover Folk Sources like these items above—just one example of what can be found at the Library of Congress American Folklife Center and other folklife archives in your region.

Want to see this narrative in a lesson plan format? See Lesson 1.1 in the curriculum guide that follows.