

A Teacher's First Experience with National History Day

Cellene Smith, Teacher, Arizona

Arizona teacher Cellene Smith shares stories about her first experience bringing National History Day to her students. She describes successes as well as things that did not work out quite as she had hoped, and talks about future plans for expanding NHD's role in her classes.—EDITOR

Introducing Students to Research

During the 2003-2004 school year, I had my first opportunity to introduce students to historical research methods, the use of primary sources, and National History Day. After several years of pressuring my school to offer advanced history instruction, my efforts bore fruit and the principal assigned me a 10th grade Honors World History Class. I planned to use the AP World History Curriculum as a model, which meant that writing and critical thinking skills would need to be major components of the course. I also wanted to involve students in actually doing their own research.

I knew that the context in which I teach might make it difficult to accomplish my goals for this course in the first year. I teach at Chino Valley High School, a small, 800-student rural high school located in central Arizona. Most of the students are from lower- to middle-income families. Student access to the Internet, libraries, and research facilities is quite limited, as is many students' exposure to basic research skills.

Geography limits my students' access to resources. The town of Chino Valley has one small public library, located about two miles from the school. Otherwise, one has to drive twenty miles to Prescott, Arizona, the nearest city of significant size, to reach any other library or research facility. In Prescott, students can visit two libraries—a larger public library than the one in Chino Valley, and the one that serves Yavapai Community College. Prescott also has a research archive associated with a local museum called Sharlot Hall. All other research facilities, archives, libraries, colleges, and museums are nearly a three-hour drive (one way) from Chino Valley. Most of my students are still too young to drive, so parents must drive them to any of the available libraries other than the small one in the school or the public library in town.



This newspaper headline and the others with this article appeared in the daily Prescott Journal-Miner in September–November 1918.

Because of the difficulty in accessing research facilities, therefore, my students and I have to rely heavily on the Internet for most of our research needs. The kind of extended access and concentrated time to use computers and Internet for research at school is fairly limited. While the school does have computers in the library and one computer lab, there are none in any of the classrooms.



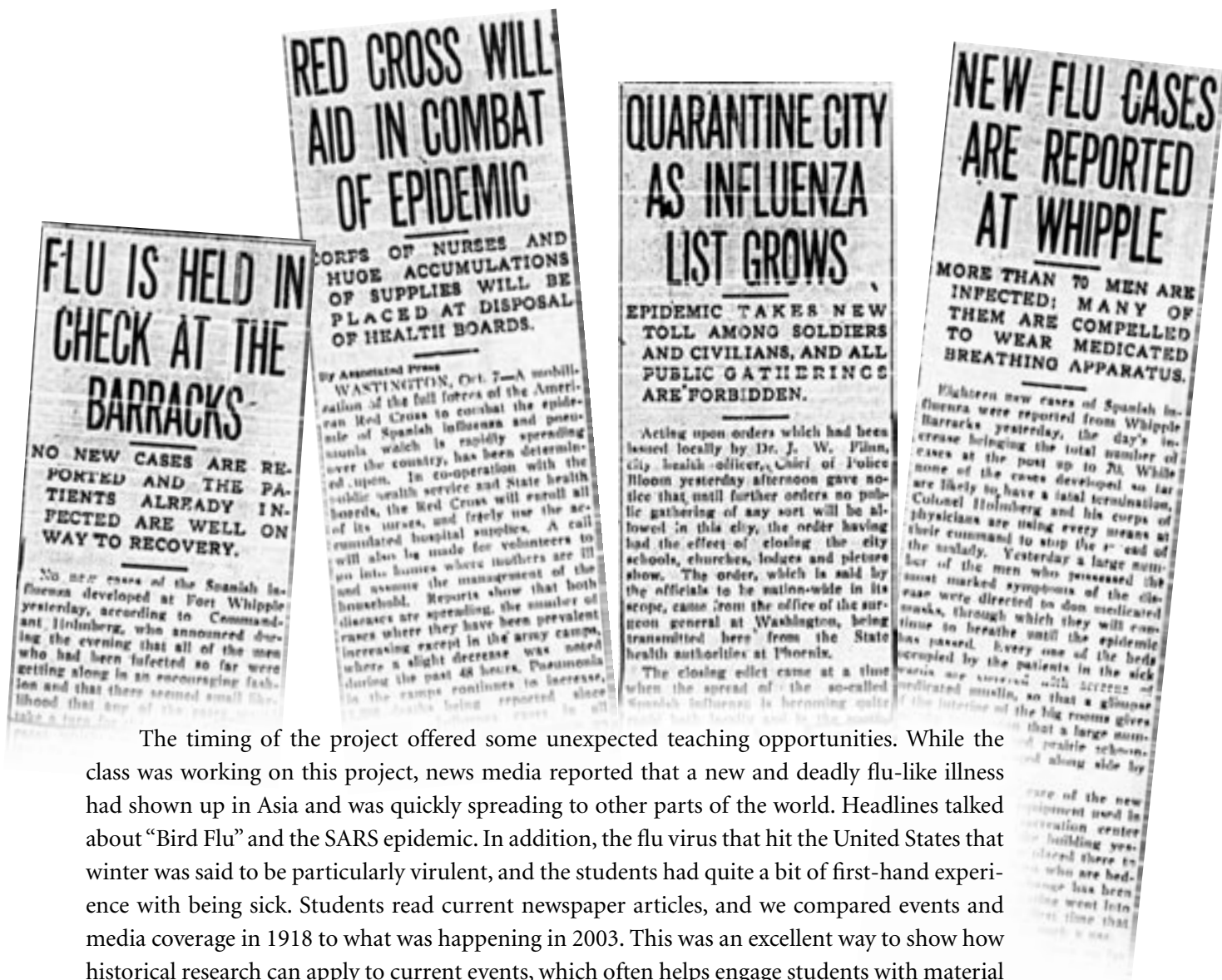
An even bigger barrier that I had to overcome, though, was the students' lack of experience in doing previous serious historical research or applying analytical thinking skills. The extent of their prior experience consisted of writing short papers or working on small school projects. For past class assignments, many of them simply used encyclopedias and whatever they could find on the Internet to fulfill their source requirements. They had written "reports," summarizing and repeating back information from those sources, but they had not been taught or expected to analyze information or critique their sources.

I decided that I had to start by teaching my students the higher level skills they lacked. Even though this was a world history class, it seemed like I could best accomplish my goals by having them study the local impact of a world-wide disaster: the 1918 influenza epidemic. At the beginning of the school year, I assigned a semester-long class project. The class would produce an article for our local newspaper, the *Prescott Courier*, about how our local area was affected by the epidemic, based on investigation of primary sources. Each student had to write his or her own article, and then the class would work together to combine and condense their individual articles into a single piece which would be submitted to the newspaper.

Class Project: 1918 Flu Epidemic

To prepare my students to work with primary sources, I first had the class watch one of the episodes in the PBS documentary series *American Experience* that dealt with the epidemic. Since *American Experience: Influenza 1918* focuses on events and impacts within the United States, I next had my students read secondary source material about the epidemic as part of world history. We discussed the flu epidemic in the context of World War I and other aspects of world history of that time. Then, students started looking for additional information and sources on the Internet. They explored, and brought back to the class websites they had found. I taught them to examine and analyze the sources, and to figure out which were appropriate for research and which probably were not. The following were among the most useful sites they found:

- Project Fort Greene—Yesterday and Today for Tomorrow: "The Influenza Pandemic of 1918," by Andrew Spellen (<http://pd.ilt.columbia.edu/banneker/fgproj/influ.htm>);
- "The Influenza Pandemic of 1918" (www.stanford.edu/group/virus/uda); and
- Influenza Epidemic of 1918-1919: A Selected Bibliography (<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/hsl/resources/guides/flu.html>).

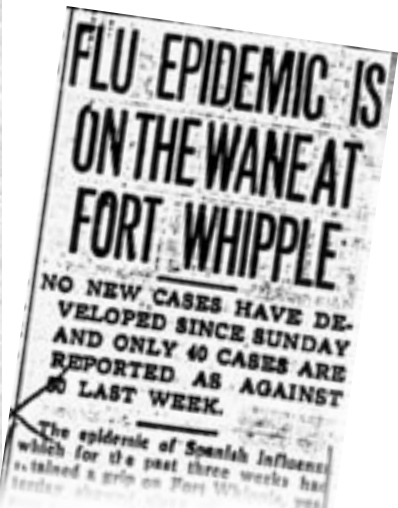
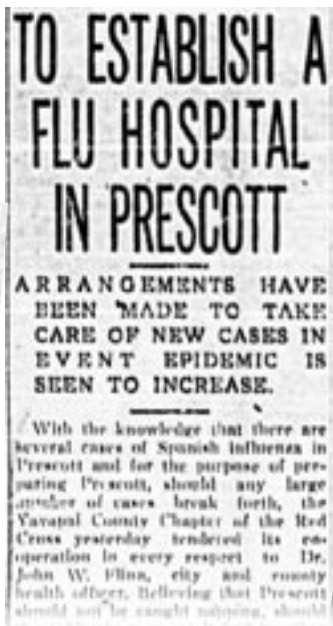
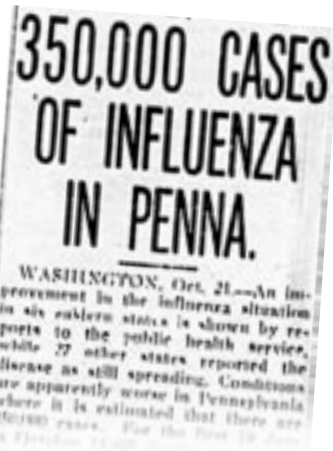
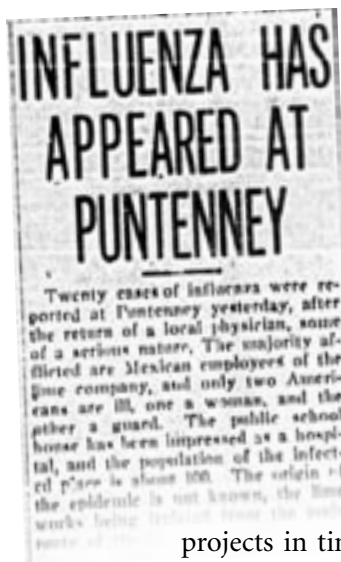


The timing of the project offered some unexpected teaching opportunities. While the class was working on this project, news media reported that a new and deadly flu-like illness had shown up in Asia and was quickly spreading to other parts of the world. Headlines talked about “Bird Flu” and the SARS epidemic. In addition, the flu virus that hit the United States that winter was said to be particularly virulent, and the students had quite a bit of first-hand experience with being sick. Students read current newspaper articles, and we compared events and media coverage in 1918 to what was happening in 2003. This was an excellent way to show how historical research can apply to current events, which often helps engage students with material that otherwise would seem boring or irrelevant to their lives.

To kick off the next part of the project, I scheduled a full day’s field trip to Sharlot Hall. Never having been in an archive before, students thought it would be “just another library” and could not figure out why I was taking them there. The Sharlot Hall archivist met with my students and gave an introductory talk about what an archive is and what its purposes are. The students soon became intrigued. As the archivist brought out original sources, I watched my students’ eyes widen and light up. The research bug had bitten! The Sharlot Hall staff worked with my class throughout the semester, and the January 25, 2004 Sharlot Hall Museum “Days Past” column in the *Prescott Courier* featured my class’s article, “1918 Influenza Struck an Unsuspecting Northern Arizona.”

Involvement with National History Day

With my first goal achieved, I wanted to foster my students’ newly developed interest in history and historical research. I recalled seeing a flyer several months earlier that talked about something called National History Day. I did a little research of my own and learned that while I had missed Arizona’s fall teacher workshops, if I acted quickly, my students could still complete



projects in time for the regional contest. I started my students on NHD projects in January 2004. Because of the late start, I needed to help my students make use of whatever resources were readily available. I encouraged them to make telephone calls, write letters, and use materials from the local public library and community college library in Preston to supplement research via the Internet.

Rules for the contest and its different categories were at times puzzling to both me and the students. I tried to reduce some of the complexity of the program by limiting my students' options a bit in that first year of my NHD involvement. Since I have written papers and put together exhibits but have not written scripts, given performances, or put together documentaries, I suggested that students stick with exhibits or papers unless they really wanted to try one of the other two types of projects.

In spite of my preference for exhibits or papers, one student convinced me to let her do a performance. Until I went to the regional contest, I did not realize that doing a performance meant the student had to go to the contest and perform it live, so my student put together a video of her performance and submitted that to the regional contest. Daunted by the need to revise her project for a live performance, she dropped out before the Arizona State Contest.

While the NHD State Coordinator assisted me when I contacted her for clarification, other aspects of rules, formats, and requirements for NHD were also somewhat confusing. "Process papers" and the NHD format for bibliographies were new to me as well as to my students. I misunderstood the interview part of the process and did not realize until we got to the regional contest that all students, regardless of project category, needed to go to the contest so that judges could interview them about their entries. These experiences, while frustrating at the time, made me more aware of what NHD requires and will help me better guide my students in future years.

I quickly realized that I would have to help my students develop their research and analytical skills even further if they were to create successful NHD projects. Students found it particularly difficult to grasp the concept of connecting a topic to the year's theme. I gave short assignments to help them understand. They had to explain *how* their topic tied to the theme. We discussed their statements, and then I made them go back and elaborate, refining and augmenting their initial explanations. We went through several rounds of this process, just as historians

EMERGENCY FLU HOSPITAL IS OPENED HERE

SIX PATIENTS HAVE ALREADY BEEN TAKEN TO NEW WARD: SKILLED NURSES AND PHYSICIAN ARE IN CHARGE.

An emergency hospital in the Washington street school building was yesterday opened by the Red Cross of this city. While there apparently is not reason as the present time of the citizens of Prescott to become alarmed, yet in order that those who have this sickness may receive attention, it was deemed advisable that this hospital be opened. At the present time, there are all people in the hospital, two adults and four children. The hospital is under the direction of Dr. John W. Plien who has as his manager James Sprague. The women directly interested in this work put in a rather strenuous day fitting the hospital and it is in first-class shape at the present

mind by those desiring to take up this work that unless they are willing to render service when called upon, they should not join the class. The nurses committee is in charge of Miss Ollie Fisher, who will be very glad to have those interested call her by telephone so that the hours for their instructions may be set. There is urgent need for these volunteers and it is hoped that by today there will be sufficient who will volunteer their services, so that a reserve may be maintained. Young women are particularly asked to give their services and if sufficient number could forward a special class will be made for them. At the present time at least four volunteers are needed, either men or women to complete a class. Colonel Holmberg has very kindly rendered the use of the barracks ambulance, together with three of their men to assist the women with this work. The chairman of the Red Cross committee in charge of the influenza is Mrs. Morris Goldwater. Mr. Sprague's first assistant is Mrs. McDonnell.

It is believed that by the measures adopted by the Red Cross, acting in co-operation with Dr. John W. Plien, much good will be done toward preventing an epidemic in Prescott. Throughout the county, the situation is serious and those willing in Prescott to assist with this work should make it known to the above-named persons. At the present time assistance is needed to help run the kitchen. Numerous offers have been

INFLUENZA TAKES LIVES OF SEVEN AT JEROME

COPPER CAMP STILL IN THE THROES OF VISITATION OF FLU: DISEASE IS HARD TO COMBAT AMONG MEXICANS.

The ravages of the Spanish influenza continued unchecked in Jerome yesterday, and a telephone message from that camp to the Journal-Miner yesterday evening stated that seven persons had died during the day. Some of the victims being taken to

RECALLS TIME IN 1889 WHEN HE HAD FLU

H. D. AITKEN TELLS OF EXPERIENCE IN PREVIOUS EPIDEMIC: SENT YOUNG TOM CAMPBELL FOR THE DOCTOR.

When the "flu" hit Prescott in 1889, its ravages were much more severe than they have been this year so far. Old-timers will be interested in the reminiscences of H. D. Aitken, manager of the Washford-Burnmaster Company. In telling a friend about the Aitken said:

"In spite of heavy clothing I felt very cold one day. I went up to the big stove in the front of the store. It was then Washford & Burnmaster (not the Washford-Burnmaster Co.) and in spite of a roaring fire I could not get warm. It was not long before I realized that I was slightly sick. I didn't want to give up and I held out that if I didn't soon I prob-

go through several drafts of their work. Next, I asked students to explain *why* their topics and information should be presented. At first, most of the students answered, "Because you said we had to." Eventually, most students seemed to accept the challenge and gave more thoughtful answers about their topic's significance. I enjoyed watching them begin to ask probing questions and explore how they could clarify and improve their presentations.

It was not only the students who had to learn and change. As a teacher new to National History Day, I had to alter my behavior, too. Rather than imparting information or giving answers, I taught skills and methods and tried to guide students so that they could discover sources and answers for themselves. I faced another challenge: with each student working on a different topic, I had to learn enough about each subject that I could stay a step ahead, assess their progress, and offer appropriate suggestions for further research and investigation.

In the end, only two of my students went on to the Arizona State Contest – and how those two young ladies bloomed as they developed and refined their entries! Both participated in the individual exhibit category, and both did local history topics, which made it easier to find information and primary sources. After the regional contest, I sat down with the two of them. Together, we reviewed and discussed the regional contest judging sheets for their entries, going over each element one by one. Then we sketched out, in writing, exactly what tasks each student needed to undertake to improve her exhibit.

After our discussion and planning, the next step was to do more research. The two students returned to Sharlot Hall to look in the archive for additional primary sources and photographs. On a trip to the Prescott Public Library, the girls discovered the Vertical Files,¹ which

¹ Libraries and archives often keep "vertical files" for their patrons' use. Organized by subject headings or names of people or places, they contain various newspaper or magazine articles, and miscellaneous materials related to the topic. In their study of the Flu epidemic of 1918, Ms. Smith's students might have looked at vertical files related to "influenza," epidemics," "diseases," "World War I," "medicine," and "1910-1920."

FLU IS RAMPANT EVERYWHERE IN THE NORTH

THE EPIDEMIC NOW HAS SPREAD TO REMOTE SECTIONS FROM RAILROAD AND INDUSTRIES COME TO A STANDSTILL.

"All outlying country along the Santa Fe railroad is in the throes of a raging epidemic of influenza, and even the isolated farmer is not free from this affliction. Torrey yesterday, an

Mr. Torrey, mailman, was foreman of the City. He motored to mountains on an outing back to Prescott to business matters and California his home. Flagstaff in a few days was left. He states the slaves of one of the

road in the White mountains had straggled when the flu appeared, and the large plant was now idle. The new railroad building out of Holbrook into Snowflake was at a standstill, and scores of cars with livestock aboard cannot be moved. Other business also was closed down and the range of the epidemic reaches to every locality as far away as 100 miles from the railroad.

Many deaths are occurring, particularly among Mexicans, while St. Johns, inland over 70 miles, is severely afflicted. Lack of medical skill is responsible for the heavy mortality, and this situation cannot be remedied by physicians being called in daily from all towns along the main line. Mr. Torrey also states Holbrook, Winslow and Flagstaff are hampered by the crash, and all streets of business are restricted to a limited number of persons at a time. Small girls are doing hotel work, the adult getting out of the country. As a whole the situation continues decidedly gloomy.

SPREAD OF FLU SEEMS CHECKED AT BARRACKS

ONLY TWO NEW CASES WERE REPORTED YESTERDAY AND ALL OF PATIENTS ARE SLOWLY RECOVERING.

Commandant Holmberg and his corps of physicians at Fort Whipple had the satisfaction yesterday evening of stating that, temporarily at least, they had put a big crimp in the spread of the epidemic of the Spanish influenza which had

COUNTY HOSPITAL OPEN FOR FLU PATIENTS

INDIGENT PERSONS AFFLICTED CAN RECEIVE BEST OF MEDICAL CARE BY MAKING CONDITION KNOWN TO AUTHORITIES

Because of the inability of the recently-established city emergency hospital in the Washington school

proved to be quite useful. They also contacted the staff of the Prescott City Historical Office, who recommended several additional sources. Their last step was to modify and improve the exhibits, based on the additional research they had done.

The girls were nervous as they prepared to go to the state contest, especially about the interview portion of the judging. We discussed aspects of the interview such as eye contact, dress, and shaking hands. I told them just to breathe deeply, smile, and answer questions asked by the judges. Later, the girls said our discussions gave them confidence and direction to handle the interviews. This preparation apparently helped, since judges for both entries commented on judging sheets that the students did very well in the interviews. Both had a wonderful time at the State Contest, and I was so proud of both of their exhibits. One of the girls even won a special award for "Best Use of Museums and Archives" at the state contest, for her exhibit on Prescott architecture.

Plans for Next Year

While I identified some gaps in my own preparation for my class's NHD participation, I realized that my research experience and knowledge provide a strong foundation for using the NHD program in my classroom. Although I have taught for many years, this experience reminded me that students will rise to the occasion when I give them challenging tasks and help them to reach those goals.

This year, I will require each student in my Honors class to participate in NHD. We will start earlier in the school year, and I will do a better job of guiding my students in their individual research and project development. I plan to reserve the entire computer lab for two periods a week so that my honors history students can do some of the required level of in-depth research at school.

I hope at least half of my students will go to the state contest, and perhaps one or two will set a precedent and go on to the National contest. Most importantly, though, I hope to spark in all of my students an appetite for research, an appreciation of critical thinking, and a love of history.

Cellene Smith teaches World Geography and World History at Chino Valley High School in rural Arizona. She first learned about and introduced her students to National History Day during the 2003-2004 school year.