

PIONEER LIFE Grades 5-8

OBJECTIVES:

- The students will identify hardships the early pioneers faced.
- The students will compare and contrast hardships for pioneers to their own lives.
- Students will write letters to a Pioneer child sharing how life has changed.

FCAT STRANDS ADDRESSED:

Reading Exam Words and Phrases in Context
 Comparisons and Cause/Effect

Writing Exam: Narrative writing/Focus and support

MEETS THE FOLLOWING SUNSHINE STATE STANDARDS:

LANGUAGE ARTS

Strand A: Reading (Grade 5)

Standard 2: *The student constructs meaning from a wide range of texts*

Benchmark LA.A.2.2.1: The student reads text and determines the main idea or essential message, identifies relevant supporting details and facts, and arranges events in chronological order

Strand B: Writing (Grade 5)

Standard 1: *The student uses the writing process effectively*

Benchmark LA.B.1.2.1 The student prepares for writing by recording thoughts, focusing on a central ideas, grouping related ideas, and identifying the purpose for writing

Standard 2: *The student writes to communicate ideas and information effectively*

Benchmark LA.B.2.2.1 The student writes notes, comments, and observations that reflect comprehension of content and experiences from a variety of media

Benchmark LA.B.2.2.3 The student writes for a variety of occasions, audiences, and purposes

Strand A: Reading (Grades 6-8)

Standard 2: *The student constructs meaning from a wide range of texts*

Benchmark LA.A.2.3.1 The student determines the main idea or essential message in a text and identifies relevant details and facts and patterns of organization

Strand B: Writing (Grades 6-8)

Standard 1: *The student uses the writing process effectively*

Benchmark LA.B.1.3.1 The student organizes information before writing according to the type and purpose of writing

Benchmark LA.B.1.3.2 The student drafts and revises writing

Standard 2: *The student writes to communicate ideas and information effectively*

Benchmark LA.B.2.3.3 The student selects and uses appropriate formats for writing, including narrative, persuasive, and expository formats, according to the intended audience, purpose, and occasion

MATERIALS:

- Florida Cracker family text (attached)
- Florida Cracker tale

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES:

1. Ask students what they think life was like in Orlando in the late 1880s. Discuss what they think the land was like and what conveniences they think the pioneers had.
2. Have students read the Florida Cracker family essay. As they read, ask them to record hardships and inconveniences the pioneers faced.
3. Allow time for students to share their findings, while recording their ideas on chart paper.
4. Using the list the students created, ask them which of the hardships they have to face today.
5. Ask students to write a letter to a pioneer student of the same age, sharing how life has changed in Orlando since the 1880s. Encourage them to incorporate how technology has influenced the changes, as well as focusing on which hardships have been eliminated and why.

AT THE HISTORY CENTER:

1. While visiting the Pioneer exhibit, ask students to compare how the Florida Cracker Family article compared to what they see at the exhibit.

POST VISIT ACTIVITIES:

1. Ask students what more they learned about Central Florida's early pioneers.

2. The early Crackers often sat around during Cane Boiling and swapped stories. Have students create their own Cracker Tales either orally or on paper.
3. Hold a Cracker celebration feast, with different students preparing different Florida Cracker dishes.
4. Do a class taffy pull. The ingredients needed are: $\frac{1}{2}$ pint of water, 3 ounces of butter, $1\frac{1}{2}$ pounds of sugar, $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of lemon juice, and 2 teaspoons of vanilla. Stir the water and sugar until the sugar is dissolved. Boil until a small quantity can be rolled between the thumb and finger to form a ball. Add the butter and lemon juice and boil until it hardens quickly when dropped into cold water and will not stick to the teeth. Add the vanilla and place in greased shallow pans to cool.

Florida Cracker Family

"Among the first to come were the Jernigans, Patricks, Lees, (Mizells)...the Barbers, Bronsons, and Prescotts. Most of these men were ex-soldiers, or cattlemen having large herds of beef cattle needing more grazing land." Florida crackers were a simple, gentle people who would only fight with each other if there were disputes over women, cattle, or land. The crackers who settled in Orlando came to an unbroken wild land in which crops could be grown year round and where food and game was plentiful in the wild.

They came to a place with hot summers and winters where cool Northeast winds could bring wind chills with fifty-degree weather, which made it seem much colder. The landscape was covered with swamp, ferns, moss covered shade trees, various wild fruits and plants, oaks, pine and various other forms of vegetation. Shrubs and vines hung in the subtropical environments and buzzards hovered above them searching the ground for their next meal. The cracker was often barefoot. If he had shoes, he would save them for special occasions, such as church.

The land was plentiful, but often worthless. In the pioneer days of Central Florida your closest neighbor might be a day's ride away.

The pioneers, being a versatile and industrious people, made spinning wheels, looms, fashioned bee hives from hollow logs, made chairs, tables, bed stands, side tables and other furniture. They ranged their hogs and cattle in the woods; the hogs were fed on sweet potatoes, slaughtered, smoked and then the lard was packed in containers made from large gourds.

They made their own clothing, from the first process to the last. They planted cotton, stripped the boils, ginned, carded, spun, reeled, and warped the threads and dyed them with indigo for blue, the bark of the black jack for brown, and the cotton bloom for yellow, and wove the cloth on handmade, wooden looms, quilts, counterpanes, suits and shirts for husbands and sons, stockings, socks, gloves and sun bonnets.

Their coffee was brewed from sweet potatoes cut into cubes, dried in the sun, parched and ground (dried okra, pumpkin seeds, coffee from the trading post, and brewed acorns were other ways of making coffee). The people lived chiefly and cheaply on pork, beef, grits, sweet potatoes, syrup, a little milk and butter.¹

Florida cracker men

The father in a Florida cracker family had the following duties: building the home, hunting for food, plowing the fields, and tending to livestock. The cracker man had to deal with the hardships of breaking the land which was wild and untamed before he arrived. He was constantly trying to find the best land to clear in order to plant ground peas (peanuts), cow peas, taters (potatoes), sweet potatoes, sugar cane, corn and other crops.

While traveling through this rugged terrain, the Florida cracker man dealt with several different types of insect pests, the most common being redbugs (chiggers), sand flies and mosquitoes. Other animals, which caused the pioneer problems were alligators, rattlesnakes, coral snakes, water moccasins, wild boars, wildcats, pumas, bears, and wolves. The cracker also had to be wary of possible attacks by Seminoles or Seminoles rustling their cattle.

Florida cracker women

Most often pioneer women had to be prepared for the rigors of the frontier and looking pretty was not the norm among cracker women. Women were often treated as inferior, yet were still vitally important in the day-to-day survival. The woman would do the few chores there were to do around the small makeshift homes with dirt or pine floors.

¹ Mary Ida Bass Barber, *Florida's Frontier: The Way it Wuz* (Gainesville, GA: Magnolia Press, 1991), 20-21.

Tending crops, mending clothing, taking care of the children, and gathering food around the consumed most of the day for Florida pioneer women. Besides these tasks, women were in charge of making the family's clothes and killing unwanted insects that lived in the roof or the walls that the uninvited, but useful, house snakes didn't eat. The women were also responsible for what little education the children got before public education began was established in the 1830s.

Since there was not much trade in Central Florida during the pioneer days, women used herbs to make medicines and dyes. The women would have to make due with what was in their environment when preparing food for their family to eat, sometimes would begin cooking early as 4 a.m. to get ready to feed the children and the husband for the upcoming day. Popular cracker foods were: Chicken "Perlow" (pilau) which means with rice, fried okra, sweet potato pie, tomato gravy, corn bread, Hopping John (cow peas, rice, salt, bacon, and one medium chopped onion steamed with grease), cornmeal dodgers (cornmeal biscuits), and many other dishes. The meat used in the dishes could range from beef to chicken or when times were tough, from squirrel to rabbit. The food was almost always cooked in bacon fat or grease and with butter, salt and eggs. Needless to say the cracker diet was not very healthy. Combining the poor health habits of the cracker with the poor diet showed in their physical appearance. Often the teeth were ragged as their clothes and they permeated the smells of sweat and dirt mixed with bacon grease.

Building the home

There were two types of cracker homes. The first was made out of logs and one was made out of wooden posts and palmettos. The palmetto house could usually be made in

about ten days or less with a spade to dig the postholes, an ax to cut the posts, a hatchet to shape the posts and frame of the shelter and spikes. Crackers used ten-penny nails for the foundation and the palmettos and enough palmetto leaves for the walls and to double layer the thatch roof in order to prevent rain from getting in. The roof was angled forty-five degrees in order for the rain to slide off easily. Inside the home was a fireplace made out of mud taken from the environment due to the lack of availability of bricks. Some palmetto homes had only three walls in order to let in light.

The complex was open which required mosquito netting or cheesecloth to provide protection from insects at night. Palmetto homes often would contain the bedroom, kitchen, living room, and dining room all in one, providing very little privacy. The palmetto house provided a temporary shelter while the green logs cut for homes were allowed to dry.

The second type of cracker home was a log home. Usually built on the bank of a creek or lake, they were usually about 8'x12' and had one to two rooms. Log homes typically had no windows, instead they had square holes cut into the logs to let in light and to air out the home. At night Crackers covered the holes with log shutters or log blocks to keep out mosquitoes. The roofs were often made of cypress or pine shingles, the fireplace from mud, and the chimney a combination of sticks and mud.

The furniture in these homes was often homemade. The table could be a large stump and same as the chairs. Otherwise those who possessed the finer skills of carpentry could craft a nicer chair or table from the materials in the environment. Some beds were

made of a pine frame with three pine frame supports laying across the center of the frame and then covered with palmetto leaves and most likely a feather or straw mattress.

Orlando itself was very sparsely populated and neighbors few and far between. Mr. Mahlon Gore tells of his arrival in Orlando in 1880:

I walked from Sanford, taking two days to make the trip. The sand was deep and the last end of the road stretched out unaccountably long. At about the present intersection of Magnolia Avenue and Livingston Street, was a little house, a block to the east, discernable through the trees, was another. No other buildings were in sight, but meeting a man on horseback.

I inquired how far it was to Orlando. He replied, "Why you fool, you're in Orlando now!" There were just two houses in sight, but another quarter of a mile brought me in sight of the little wooden court house and a cluster of about a dozen buildings.²

When the temperature dropped, pine was often the main source for fuel. Another source of fuel and light was fat wood (turpentine). Any wood would do for the cracker, except for the wood of trees that had been struck by lightning which were considered bad luck by the superstitious crackers

Hunting, fishing, and gathering

The cracker hunted the lands for various types of animals in order to get food. Bear would provide a good meal, but the hide was very tough so the cracker preferred frogs, alligators, deer, turkey, wild hogs, sand hill gophers (land turtles), rabbits and the occasional wild cow. Crackers have been known to eat almost anything in times of need. Some unexpected dishes were that which integrated the meat from squirrels, raccoons or even crows.

² William Fremont Blackman, *A History of Orange County, Florida, Narrative and Biographical* (Chuluota, FL: Mickler House, 1973), 27.

When fishing, the first thing a cracker had to do was gather bait, usually worms. In order to get worms he would drive a stake into the ground and rub an un-planed board across the top. The vibrations in the ground disturbed the earthworms and they came to the surface. Another method was to peel back the bark of a yellow pine log. Here the cracker would find log sawyers (white worms). Otherwise mixing cotton and cornbread would also work for a bait. By using these baits, the fisherman was able to catch catfish, bass, mullet, gars, trout, perch, and several varieties of panfish and other small game fish.

During the dry season, bait was not needed at all. When the rivers or streams dried up to a series of small pools the only utensil needed was a stick. By stirring up the water and making it muddy, fish in the pool would surface in order to get oxygen and could be grabbed by hand.

When gathering food, the cracker would pick swamp cabbage (a type of green if cut too low on the stock creates indigestion), and other indigenous plants and fruits. Sampling of the unknown plants in order to find out what was edible and not edible was a hard task, which could sometimes result in sickness or even death if too much of a non-edible plant was eaten.

Plowing fields and livestock

Cracker men would plow the fields after the whole family helped in clearing the rugged untouched wilderness. After they finished, women and children would plant the crops of choice. If the land was not to be used for crops, it would be used for livestock as most crackers likely would have a few cattle, pigs or chickens. Children were usually responsible for collecting the milk, which had to be divided up amongst the family (in a

family of four this would be four ounces of milk a day). There would be even less if the mother needed to use it in her cooking.

Dangers of the unknown Florida wilderness

The dangers the pioneers faced in Florida were mostly found in the swamps or along the river. These dangers included alligators, mosquitoes, chiggers and leaches, snakes and disease. For example, while traveling through the Ocklawaha river with President Ulysses S. Grant on a steamer, one nervous passenger reported, "The hull of the steamer went bumping against one cypress-butt, then another, suggesting to the tyro in this kind of aquatic adventure that possibly he might be wrecked and subjected, even if he escape a watery grave, to a miserable death, through the agency of mosquitoes, buzzards, and huge alligators."³ A second story describes the trouble of living around alligators on the homestead,

We had to go in our row boat to our garden. Turkey Creek was full of alligators, as is their habit; they would lie along the bank of the creek. Our small dog always wanted to go to the garden with us but was not permitted to do so. One day doggie was determined to have his way and when the boat shoved out from shore the dog sprang into the water and was swimming along following the boat when one of the alligators bit off his head and thus we lost our pet.⁴

There were plenty of varmints in the woods, such as bears, pumas, wolves, and wildcats. The land was still very wild and the animals of the wilderness were not afraid of people since they had not been exposed to them and the threat they posed.

³ Jerrel H. Shofner. *Nor is it Over Yet: Florida in the Era of Reconstruction 1863-1877* (Gainesville, FL: University Presses of Florida, 1974), 258-259.

⁴ Phoebe A. Black, *Florida Fifty Years Ago* (West Palm Beach, FL: NP, 1961), 4.

Disease and sickness had the power to take the lives of a whole family of pioneers. Malaria and yellow fever often would take the lives of old and young. By drinking bad water, one could get a bacteria infection or Florida sores. These sores could be found on all parts of the body, but were most common on the knees and down to the feet.

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