

Lead, Soil, and Sawdust, 1820–1914

Activity 8.3: Learning from a Logger

Teacher Materials

Preparation/Organization Students will work with their own copies of the excerpt from John E. Nelligan’s work, so be sure to prepare enough copies for each group or individual. You will also need copies for yourself to use as transparencies as well as colored pencils, crayons, or felt tip pens and drawing paper. You can use this activity with the whole class, small groups, pairs, or individuals, providing scaffolded support or letting students work on their own.

Procedure

1. Introduce the students to John E. Nelligan by telling them about his life from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, explaining that in later life he told his own story to someone who wrote it down. The work we have here is not a primary document, since it was not written by John E. Nelligan himself—but it is as close to Nelligan’s point of view as possible. As such, it is an excellent example of the Thinking Like a Historian “Through Their Eyes” concept.
2. Project a transparency of “Dramas of the Drives” and pass out the copies of the student pages. First discuss the specialized vocabulary on Student Page 1, making sure students understand that many of these words relate directly to the lumbering industry. Then have volunteers take turns reading aloud the passage on Student Pages 1 and 2.
3. Project Student Page 3 and review the document analysis questions. Allow students to work—as a whole, in groups or pairs, or individually—to answer the questions.
4. Distribute drawing paper and ask students to illustrate and caption one of the scenes that Nelligan describes.
5. Display the drawings and have students discuss the way the passage and the students’ illustrations helped them understand more about this important era in Wisconsin history.

Answers

1. He used a lot of descriptive and emotional words—such as “mighty, surging monster” and “a smother of spray and a tumult of noise”—to create colorful images. To heighten each situation’s importance, he also used dramatic phrases such as “epic drama of the drive,” “treacherous element,” and “send them relentlessly to their deaths.”
2. The men faced the dangers of falling into the water, the chill of the weather, and the possibility of being crushed by the logs.
3. They wore flannels for warmth in winter. When they drove the logs, they donned lighter clothing that would dry faster and not weigh them down in case they fell into the water. They wore rubber, waterproof boots in winter; for the drives they changed into spiked boots that would help give them a foothold on the logs.
4. Answers will vary, but students should appreciate that the passage makes the experience come to life for readers.
5. Answers will vary. Sample questions might be: (A) Did you ever fall into the river? (B) What was the scariest thing that happened to you? (C) Are things still done this way? Why or why not?

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Vocabulary

epic (ep ik) Heroic.

reservoir (rez ur vwar) A holding area for storing a large amount of water.

headwaters The source of a stream.

spree A period of too much eating, drinking, shopping, etc.

calked (kawkt) Having cleats on the sole of a shoe or boot to prevent slipping.

hardihood Courage and strength.

clement (klem ent) Mild, as in mild weather.

unfaltering Firm, not weakening.

vigilance (vij uh lens) Being alert, watchful.

treacherous (trech ur us) Not to be trusted; dangerous.

miscalculation (mis kal kyoo lay shun) Figuring out something incorrectly.

tumult (too mult) Loud noise and confusion.

wended Twisted; traveled.

Dramas of the Drives

From John E. Nelligan's *A White Pine Empire: The Life of a Lumberman* (1929)

In the old logging days of Wisconsin and Michigan, every spring saw the curtain roll up on a tremendous drama along the rivers of the timber country; a drama greater even than that in which the giant pines were felled . . . the **epic** drama of the drive. All winter long, preparations went forward for this brief period of . . . activity and struggle. Thousands and thousands of logs were banked along the riversides, or on the ice of the streams. There they lay . . . awaiting the day when they would be tumbled into the streams and rivers, to become . . . parts of a mighty, surging monster, the drive. The sun, in its daily journey across the heavens, worked ever northward, each day adding a few moments to the time taken by that journey, each day increasing the heat by which ice and snow were changed to water In **reservoir** dams at the **headwaters** of the rivers, the waters of the spring thaw . . . were stored up to carry the logs along the fist lap of their journey to the mills.

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In the camps, cutting operations came to an end. Some of the men left for an early spring **spree**. Others stayed on, changing their rubbers for **calked** boots, the many spikes of which, on sole and heel, were filed to sharp points that would bite into the pine logs. The heavy flannels of winter gave way to overalls which would be lighter when wet and would dry out faster. These rivermen were the pick of the camps, lumberjacks of unusual strength . . . daring, and **hardihood**. They had to be. For days they had to go with but little sleep . . . with snacks of food snatched whenever and wherever possible. They had to suffer frequent duckings and were almost continually soaked to their skins at a time of year when the weather was still far from **clement**. The price of their safety was constant and **unfaltering vigilance**. They worked in a **treacherous** element, and the slightest misstep or **miscalculation** might send them relentlessly to their deaths. . . .

There would come a day in spring when the gates of the reservoir dam on each stream were lifted and its stored up waters turned loose. Down the riverbed they rushed, eager and irresistible, tearing up and carrying along the rotten ice which covered the stream. The rollways were broken out and, in a smother of spray and a **tumult** of noise and confusion, the logs were tumbled into the rushing waters. Out upon their heaving, surging backs scampered the rivermen, pushing, pulling, and prying with their peavies and pike poles, doing their best to keep the logs always on the move. The drive was on!

Down the river it **wended** its way, around bends, over falls, through rapids. Upon the constantly shifting carpet of logs the agile rivermen labored. . . . Every effort was made to avoid jam. . . . The first lap of the journey came to an end at the dam next below the reservoir dam. In the great pond back of this dam the logs came to a temporary rest, while a sufficient head of water was raised to carry them along the next lap.

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Questions about “Dramas of the Drives”

1. What words did John Nelligan use to make the spring log sound exciting? _____

2. What kinds of dangers did rivermen face on the drives? _____

3. What kinds of clothing did the rivermen need to wear for protection? _____

4. How did this reading help you understand more about what life was like for loggers in Wisconsin about 100 years ago?

5. What three questions would you like to have asked John Nelligan if you could have interviewed him?

A. _____

B. _____

C. _____
