Saving Privates Bixby

by
Fran O’Malley
and Brian Gearin
Delaware Social Studies Education Project
University of Delaware
©2009
Saving Privates Bixby
Fran O’Malley

Lesson Description: This lesson builds off of the scene in the movie Saving Private Ryan in which an officer (“General Marshall”) quotes from a historic letter associated with President Lincoln. The letter extends poetic expressions of sympathy for a Mrs. Lydia Bixby. Mrs. Bixby was thought to have lost 5 sons in the Civil War. Students research the fates of the 5 Bixby sons to see if they can “save” any from the cruel fate that they were believed to have suffered.

***NOTE: this lesson suggests showing a scene from “Saving Private Ryan” which is rated “R.” Movies or clips from movies should not be shown in K-12 classrooms without school or district permission. While the author of this lesson believes that the “Letter” scene from this movie does not account for the R rating, he strongly urges teachers to get approval before showing this clip.

Time Required: 1 class + for research.

Benchmarks Addressed:
- History 2a, 6-8: Students will master the basic research skills necessary to conduct an independent investigation of historical phenomena.
- History 2b, 6-8: Students will examine historical documents, artifacts, and other materials, and analyze them in terms of credibility, as well as the purpose, perspective, or point of view for which they were constructed.
- History 2a, 9-12: Students will develop and implement effective research strategies for investigating a given historical topic.
- History 2b, 9-12: Students will examine and analyze primary and secondary sources in order to differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations.

Essential Questions Addressed:
- Is this source credible? How do I know?
- What is the evidence for this argument?
- Does differentiating between fact and interpretation matter?

Enduring Understanding:
- Sources about the past need to be critically analyzed.

For the Teacher (not to be shared with students until the student research called for in this lesson is completed)
- Many believe that Lincoln did not write the letter to Mrs. Lydia Bixby.
- While the letter suggests that 5 of Mrs. Bixby’s sons were killed in the Civil War, evidence points to a different conclusion i.e., two sons were killed (not to diminish the depth of this tragedy).
- Many fake Bixby letters are believed to be in circulation.
- Mrs. Bixby is believed to have been a “copperhead” (i.e. southern sympathizer).
Vocabulary: (from Bixby letter) beguiling, anguish, consolation, bereavement, assuage.

Materials:
- Video: Saving Private Ryan.
- DVD or VCR Player and monitor.

Procedures:
1. Tell students, “Today we are going to read a letter that appears to date back nearly 150 years. The letter is one of the most famous ever written in American history.”
2. Pre-reading prediction. Post the following words on the board: war, mother, sons, thanks, memory, Lincoln. Ask students to write a paragraph predicting what the letter will be about.
3. Have students read the letter.
4. During reading strategy: Ask students to offer a physical sign (e.g. raise hands without speaking) if and when their predictions change.
5. After reading, ask:
   a. who wrote this letter?
   b. to whom was the letter sent?
   c. what is the purpose of the letter?
   d. what is the author’s point of view?
   e. what, if any, are some facts embedded in the letter?
   f. what, if any, are some interpretations embedded in the letter?
   g. what are some impressions you may have formed about Mrs. Bixby or her sons?
6. Ask students if they have ever heard of this letter to Mrs. Bixby prior to today. If so, how were they introduced to it?
7. Provide general background information on D-Day.
8. Explain to students that one of the most painful duties of any President or military officer involves sending letters to parents who have lost sons or daughters in the field of battle. Tell them that they are now going to see a scene from a 1998 Academy Award winning movie entitled “Saving Private Ryan” in which the letter to Mrs. Bixby that they read is featured.
   ***Again, teachers are cautioned to get approval to show this clip from the movie which is rated “R.”
9. Show the episode from Saving Private Ryan entitled “The Letter.”
10. Ask the students if this scene from “Saving Private Ryan” suggests….
   a. an effective use of the Bixby letter in a movie set in WWII?
   b. who wrote the letter from which General Marshall quotes?
   c. that the reading of the Bixby letter is true to the actual letter?
   d. that the movie presents the letter and its content as historical fact?
   e. if there are any elements of the Bixby letter that appear incredible?

Consoling Words

Tradition has it that in the fall of 1864, Abraham sent this letter [i.e., the Bixby letter] to Mrs. Lydia Bixby, a widow who was believed to have lost five sons during the Civil War.

[text of the letter follows]
12. Ask students:
   - what is notable about the manner in which Candace Fleming chose to phrase this section of the book? [Fleming’s account is not stating that Abraham Lincoln sent the letter, nor is it suggesting that the contents of the letter are factually accurate].
   - which words or phrase does Fleming choose to signal uncertainty? [“Tradition has it…” and “believed.”]
   - why this wording may have been chosen? [there “appears” to be some doubts about the “facts” surrounding the letter] Tell students that questions have indeed been raised about the contents of the letter as well its author. Motivate them here. Tell them that it is their mission as historical detectives to uncover the “truth(s)” about this historic Bixby letter.

13. Research: have students research the details surrounding the Bixby letter and report back. [Google lydia bixby letter for information]

14. Ask students: What did you learn from your research about the Bixby letter and how it is presented?

Debrief: Revisit essential questions for this lesson:
   - Is the Bixby letter credible? How do I know?
   - Is the “Letter” scene from the movie Saving Private Ryan credible? How do I know?
   - How has the Bixby letter been presented in books and movies?
   - Does it matter how the past is presented? Why or why not?

Clarify: Bring the following to the attention of the students:
   - Some believe that Lincoln did not write the letter to Mrs. Lydia Bixby.
   - While the letter suggests that 5 of Mrs. Bixby’s sons were killed in the Civil War, evidence points to a different conclusion i.e., two sons were killed (not that this is less of a horror).
   - Many fake Bixby letters are believed to be in circulation.

Linkages between Saving Private Bixby and History Standard Two. Suggest that while Tom Hanks and company “saved Private Ryan” from an early and tragic death, the students as researchers “saved Privates Bixby” from fates similarly premature by exposing the “fact” that they had not been killed in 1864 when the letter to Mrs. Bixby was written.

Endnotes:
   Saving Private Ryan is based in part on an actual WWII tragedy involving the “the Sullivan brothers,” five of whom were killed when their ship (the Juneau) sank following a torpedo attack at the battle of Guadalcanal. An account of their story appeared on screen in the 1944 movie entitled “The Sullivans” (later renamed “The Fighting Sullivans”). The deaths of the Sullivan brothers led to the adoption of the Sole Survivor Policy by the US War Department which helps one understand the plot of Saving Private Ryan.
Executive Mansion. Washington, Nov. 21, 1864.

To Mrs. Bixby, Boston, Mass.

Dear Madam,

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

A. Lincoln