



UNIT 9: HISTORY AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Agriculture through the Centuries

Grade level: Primary and upper elementary

Student Learning Objective

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Discuss changes in agriculture over the years.

Time: 50 minutes

Tools, Equipment, and Supplies: Handouts of Activity Sheets
26:1, 26:2, 26:3, 26:4

Background Information

Agriculture has always been a part of history. Around 8000 BC, primitive people began growing food as well as hunting and gathering it. This enabled them to live together in one place. Earlier people had moved to hunt the animals wherever they could hunt, and they picked wild edible plants as they went.

The plow was invented in ancient Mesopotamia around 3500 BC. The first plow was probably a Y-shaped branch pulled by an ox. When settlers first came to the United States in the 1600s, the only farm tools they had were these Y-shaped plows. Native Americans showed them how to make a hoe with a large stick and the bone of an animal.

Inventions gradually made farm work easier. The cotton gin was invented in 1793 by Eli Whitney to separate the seeds from the cotton. For the first time in agriculture, a machine replaced the work of many people.

Grain had been harvested for thousands of years by hand with scythes and sickles, but Cyrus McCormick's invention of the reaper in 1834 was the first horse-drawn grain harvester. Another machine, called a thresher, came to the fields to separate the grain from the chaff. Today, these two steps are combined in a machine called the combine.

The steel plow was developed in 1836 by John Deere to make breaking and turning the soil easier. This invention was lighter in weight to pull through the fields, and soil didn't cling to the steel as it did to wood and iron plows. Through the early 1800s, other machines powered by horses were invented, such as the grain drill, mower and cultivator.

NATIONAL STANDARDS

NL-ENG.K-12.2

NSS-USH.K-4.1

NSS-USH.K-4.3



NOTES

When the Civil War began, new technology was adopted quickly because of the labor shortage and strong demand for farm products. In 1862 President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, which helped settle the West with farmers.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, technology made rapid advances in agriculture. Production increased dramatically as hybrid corn was developed. By crossbreeding, corn plants grew faster and produced more kernels per ear. Other developments improved crops and livestock. With these advancements providing surpluses, prices stayed low until World War I.

By the 1930s, most farmers owned tractors to pull equipment, but the Dust Bowl wiped out many Great Plains producers. During the years of drought, many farmers moved west to find jobs.

World War II led to the complete shift from animal to mechanical power on farms because of a shortage of farm workers and incentives to produce food. After the war, technology helped production skyrocket. Fertilizers, improved seed and feed, new breeds of livestock and pesticides were just a few of the revolutionary additions.

Until 1900 most producers were subsistence farmers, growing just enough to feed their families with a little left to trade. In the 1800s, one farm worker could feed five people.

Today farmers keep their records and make feeding, planting and marketing decisions with computers. Farms are larger than ever, but they still require less labor thanks to modern machinery. Now farmers usually specialize by producing one or two crops or one type of livestock. Today, one farmer can produce enough to feed 155 people. Fewer farmers are needed to feed the world, so people are free to pursue other careers.

American agriculture has come a long way. Science and technology continue to make advancements to provide consumers with higher-quality, less-expensive food.

Interest Approach

History! What is history?

Solicit responses. Comment positively on each response.

History is important because we learn from it. History is interesting because we are inspired by it, and history is especially cool in the field of agriculture. Some amazing events in history have allowed us to have all of the things we enjoy today. Let's experience some agriculture history.

OBJECTIVE 1: Discuss changes in agriculture over the years.

Hand out Activity Sheets 26.1, 26.2 and 26.3 that tell the story of agriculture as first-person accounts of young people in three different time periods.



NOTES

Follow along and listen carefully to the stories on each of the three handouts. Our first story is about Little Bear, a boy who lived 35,000 years ago. Story number two is about Layla, a girl who lived about 3000 BC, and the last story is about Joshua, a teen who lived during the 1860s. Are you ready? Let's step back in time.

Read each story with the students. Discuss each briefly before moving on to the next.

How does agriculture change during the centuries? How do these changes affect people's lives?

Solicit responses. Comment positively for each response. Hand out Activity Sheet 26.4, "Agriculture Today." Use a Dickens e-Moment® to develop a story for today.

Now let's write a story about a child living on a farm today. When I say WRITE, we will have 10 minutes to write a story about their life. What questions are there? – WRITE!

SUMMARY / REVIEW

Who will be the first to share their story?

Allow several students to share their story.

Great stories! Can you see how agricultural history has changed over the years? We just wrote about a farm today, but now let's draw some history.

Use a Cartographers e-Moment® to depict the change in agriculture.

REFLECTIVE REVIEW QUESTIONS:

- What do you think your family would have produced if you had lived in the late 1800s?
- What types of agricultural jobs are now easy that once were very hard?
- What types of jobs exist in agriculture now that did not exist long ago?

Be sure you inform someone what you learned about agricultural history today.



ACTIVITY SHEET 26:1

Little Bear's Story

NOTES



**Little Bear is a 12-year-old boy who
lived about 35,000 years ago.
This is his story.**

I woke up early and rolled over on my bed of leaves. I was cold, so I pulled my animal skin up around my neck. I wanted to go back to sleep, but my stomach was grumbling too loudly. I was hungry!

I hurried outside. There, I saw my own family and several other families, too. We all live together — it's safer that way.

My father and the other men of the tribe were picking up their clubs and stones. They're going hunting today. They'll hunt for buffalo, bears or reindeer. But these large animals are very hard to catch, so they'll probably come home empty-handed again.

After the men had left, my friends and I knew we had to do something to help the tribe find food. We went out searching for berries and nuts. There wasn't much there. I suppose we'll have to move soon because there isn't much food left anywhere.

There were some mushrooms by a big tree, but we left them. We ate some a few days ago and got sick. Soon, we came to a pond. I dove in to see if I could catch a fish, but I was too slow. As we sat on the shore, I saw some little beetles. I ate a few. When night came, everyone gathered together. But there wasn't any food to be eaten. I went to sleep the same way I woke up — hungry.



ACTIVITY SHEET 26:2

Layla's Story

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Layla is a 10-year-old girl who lived about 3000 BC. This is her story.

Today was an exciting day in our village. The first crop is harvested, and we had a big celebration. We sang and played games, and everyone had plenty to eat. My mother brought out a new pot that she had made. She and her sister are the best potters in the village. I think one of our neighbors will want to trade for it. The woman who lives in the next hut has some beautiful cloth that came from far away. She said it was made in a place where thousands of people live—a city. But I don't believe her. How could so many people live in so small an area? There wouldn't be enough to eat.

My brother says I'm wrong about that. His friend saw a whole train of camels loaded down with fruits and dried grain. They said they were headed for that faraway city.

We don't always have a harvest to celebrate. But this year, the rains came when they were needed, and the sun shone when the little plants were growing. Not like that terrible year my sister died, when we were all hungry all the time. Last month, our ox gave birth to a baby.

It's already a head taller than I am. We need that ox to pull our plow. When our ox got sick, we had to break up the ground ourselves with sticks. I'm sure glad I don't have to do that job forever. I can't complain, though. Our life is much better than it used to be. I've heard stories that long ago, people had to move from place to place. We're lucky. We get to stay here all the time. I'm glad, because this is a good place to live. The crops have been good for the last few years. More and more babies are growing up.



ACTIVITY SHEET 26:3

Joshua's Story

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**Joshua is a 16-year-old who lived in Kentucky around 1875.
This is his story.**

Work never seems to end on this farm. We grow most of what we eat. We have some cows, some chickens and some hogs. There's a horse for the carriage to take us to town and mules to pull the plow. Ma and my sisters have a huge vegetable garden.

My granddad planted an orchard of peach and apple trees. They produce some fruit—and I surely do love to eat it when it's in season. We have great fruit and vegetables all summer, and Ma and my sisters put them in jars that feed us all through the winter. They make so much that my sister Sara sells some jam in town to Mr. Murdock's general store. She's saving up for her wedding next year. She's marrying Zeke Brown who lives on a farm nearby. They're talking about going west to get some farmland of their own. The government's giving it away for free out there. We grow things to sell, too. We have a cash crop of wheat and rye, and we also produce some tobacco.

That's worth a lot of money. Mr. Jackson, who owns the grain mill in town, told Pa he's sold our wheat as far away as New York. It's the railroad that made that possible.

We get into town every week. My brothers Joseph and Jacob have left the farm and are working in town. Just yesterday, I went into the general store to get Ma some sugar for the jam she's putting up and some new cloth all the way from Paris that my sister insists she have for her wedding dress. I also bought some blue jeans. That's sure better than the old days. Grandma tells me that her grandmother spun the wool from our sheep, wove the cloth and made the wool. She still spins and knits. She weaves too, but that's just to keep up the tradition. My sister says she's not having a loom in her house—it takes up too much room. My dad and two younger brothers and I do most of

the work on the farm. Things are much easier for us now. Dad saved up for years to buy one of those machines that Mr. McCormick invented. It's called a reaper, and it makes harvesting our crops a lot easier. We've even bought a few more acres, because with the machines, we can work a lot more land. My brothers, who live in town, just started a business repairing all these new machines. They're even talking to Mr. McCormick's company about being a dealer for this whole part of the state. They think they're going to make thousands. But me? I'm going to stay on the farm.

Agriculture Today

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