

Lesson 8: Games and Leisure Time—Then and Now

Learning Goals:

Students will recognize how the leisure time activities of pioneer children and their families compare to today's children and families.

Iowa History Benchmarks:

4. Pioneer Life on the Prairie
 - a. Pioneer families developed a sense of social community and interdependence by sharing work and social events.

Materials:

Copy of Fun Was Where You Found It to read to students
Game cards

Activities:

1. Introduce pioneer games and leisure time activities by reading to the children "Fun Was Where You Found It."
2. Discuss the differences between pioneer life styles and that of today (i.e., we have much more leisure time; we have many more recreational options).
3. Share with students the game cards Hide and Seek, Fox and Chickens, Spin the Platter, and Run Sheep Run. These are old games that pioneer children may have played.
4. Have students select one of the games to play in the classroom.
5. Culminate the lesson by completing a comparison chart illustrating the differences between pioneer games and those played by students today.

Pioneer Games	Games Today

FUN WAS WHERE YOU FOUND IT

For the most part, the pioneers made their own fun. Since work was a necessity, they turned many hard labor tasks into a day of visiting and sharing work.

When a man got enough logs cut and prepared, he called his neighbors to help him "raise" the house. Discussions of politics, news, and advice on crop production were as helpful as were the walls being raised. The women also had a joyous time visiting with each other as they prepared food for the workers. Children were delighted to have seldom-seen playmates for the day.

Shortly after the family moved into their new home, the neighbors gathered again for a "house warming," or perhaps a "barn warming." Boys and girls would play such games as "London Bridge," "Hide and Seek," "Spin the Platter," "Fox and Geese," or "Ante Over," and fall asleep-around the edges of the room while their elders square danced to such tunes as "Old Dan Tucker," "Turkey in the Straw," "Money Musk," "Arkansas Traveler," or "The Girl I Left Behind Me." Most communities had at least one person who could scrape out these tunes on his fiddle and call out the directions in a sing-song voice.

Home party games usually included such games as Kitty in the Corner, Blind Man's Bluff, and kissing games. At more formal parties dancing might include the minuet, the Virginia Reel, a polka, a schottische, or the waltz.

Some people thought dancing was sinful and refused to take part in it. However, they did not object to a play-party where singing games such as "Skip- to-my-Lou" took place. These were mostly circle folk dances where the dancers sang the words as they moved to the rhythm. The words of the song could be made up if no one remembered them exactly.

One popular play-party song was "The Miller Boy." An extra person, the miller boy, stood in the center of a circle of partners. Those in the circle walked to the right while singing:

"O, happy is the miller boy
Who lives by the mill.
He takes his toll
With a right good will,
With one hand on the hopper
And the other in the sack.
The ladies step forward
And the gents step back."

At the beginning of the last line, each boy let go of the arm of his partner and tried to take the arm of the girl behind him. The miller was also trying to get a partner and, if he succeeded, the boy left without a partner had to be the miller.

Helping each other at harvest, haying, and threshing times gave other opportunities for group friendliness. Other neighborhood gatherings for fun and frolic, as well as for accomplishing necessary goals, were husking bees for corn crops, and quilting bees for the production of additional bedding.

Men liked a chance to enter into contests that required strength, speed, and skill. On Saturday afternoons there might be a shooting contest, the winners of which would come home with a piece of beef, a turkey, or some other wild game. To be a winner in wrestling, racing, or shooting was important to a pioneer man's self respect. Even work groups would challenge another group to beat their record in some routine task. Wolf hunts, with the men and boys carrying clubs, were exciting events. Horse racing gave men a chance to boast about and bet on their own horse or a neighborhood favorite.

Some of these contests were always a part of holiday celebrations such as the Fourth of July. Settlers for miles around would gather in a well-known grove for speeches, food, and afternoon contests.

GAME CARDS

FOX AND CHICKENS



One player is the fox and the others are the chickens. Form several groups of five or six players arranged in files. Each child in a file holds his/her hands on the hips of the child in front of him/her. The first player in a file is the hen. The fox attempts to tag the last chicken in any one of the files. The hen tries to protect her group from the fox with her outstretched arms while the group moves from side to side in back of her; all players must maintain their holds in the file. Whenever the fox tags a last chicken, the fox becomes the-hen for that group, and the child who was tagged becomes the fox.

HIDE AND SEEK



One player is "IT" and stands at the goal(tree, post, etc.) counting to 25 while the others run and hide. The person who is "IT" then calls out and goes to look for them. The first one who is found is "IT" the next time the game is played. The person who is "IT" continues to search until all are found. An additional element may be added to the game. A hider may be saved by reaching and tagging the goal before the seeker does. He/she is not considered "caught" if he/she tags the goal before the seeker does. Then the first one found and "caught" is "IT" the next time the game is played.

SPIN THE PLATTER



The children stand or sit in a circle, and each child is given a number. One child is "IT" and spins a tin pie plate on the floor in the center of the circle as a number is called. The child whose number is called tries to catch the plate before it stops spinning. If successful, this child may be "IT" and the game is repeated. The game may be changed so that the child whose number is called is "IT" if the plate is not caught before it stops spinning.

RUN, SHEEP, RUN



The players form two teams. Each team chooses a player to be its captain. A goal area is designated, and one team stays at the goal while the other team hides. After they are hidden, the captain of the hiding team comes back and accompanies the other team whose object is to find the hiders and then reach the goal before the opponents do. The team, which has all of its members back in the goal area, first wins. Any member of the searching team who finds the hiders tells his/her captain; then the captain calls, "Run, sheep, run!" Upon this signal all players must return to the goal. The captain of the hiding team may call, "Run, sheep, run!" as a signal at any time he/she feels that the searchers are far enough away for his/her team to reach the goal in safety. Both teams must run for the goal if either captain calls the signal. Each team, when hiding, plans signals that the captain uses in calling warnings to his/her team. "Red" may mean danger, "green" may mean to get ready to run, "cucumber" may mean to come in closer, "tobacco" may mean to go back, et cetera.