

TEACHING ACTIVITY: EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY

(adapted from *Project Archaeology: Investigating Shelter*)

Enduring Understanding:

Using the tools of scientific and historical inquiry, archaeologists study shelters and learn how people lived in them.

Essential Question:

How do archaeologists study the past?

- Students will learn that archaeologists use historic photographs to interpret archaeological sites and artifacts.
- Students will use observation, inference, and comparing skills to interpret a historic photograph.

Background Information

Photographs are a form of artistic expression and human record that modern people understand very well. Photographs are used to capture people's lifestyles, special or historic events, candid activities, family and social relations, artistic feelings, and even criminal deeds. Photographs of peoples who do not, or did not, keep written records sometimes provide a primary source of information about those cultures. A century ago, when having one's picture taken was a rare experience, people often posed with serious and formal expressions—creating the impression that society and people were a little dour.

Historical archaeologists use old photographs in many ways. For example, by determining the earlier appearance of an area, including the landscape and structures, an archaeologist can anticipate and better interpret features found during an excavation. Photographic images also help to identify fragments of recovered objects that may appear intact in a photo. Photographs are a particularly vivid teaching device for students because they provide views of the past for people whose own history is very short.

In this activity students will examine a historic photograph of a Pawnee earthlodge. These earthlodges were built in the Central Plains of the United States and were occupied about 200 years ago by the ancestors of today's Pawnee people.

Procedure:

- Students use the questions below to analyze the photograph individually or in teams of two.
- As a whole class, consider the questions in the Reflection.

Historic Photograph of a Pawnee Earthlodge: Analyzing the Data

Examine the photograph and answer the following questions.

Observing and Collecting Data

1. List the objects you see in the photograph.
2. What materials did the Pawnee use to build their earthlodges?
3. What are the people in the photograph doing? Are they posing for the picture? If so, why?
4. When do you think the picture was taken (season, time of day)?

Analyzing and Interpreting the Data

1. Why do you think the photo was taken?
2. What does the picture tell you about the past? What is your evidence?
3. What questions do you have about the photograph?
4. How could you get more information to answer your questions?

Reflection:

- Are historic photographs an important tool for learning about the past? Why or why not?
- Is it important to keep your family photographs? Why or why not?
- How might an archaeologist use the information in this photograph?

Reference: Letts, Cali A. and Jeanne M. Moe. 2009. *Project Archaeology: Investigating Shelter*. Montana State University.

