

A FILM BY KEN BURNS
THE NATIONAL PARKS
America's Best Idea

THE NATIONAL PARKS: AMERICA'S BEST IDEA
LESSON PLANS

**PERSONAL STORIES OF THE NATIONAL
PARKS**

For more information, visit

www.pbs.org/nationalparks/for-educators/

PERSONAL STORIES OF THE NATIONAL PARKS

Overview

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, millions of Americans and people from all over the world visited the national parks. Their reasons and experiences differed almost as much as the number of people who went. To record their experiences for others to enjoy, nearly all relied on the camera and the written word. Most took black and white snapshots with a Kodak or other camera. Some recorded their experiences with film movie cameras. Pictures were mounted in photo books with captions hand written below or along the margins. Many people wrote diary entries or stories to further describe their experiences.

Margaret and Edward Gehrke, from Lincoln, Nebraska, began traveling together to the national parks via train in 1915, when the young couple decided to stop at the Grand Canyon on the way home from San Francisco. For the next quarter-century, the couple would travel thousands of miles to visit virtually all of the existing national parks at the time, eventually switching from the railroad to traveling in the string of Buicks they owned. During each summer journey, Edward snapped photographs and Margaret recorded their adventure in her journals.

In this activity, students will review the stories of Edward and Margaret Gehrke on their travels to the national parks. They will examine Margaret's diary entries as a primary source document, looking for clues into what the couple valued most about their experiences. They will then assess how effective the diary entries, as presented in the film, are as storytelling. Finally, students will plan their own digital storytelling project and produce it for publication.

Note: If you or your students haven't had much experience in this type of project, a series of digital storytelling and technology modules can be found at pbs.org/nationalparks/for-educators. The training modules are tiered, allowing participants to choose their level of engagement: from simple uploading and geo-tagging of photos, to the Share Your Story media uploading tool, to creating, publishing and geo-tagging personal digital stories. As the modules can be used separately or together, participants choose the appropriate level of engagement, given available skill level, time and resources.

Objectives

The student will:

- Analyze primary documents of a personal diary
- Understand the components of an effective story
- Write a brief review of a travel story
- Plan their own storytelling project

Estimated Time

- Two class periods plus homework.

Materials Needed

- TV/DVD player or computer with overhead projector
- Copies of Students Handouts:
 - Diary Entries of Margaret Gehrke and Diary Analysis worksheet
 - Planning your Storytelling Project

Activity/Procedure

Day 1, Part 1: Watch the Video Segments

Tell students in this activity they will be exploring the diary of Margaret Gehrke, who with her husband Edward, spent nearly 30 years exploring the national parks. Like many travelers of the 20th century, they recorded their adventures in snapshot photographs, and Margaret wrote diary entries. Tell students to watch and listen carefully to the segments. Ask them to watch for various aspects of a good story – character development, narration, plot development, emotional presentation and message.

1. Show the *Personal Stories from the National Parks* clips.
2. After viewing the segments ask students the following questions:
 - a. What were the main themes expressed in the stories?
 - b. What was it about Margaret's stories you found compelling (powerful, humorous, emotional, etc.)?
 - c. Would you change anything in the way these stories were told? Explain.

Day 1, Part 2: Examining the diary entries of Margaret Gehrke

1. Ask students what makes up a good story. (*Possible answers: good plot, character development, suspense, climactic ending, a moral or lesson, etc.*) Review with students some other components of a good story:
 - a. Does the story have a beginning, middle and end?
 - b. Does the story engage your attention?
 - c. Does the story reflect honesty and authenticity?
 - d. Is the story well crafted, and does it offer reflection about the experience?
2. Divide students into groups of 2-3 students.
3. Distribute the student handout **Diary Entries of Margaret Gehrke** and **Diary Analysis Worksheet** for each student.
4. Review the directions with them and provide time in class for students to complete the worksheet.
5. Afterward, review the questions in # 7 with the entire class. Stress to students the components that make up a good story.
6. Tell students that in the next class period they will plan a storytelling project on a national park they've visited or a favorite place.

Day 2: Planning the Storytelling Project

Tell students that they will work to plan a storytelling project to produce and publish using the **Storytelling Project Student Guide**. Ideally, students will create a story on an experience they had at a national park or national historical park. If students haven't had such an experience, they can tell a story of a favorite place or you may consider planning a class field trip to a national park site.

After students complete the design of their project you can have them begin their production. The digital storytelling tutorials at pbs.org/nationalparks/for-educators will help you through this process. Once projects are complete they should be presented to the class and uploaded to pbs.org/nationalparks/share-your-story.

Related Academic Subjects

This lesson meets the following curriculum standards set by the McREL – Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning:

Historical Understanding:

- Standard 2: Understands the historical perspective

Arts and Communications

- Standard 3: Uses critical and creative thinking in various arts and communication settings

Language Arts:

- Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process
- Standard 7: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts
- Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes
- Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

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Diary Analysis Worksheet

1. List date range and places of the diary entries:

2. For what audience was the document written?

3. Why do you think this document was written? What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Cite example or quote.

4. List five experiences the author describes in the diary entries.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____
- d. _____
- e. _____

5. List three things the author said you think are important.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

6. List two things that tell you what is important to the author.

- a. _____
- b. _____

7. Write a brief review of the Gehrkes' story using the following guide:

- Do the diary entries, as they are arranged in the video segments, tell a clear story with a beginning, middle, and end? Explain.

- Do the stories engage your attention? Explain

- Are honesty and authenticity reflected in the stories? Explain

- Are the stories' are well-crafted and do they offer reflection about the experience? Explain

Margaret Gehrke Diary Entries

Directions: Review all of Margaret Gehrke’s diary entries carefully, making sure you understand what she is saying in each entry. Then complete the Diary Analysis Worksheet.

Diary entry: Late 1915, Grand Canyon National Park

A few things in this beautiful old world are too big to talk about... One can only weep before so supreme a spectacle of glory and of majesty!

Diary entry: August 1917, Glacier National Park

We have seen much in a short time... But still I have not found the peace I seek. I have found five hotels filled with crowds, I have seen beautiful scenery, but not the deep silence of the hills.

Diary entry: August 10

We have a wonderful location: camped in a forest of tall pines, overlooking the Lake. At last I have found the “spirit of the woods”... I shall like it here very much.

Diary entry: August 21

Our last day here... It has been all we dreamed it would be... For in this trip, like all the others, we have “laid up for ourselves treasures” and we have “remembered to live.”

Diary entry: August 24

Lincoln, Nebraska. To come home on Edward’s birthday was nice! If returning home can ever be said to be pleasant...

Diary entry: August 27

The house-keeping wheels begin! I swept and dusted, thoroughly cleaned the front rooms.

Diary entry: July 15, 1921

This is Colorado!... Ahead the snow covered peaks and cool pines, and the long Trail into the Unknown! About 20 miles out of Ft. Morgan we made camp... where mosquitoes made supper and sleep an interesting undertaking. Mosquitoes won.

Diary entry: July, 1921

Seventy-five miles [this day] over splendidly graveled roads,... the freedom! The joy!... the ecstasy one feels when he is going into the mountains that lie ahead,... the steady purr of a speeding car that bears one on past unfamiliar fields,

Diary entry: July 19, 1921

We shall long remember going over this new Pass from Estes to Grand Lake... a ride of forty miles of indescribable scenery and some stretches of inconceivable roads!... Altitude 11,000+.

Diary entry: Summer 1921

It would be sensible not to go. [But] to be sensible is to be commonplace. To be commonplace is unpardonable. I shall regret this decision

Diary entry: September 14, 1921

In camping tonight here at the foot of Mount Rainier, its great summit covered with immaculate snow, its outline in sharp contrast against the sky – the clear bright stars above – the icy chill of thin air – a secret dream of my heart has been realized and here I give thanks.

Diary entry: September 25, 1922

Mount Desert Island, off the Coast of Maine. We have arrived! --- The tall pines about remind me a little of Glacier: the lake with its low range about, a trifle of Grand Lake [at Rocky Mountain]. So we sleep tonight... and rejoice in spite of a cold wind impossible to keep out.

Diary entry: August 24, 1925. We are off into Mesa Verde!

For 31 miles we wound and wound, round and round, up and up: first the switch back Road with its sharp grade curves, then the Knife Edge Highway... and Mesa Verde!!! Here it was: ...scrubby little pinõn trees, canyons, and Spruce Tree House over there in full sight – altogether different than we expected.

Diary entry: May 28, 1929 The Grand Canyon.

We arrived this morning after a pleasant run thru national forest over paved highway. We made camp and had dinner before we set out to look at the Canyon. There it was: beautiful, majestic, sublime – but some how I missed the thrill of that first look 14 years ago. (Great moments in our lives do not return.)

Diary entry: May 29

For us the Canyon needs an added experience... we decided to hike to the bottom, stay over night, and return tomorrow.

Diary entry: May 30

Well, it was a Great Hike! Seven miles to the Bottom and a hundred and seven to the Top. We are stiff and lame but satisfied.... What is life but to dream and do?

Diary entry: June 11, 1929 Yosemite!

The incomparable Yosemite of our dreams!!! [Edward] tried so hard to capture it all with his cameras, while I wondered a bit if I could ever get it all down in my diary! In these few days Yosemite Valley must in some sense become “ours” and we will feel in part what John Muir felt...

Diary entry: June 28, 1929:

We arrived at Bryce Canyon this morning... A gorgeous spectacle! Fantasy and startling beauty!... “The Silent City,” with towers and fortresses and steeples, and afar a thousand windows!

Diary entry: June 19, 1934: So much new pavement has changed the appearance of the country. We see the mountains!... Before you could say “Jack Robinson” we were lugging things up the steep steps into the little cabin [called “Rose Den”] we have loved so many years... The old familiar mountain side with its cabins, the snowy peaks beyond, the rush of water. All the same, only I am different.

Diary entry: June 24, 1934: Sunday at Rose Den. The twilight hour is here: I look out to dark clouds on the mountain sides... Towards evening we have gotten our things together for quick packing in the morning. Our stay here in Rose-Den comes to an end. Will we come back again? I wonder.

Storytelling Project Student Guide

Overview: For over one hundred thirty years, Americans have experienced the national parks. For as much time they have told their stories of unique animal sightings, breathtaking scenery, and great human experiences with friends, family, and new acquaintances. In this activity you will plan a storytelling project of an experience you've had at a national park or a favorite place you would like to tell about. Examples of storytelling projects can be found on the PBS National Parks website at pbs.org/nationalparks/share-your-story/.

1. Think about the subject of your project. Identify the location where the experience took place. Where will your story take place? How is the location important to the story? What made the location special?
2. Narrow down the focus to one particular experience. What is the main point, issue or problem you want to explore in your story? What is it you want to tell your audience?
3. What are the events and circumstances that that make up your story?
4. What is the sequence of events or circumstances in your story? Your story should have a beginning, middle and end.
5. What aspects of the story will engage your audience? How will you do this?

6. Provide some examples of how your story will explain the experience:

- What images will you use (pictures, maps, video footage, graphs or charts)?

- What music will you include? What natural sounds will you include?

- Will you use any interviews of other people who also had the experience? If so, what will they talk about?

- Will you use voice-over narration? How will it narrate the story?

7. What message or statement do you want your audience to reflect on?