

## TOPIC VII: The Amazing Potato and the History of Ireland

### INTERDISCIPLINARY MIDDLE GRADES (4-8) PACKAGE

#### TITLE: The Amazing Potato and the History of Ireland

#### AIM 7.2: How did the amazing potato shape the history of Ireland?

#### TEACHER BACKGROUND:

In 1997, the people of Ireland and of Irish descent around the world observed the 150th anniversary of the worst year (1847) of the Great Irish Famine, a catastrophe precipitated by a fungus that destroyed the potato harvests of 1845, 1846, 1848 and 1849. To mark the Great Irish Famine commemoration in New York State, the state legislature voted that study of the famine in Ireland be included in the Human Rights curriculum required in the state's public schools. The curriculum already includes the study of slavery in the Americas and the European Holocaust.

The consequences of the Great Irish Famine altered more than the course of Irish history; the Irish diaspora changed the shape of world history, especially that of the United States, Canada, Australia and England. In the 1990 federal census, 44 million Americans voluntarily reported their ethnicity as Irish.

New York State is especially proud of its Irish heritage. In 1855, 26% of the population of Manhattan was born in Ireland. By 1900, 60% of the population was of Irish descent. Today, thousands of New Yorkers trace their ancestry to famine era immigrants who helped develop the infrastructure, economy, and social and political institutions of our state.

The Great Irish Famine occurred in a period where England, countries in continental Europe, and the United States were developing industrially and as modern states. The famine challenged the British government, international humanitarian organizations and philanthropic private individuals to provide aid to massive numbers of poor Irish, many living in remote areas, who were suffering from starvation and famine-related disease. The degree to which those involved responded continues to draw praise and condemnation more than a century later. The ideas they debated about the responsibility of government are still being discussed today.

Studies of the Great Irish Famine suggest that famine-related deaths and the accompanying mass emigration were the result of multiple causes, including a food shortage, the lack of individual resources to obtain food, and the failure of the government to adequately regulate markets and provide sufficient support. It is important to note that the economy of England in the 1840s was probably roughly equivalent to the economy of Indonesia today, while economic conditions in Ireland were probably very similar to contemporary Somalia.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to study the Great Irish Famine is that hunger and homelessness are still with us; that there is want in a world of wealth. The famine's legacy has affected the psyches of the Irish and the Irish of the diaspora teaching us that distress and dislocation have long-term consequences on its victims and its descendants. The lessons of the Great Irish Famine have a claim on our fundamental humanity; they remind us that we have an opportunity to help our neighbors who face similar suffering.

AIM 7.2: How did the amazing potato shape the history of Ireland?

PI:

- Students will use scaffolding questions to understand and explain historical material describing on the impact of the potato on Ireland.
- Students will work in expert groups to prepare and present reports to the class on the impact of the potato on Ireland.

ASSESSMENT:

- Students will demonstrate their understand of the impact of the potato on the history of Ireland through participation in group discussion, completion of activity sheets and presentations in class.
- Students will demonstrate their understand of the impact of the potato on the history of Ireland through completion of individual projects.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: Hold up a potato. What is this? Do you eat them in your family? How do you prepare them? Why are foods like potatoes so important?

TRANSITIONAL ACTIVITY: Explain the activity "The Amazing Potato and the History of Ireland."

ACTIVITY: Student will work cooperatively in expert groups to complete either ACTIVITY SHEETS 1, 2, and 3. Expert groups report on their findings to the full class.

SUMMARY QUESTION: How did the amazing potato shape the history of Ireland?

HOMEWORK: Select and complete one of the projects.

APPLICATION: Why is there hunger in the world today? What can we do to end world hunger?

- Why is there hunger in New York State today? What can we do end hunger in New York State today?

PROJECTS: Imagine that you were an Irish man or woman during this time period. Write a letter to the British Parliament explaining your views on British rule in Ireland and the problems facing the Irish.

- Draw a picture, poster or political cartoon that supports the arguments you are making in your letter.
- Write an illustrated children's book about the amazing potato and the history of Ireland.
- Write a speech you would want to deliver at the United Nations to world leaders. In your speech, explain your views on way governments and people should respond to the problem of world hunger. Include ideas you learned about during your study of the Irish potato famine.
- Draw a picture, poster or political cartoon that supports the arguments you are making in your speech to the United nations explaining your views on way governments and people should respond to the problem of world hunger.

REFLECTIONS: Expert teams in Cecelia Goodman's 5th grade class and Rachel Gaglione's middle school classes reported on their findings to class. On both levels, students felt it was important to pass around and look at different types of potatoes. The potatoes became a metaphor for the entire project. These teachers, as well as Jennifer Debler of Baldwin Middle School, Baldwin NY, found that scaffolding questions were crucial to direct student attention to key information in the reading passages.

## **ACTIVITY SHEET 1- The Amazing Potato and the History of Ireland**

(adapted from The Amazing Potato by Milton Meltzer)

### **A) How did the potato arrive in Ireland?**

The potato probably arrived in Ireland by accident in the year 1588. A great fleet of ships, sent out by Spain to conquer England, was defeated by the English navy. Some of the Spanish ships, tried to sail home around the top of Scotland, but were damaged by storms off the coast of Ireland. Their crews were killed or captured by the Irish, who took what they found on board. This probably included potatoes that were planted along the Irish coast. Very soon the Irish of all ranks were eating potatoes.

#### **Questions**

- 1- What year did the potato probably first arrive in Ireland?
- 2- Who brought the potato to Ireland?
- 3- Why do you think the Irish began eating potatoes?

### **B) How did the potato become the major food crop of Ireland?**

In the twelfth century, Pope Adrian IV, the only English pope ever, gave control of Ireland to King Henry II of England. In the sixteenth century Irish revolts against English rule were savagely crushed by the soldiers of Queen Elizabeth I. The long war ended in the slaughter of more than half of the population of Ireland and the destruction of the homes of wealthy and poor alike. The countryside, with its grain crops and cattle, was ruined. Just as that terrible struggle ended, the potato reached the hands of the Irish peasants. The people were near starvation, so when the potato arrived, it met a desperate need. In a few years, necessity overcame resistance to a new food, and the Irish were eating potatoes to survive.

#### **Questions**

- 4- How did England get control over Ireland?
- 5- What happened when Ireland rebelled against England?
- 6- Do you think the potato would have become so important without these other events? Why or why not?

### **C) Why did people continue to raise potatoes?**

Potatoes had many advantages as a food crop. They were easy to prepare in an iron pot over an open fire place. Potatoes could feed the entire family and also their farm animals. People could eat potatoes three meals a day. Also, even though the Irish did not know it, the potato may be the most perfect natural source of nutrition so far discovered. For many people, it offered them their only chance to escape from famine and disease that regularly hammered at Irish doors.

#### **Questions**

7- Explain an advantage of the potato as a food crop.

8- Would you be willing to eat the same food three times a day? Why or why not?

### **D) What happened when the Irish started eating potatoes?**

In the 1700s the population of Ireland grew with astonishing speed. By 1801, when England forced a union of Ireland with Great Britain, the population of Ireland had doubled, reaching nearly five million people. In addition, because of their potato diet, the Irish grew taller than most other people. For ninety percent of the Irish, potatoes for breakfast, lunch, and supper, largely replaced their traditional diet of meat, milk, and oatmeal. This was because one small acre of land could supply a family of six people with enough potatoes that they could eat an average of ten pounds of potatoes a day.

#### **Questions**

9- How did the potato change Ireland?

10- In your opinion, why were people willing to make this change?

### **E) Why are potatoes considered a healthy food?**

Potatoes are a very healthy food. Look at a medium sized potato. The average potato of 150 grams has only 100 calories. It has no fat and is almost salt free. It provides the following vitamins and minerals:

50 percent of the U.S. RDA of vitamin C

20 percent of vitamin B6

15 percent of iodine

10 percent of niacin (a B-complex vitamin), iron and copper

8 percent of folacin (folic acid, another B vitamin), phosphorous, magnesium, and thiamin (vitamin B1)

4 percent of zinc and pantothenic acid (another B vitamin)

2 percent of riboflavin (vitamin B2)

Besides all these vitamins and minerals, a potato provides potassium and crude fiber .

**Questions**

- 11- List 3 vitamins or minerals provided by the potato.
- 12- Why are potatoes an important part of a healthy diet?

**F) Did the amazing potato make Irish peasants prosperous?**

Potatoes keep Irish families alive, but families remained very poor. The majority of the Irish owned little or no farm land of their own. The cost of renting land for a potato patch, even a small patch on swampy land called a bog, was very high. Most people had no money. To rent land, they had to work for absentee landlords. People also had to give a share of their potatoes to the Anglican (Protestant) Church of England, a tithe (tax) they bitterly resented because most of the Irish were Roman Catholics.

**Questions**

- 13- Why did the Irish remain poor despite an abundance of potatoes?
- 14- Why were many Irish upset by the tax they had to pay to the Anglican Church?

**G) What was life like for Irish potato farmers?**

The potato needed the least amount of cultivation of any crop. Preparing the ground, sowing, and harvesting the crop only took three months. For most of the year, peasants had little to do and no way to earn money. A great many men, women, and children roamed around in the summertime, when their own potatoes were gone, begging for money or for old potatoes to eat. Denied education, often kicked off the land for inability to pay rent, hanging on the edge of starvation, many of the Irish sank into apathy. Squatters built shacks alongside roads and grew potatoes on scraps of land. Many people were driven to commit small crimes so they would go to prison, where at least they would be fed. Alcoholism and drunkenness became a major problem. A British commission studied the situation of the Irish. It concluded that "Their sufferings were greater than the people of any other country in Europe had to sustain."

**Questions**

- 15- Explain 3 problems that were facing Ireland and the Irish.
- 16- In your opinion, was the potato really an amazing food? Explain your answer.

## **ACTIVITY SHEET 2- The Amazing Potato and the History of Ireland**

(adapted from The Amazing Potato by Milton Meltzer)

### **A) What happened in Ireland during the summer of 1845?**

As the summer of 1845 began, Ireland's potato crops looked their best. Suddenly a change set in. First there was a dismal mist. Then storms of rain and wind alternated with a vast and terrible stillness. In their fields, farmers noticed brown spots spreading on the leaves of the potato plants. Next, blackened stalks slowly leaned over and died. The air became heavy with the stink of decay.

In some farm districts there was only a mild alarm at first. Potato disease was no stranger. But this disease proved different from the past. Entire fields were ruined in a few hours. Families who had gone to bed leaving green fields woke to find them blanketed in black. Panic quickly spread.

#### **Questions**

- 1- What was the first sign of the potato disease?
- 2- Why was the spread of the potato disease so frightening?
- 3- If you were a potato farmer, how would you have felt when you saw that your field was destroyed? Why?

### **B) How did people battle against the potato disease?**

People were terrified by the sight of the potato fields and tried a number of things to stop the disease from spreading. They worked frantically to cut the black stalks. They set fires to purify the air. They tried to bury potato patches under turf and stones. They even sprinkled fields with holy water, hoping to scare away demons. But whatever people tried, the disease swept from field to field. It even invaded barns and houses, destroying potatoes that had been stored away. There had been many partial potato famines in Ireland over the past hundred years. But none had ever been this bad.

#### **Questions**

- 4- How did people try to stop the spread of the potato disease?
- 5- In your opinion, why did people try sprinkling holy water on their fields?

**C) What caused the destruction of the potatoes?**

The potato crop was destroyed by the potato blight. It was an infestation by a fungus that scientists call *Phytophthora infestans*. The disease was not really a sickness of the potato. The fungus is a microscopic living organism that reproduces itself at lightning speed. It struck first in 1842 in North America, along the Atlantic coast, from Nova Scotia to Boston. The fungus probably reached Europe in a diseased potato carried on a ship. The blight redoubled in 1846, preventing a new crop from being planted. In 1847 the disease let up, but it returned, full force, in 1848-1849.

**Questions**

- 6- What caused the loss of all the potatoes?
- 7- How did this potato disease arrive in Ireland?
- 8- Why did the potato disease spread so fast?

**D) What happened after the potato crop died?**

Famine started about five or six months after the failure of the potato crop. By then every scrap of food, every piece of partly diseased potato that could be swallowed, was gone. In many districts the people began to starve. They ate anything, even rotted potatoes they knew had killed pigs and cattle. People slept in rags after they pawned every scrap of clothing and their bedding. As the blight hung on year after year, the grip of hunger tightened. When they could, people lived on blackberries and on cabbage leaves. In district after district, they starved by the thousands. Even if food was available, people could not buy it because they were penniless. Bands of starving Irish men, women, and children wandered the roads, begging for food.

**Questions**

- 9- How did famine affect the people of Ireland?
- 10- If you were in charge of the British government at that time, what would you have done to respond to the famine? Why?

**E) How did observers describe conditions in Ireland?**

One visitor wrote that he saw crowds of women and little children "scattered over the turnip fields like a flock of famishing crows, devouring the raw turnips, mothers half naked, shivering in the snow and sleet, uttering exclamations of despair while their children were screaming with hunger."

Two Englishmen described a trip to Cork. They saw dead bodies lying on the roadside. In some towns there were too many dead for the living to bury the bodies.

Contagious and deadly diseases like typhus and cholera spread everywhere. Whenever they stopped, the Englishmen were surrounded by starving, almost naked beggars. They found deserted cabins, often with unburied corpses inside. There was a terrible feeling of hopelessness.

**Questions**

- 11- Why are the scenes described by these travelers so horrible?
- 12- In your opinion, why was there a terrible feeling of hopelessness in Ireland?

**F) What was done to help the starving?**

Private charities tried to help the starving, especially the Quakers, Roman Catholic Churches, and Irish immigrants to the United States, but they could not cope with so huge a problem. The British government failed to provide enough help to meet the challenge. Public works projects provided some jobs so the poor could earn the money to buy food. Food depots were set up and price-controlled meal from India and corn from the United States was sold to people working on the projects. Soup kitchens handed out food free to the unemployed. But it was never enough.

**Questions**

- 13- In your opinion, why were private charities unable to solve the problems of Ireland?
- 14- How did the British government try to help the people of Ireland?

**G) Why did English leaders oppose relief?**

People who really wanted to help relieve the suffering came up against strong opposition to government action by officials who believed that government should never interfere with private enterprise. These government officials opposed public aid to the poor, no matter how desperately it was needed.

A common argument was that the British Parliament had to leave Ireland "to the operation of natural causes." Some blamed the Irish themselves for their troubles and said they got what they deserved. An important advisor on economic affairs to the British government, said that he "feared that the famine in Ireland would not kill more than a million people, that would scarcely be enough to do much good."

Today most people accept the responsibility of the government to step in and help people in a time of crisis. But what we believe now was not how government in the 1840s saw things. It took time many years of struggle by ordinary people to change the way that governments respond to human sufferings.



But change came too late to help the people of Ireland. Ireland lost two million people because of the potato famine. One fourth of its total population. A million died of starvation and of diseases like cholera that struck when hunger weakened the body. Many more fled their homeland.

**Questions**

- 15- Why did the British Parliament decide not to provide enough help for Ireland?
- 16- What was the impact of the potato famine on Ireland?

### **ACTIVITY SHEET 3- The Amazing Potato and the History of Ireland**

(adapted from The Amazing Potato by Milton Meltzer)

#### **A) Why did many Irish migrate to the United States?**

The Irish potato famine caused boatloads of starving people to flee to the United States. But they were not the first Irish to come. At least 100,000 Irish men and women entered the British North American colonies before the American Revolution. In the early 1800s more Irish came to the United States, seeking a better life and freedom from British rule.

When the blight devastated the potato crops, the stream of Irish entering American port cities became a raging flood. Most of the Irish who came to the United States were penniless. They came from a poor agricultural country. Few had trades, industrial training or elementary schooling. The only jobs open to them were unskilled and often temporary. Irishmen soon dominated jobs other people did not want. The men often got jobs where cheap labor was hired by the day, such as construction work. The women worked mostly as domestic servants. They worked sixteen-hour days for as little as seventy-five cents a week plus board and room.

#### **Questions**

- 1- Why did early Irish immigrants come to the new world?
- 2- Why did the famine generation face difficulty in the United States?
- 3- What was life and work like for single Irish women?

#### **B) What were conditions like on the famine ships bringing the Irish to North America?**

For many Irish, emigration seemed like it would be a way to escape from poverty and hunger. But conditions on the famine ships to the United States and British North America (Canada) were often horrible. Many people failed to arrive in America safely. Tens of thousands died at sea or soon after landing in America. Small wooden ships designed to carry lumber, not people, were widely used for years. Old and unsafe, they often sank in the stormy North Atlantic. In the famine year 1847, of 100,000 Irish who sailed to America, about 17,000 died at sea of epidemics carried aboard by passengers or crew. Another 20,000 died of disease soon after arrival in North America.

### **Questions**

- 4- What happened on the famine ships to the United States?
- 5- In your opinion, why were Irish emigrants forced to travel to the United states on such unsafe ships?
- 6- How was the experience of the Irish on the famine ships similar to or different from the experience of other groups that travelled to the Americas?

### **C) What was life like for the Irish in the United States?**

Once in the United States, Irish workers were paid very low wages. Because of their low wages, large families had to live in small quarters in slum tenants in United States cities. Sometimes two or three families shared an overcrowded apartment. One community in New York City was called Five Points. Another was known as Hell's Kitchen. Life in these communities was a nightmare. Cleanliness, fresh air, and privacy were impossible. Cholera, typhus and other diseases spread and killed many people.

The most terrible price for living in an Irish immigrant slum was paid by the children. More than three out of five died under the age of five. The average age of Irish Catholics buried in Boston at that time was only thirteen.

### **Questions**

- 7- Why did the Irish live in overcrowded slums?
- 8- In your opinion, why did diseases spread rapidly in these communities?
- 9- In your opinion, why did so many Irish children die so young?

### **D) How did Americans treat Irish immigrants?**

Life was made even more difficult by widespread prejudice against the Irish. Many other Americans made fun of their nationality, customs, manners, and speech. The Roman Catholic religion was both feared and ridiculed. Anti-Irish feelings were openly expressed. Newspaper listings of jobs and housing would often include the line, "No Irish Need Apply."

In the 1840s, many towns in the northeastern United States were full of Irish workers who were busy digging canals and constructing new railroad lines. The old-time Yankees looked down on the immigrants as if they were not even members of the human race. Poor Irish, known as "Shanty Irish," were not helped by the local charities. Local governments offered them no assistance or protection. During hard times, their homes were burned and their churches vandalized.

### Questions

- 9- What did the line, "No Irish Need Apply," mean?
- 10- Who were the "Shanty Irish"?
- 11- In your opinion, why were the Irish targeted during economic hard times?

### **E) What was the long-term impact of the potato famine on the Irish?**

The enormous long-term impact of the potato blight on Ireland and the Irish is hard to imagine. Irish-American scholar Andrew Greeley wrote: "The Great Famine, for all practical purposes, destroyed Old Ireland. Emigration creamed off the surplus population and many, if not most, of the more gifted and talented younger generation." Between the years of famine and the Civil War millions of dollars were sent home by immigrants in America to bring relatives out. The young, the strong, and the enterprising left Ireland to enrich America.

In Ireland, the potato famine continued to shape the way people felt and thought for decades. Stories about what happened in those anguished times were handed down for generations. The stories taught young people about the way families dug in the fields all day hoping to find enough potatoes for just one meal, or how a healthy seed potato was hidden away like gold for the next planting.

Even a century later, fathers turned red with rage if a child wasted food. A farmer plowing his field would not leave a single potato on the ground, no matter how small it was. Old people, long after the famine, still burst into tears at the sight of a dish of potatoes, because they could never forget the time of starvation.

Emigration to the United continued long after the famine was over. In the 1890s along nearly 400,000 Irish emigrated to the United States. Most of this people settled in America permanently. Only one out of twelve returned home. All together, about 4.5 million Irish moved to the United States between 1820 and 1930. Another million went to other countries. Today, 40 million Americans trace their ancestry to Ireland.

### Questions

- 12- Why did Irish people in the United States continue to send money home to Ireland after the potato famine was over?
- 13- How did stories teach a new generation about troubles during the potato famine?
- 14- What do you think Andrew Greeley means by the statement that "The Great Famine destroyed Old Ireland"? Do you agree? Explain.

**F) Why have there been famines throughout world history?**

The world has suffered from famine throughout history. In Egypt, from 1064 to 1072, the Nile failed to flood onto the fields. This caused crops to die and a long famine. Too much rain spoiled the harvests in Europe in 1315-1317, and at least 10 percent of the population died of hunger. There were bad famines in the 1300s in both China and Russia. In the African countries of Ethiopia and the Sudan wars and bad weather conditions led to big famines in 1984-1985. It is estimated that about a million people died of hunger. Even now, an estimated 500 million people throughout the world go to bed hungry every night. Poverty exists everywhere, and hunger is a result of poverty.

**Questions**

15- What are the causes of famine?

16- In your opinion, was the Irish potato famine worse than other famines in human history? Explain your answer.