

Colorado Schoolhouse Spelling Bee

Developed by: Izaak Lane, Grand Junction High School
Colorado History Class, 2019

Background

It was common for students in the mid to late 1800s to have spelling bees with their class.

From the Smithsonian Magazine:

By the mid-18th century, spelling competitions were common; Benjamin Franklin recommended their use in a 1750 proposal for a school. Recreational spelling challenges were fashionable in the 19th century for both adults and children. *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*, a best-selling novel in 1871, includes a hero who falls in love with a woman he is facing in a “spelling-match,” and Mark Twain mentions “spelling fights” in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. It wasn’t until the mid-1870s that the term “bee”—which referred to a community social event with a common goal, such as a quilting bee—came into use, but the stakes in these competitions were high no matter what they were called. ¹

¹ Rebecca Sealon, “The History of the Spelling Bee,” Smithsonian Magazine, May 2019,
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/history-spelling-bee-180971916/>

Activity

Instructions:

1. Once in the recreation of a one-room schoolhouse, the teacher or chaperone can choose a student to be the “teacher” and four or more student volunteers to compete in a rudimentary spelling bee using words and vocabulary from the museum.
2. The student volunteers will stand single file to the right of the teacher while the teacher stands behind the desk.
3. The “teacher” will conduct the competition elimination style: each student spells a word and if they get the word wrong, they are out automatically.
4. The “teacher” will give the remaining students more difficult words.
5. The winner gets to choose another student to enact one of two historical punishments:
 - > The chosen student will wear a dunce cap and stand in the corner
 - > The “teacher” will draw a small circle on the board and have the chosen student stand with their nose in it for 1 minute

Word Bank:

Stagecoach, Explorer, Antelope, Repeater, Dalmatian, Opera, Petroglyph, Uranium, Outlaw, Revolver, Prospector, Moccasins, Colorado, Saloon, Ute, Cannon, Grizzly, Blacksmith, Redoubt, Pottery, Enormous, Cattle, Transporting, Standoff, Shabby, Valuables, Expensive, Survival, Undesirable, Custody, Superb, Village