

## Primary Sources: Clues to the Past

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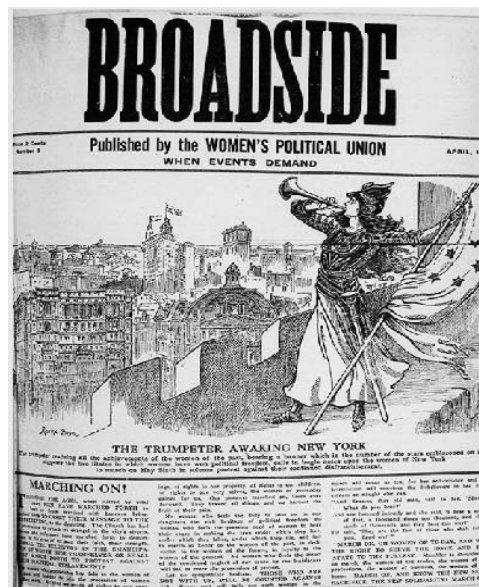
Close your eyes and imagine taking your class on a field trip in a time capsule that whisks you back in time. You wake up transported back to 1910. Open your eyes and look around...what do you see, what do you hear, what are you wearing, who is around you, what are you eating, where are you sleeping, what are you reading, who are your heroes, what are you doing?

At one time, this scenario would have made no sense (except for those of us who read *Time and Again* by Jack Finney), but now we can easily take our kids on a historical journey in which they can see, hear and feel the lives of our ancestors. All you need is a computer, an Internet connection, and children of any age with imagination and curiosity.

Through primary sources we transport our students into another time so that they can experience daily life and understand the evolution of our culture. Primary sources provide our students with a personal experience of history and culture upon which they develop their own understanding.



**What so you see in this photo? How are the people dressed? What are they doing?**



### HOW IT FEELS TO BE THE HUSBAND OF A SUFFRAGETTE

**Y**OU are the party aimed at. You who stood on the sidewalk and urged passionately that we who marched go home and wash the dishes or mind the baby. Nobody answered you then. To be frank, you didn't say much that sounded worth

Using primary source artifacts to begin a new assignment is often the key to engaging students. In English class, before reading a novel, students can view photos of the time period and write personal diary entries; in history, students can listen to period songs, view films, analyze broadsides and develop their own research questions that lead to investigate the “historical facts.” Science class can begin with life before the inventions of everyday things, with students devising their own inventions.

Students become detectives and learn to interpret history for themselves. We provide them with the material artifacts and direct them through specific activities so that they develop questions, investigate further, and then begin to draw conclusions. Facts become personally meaningful and are remembered.

### **What exactly are primary resources, and how do they differ from other resources?**

Both primary and secondary sources are used by historians to answer questions about the past. Primary sources are actual records that have survived from the past, while secondary sources are accounts of the past created by people writing about events sometime after they happened.

People living in the past left a multitude of clues about their lives, including books, personal papers, government documents, letters, oral accounts, diaries, maps, photographs, reports, novels and short stories, coins, stamps, and on and on. Historians call all of these clues together *the historical record*. When viewing any primary resource, it is important to recognize that there is bias implicit in every artifact and analysis of that artifact includes research of that bias or perspective. For example, when



looking at a photograph we must keep in mind that this photo was created with a particular purpose in mind, though it is not always apparent. Understanding that perspective provides a window through which we view the life of an individual or particular group. As a result, historians read sources skeptically and critically. They also cross-check sources against other evidence and sources. Historians follow a few basic rules to help them analyze primary sources, and students can learn to view artifacts with these rules in mind.

**Time and Place Rule** - To judge the quality of a primary source, the closer in time and place a source and its creator were to an event in the past, the more authentic the source will be.

**Bias Rule** - Every source is biased in some way. Documents tell us only what the creator of the document thought happened, or perhaps only what the creator wants us to think happened. No piece of evidence should be taken at face value. The creator's point of view must be considered. Each piece of evidence and source must

be cross-checked and compared with related sources and pieces of evidence.

### **Questions for Analyzing Primary Sources**

The following questions may help you and your students judge the quality and perspective of primary sources:

Who created the source and why? Did the recorder have firsthand knowledge of the event? Was the recorder a neutral party, or did the creator have opinions or interests that might have influenced what was recorded?

\*Did the recorder produce the source for personal use, for one or more individuals, or for a large audience?

\*Was the source meant to be public or private?

\*Did the recorder wish to inform or persuade others? (Check the words in the source. The words may tell you whether the recorder was trying to be objective or persuasive.) Did the recorder have reasons to be honest or dishonest?

\*Was the information recorded during the event, immediately after the event, or after some lapse of time? How large a lapse of time? Students examine “real” replicas of photos, read letters written by famous people, watch silent movies, and listen to speeches in original voices.

Through careful planning of projects students:

- \*learn to critically examine artifacts on their own
- \*seek information they need to understand the origin of the objects
- \*develop the research questions they need for further exploration, becoming intimately involved in authentic research.

Students question and learn that there is no “right answer,” and come to understand why there are glaring contradictions in what they are finding.

### How do we find appropriate artifacts and most importantly, make them meaningful in the context of what we want to teach?

The Library of Congress ([www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)) has developed a rich and multi-faceted Web site providing everything from U.S. legislative information, to unusual “Today in History” facts. The latest addition is a family friendly site called America’s Libraries that is well worth exploring.

In this article I am focusing on the vast educational resources of the American Memory Collection <<http://memory.loc.gov>> over 100 distinct collections of primary source historical artifacts that have been digitalized and distributed to the world on the free Internet. This is an ongoing project that now includes over 7,000,000 files and is growing rapidly. The tools for educators on the Learning Page <<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/index.html>> take us



through exercises in understanding primary sources, and to tried and true lessons that can be used with our students as they are or adapted to fit different classroom needs.

Together we develop activities that focus on:

- \*Students learning to *read* artifacts for meaning.
- \*Students using material culture analysis tools to determine how individuals / groups have been portrayed and have portrayed themselves.
- \*Students constructing stories.
- \*Students finding or analyzing conflicting evidence.
- \*Students asking ‘What else do I need to know?’

**What lessons are available for me to explore or use?**

Why “reinvent the wheel”? Explore sections of the American Memory Learning Page to identify a tried and true lesson that you might find useful to adapt for your class.

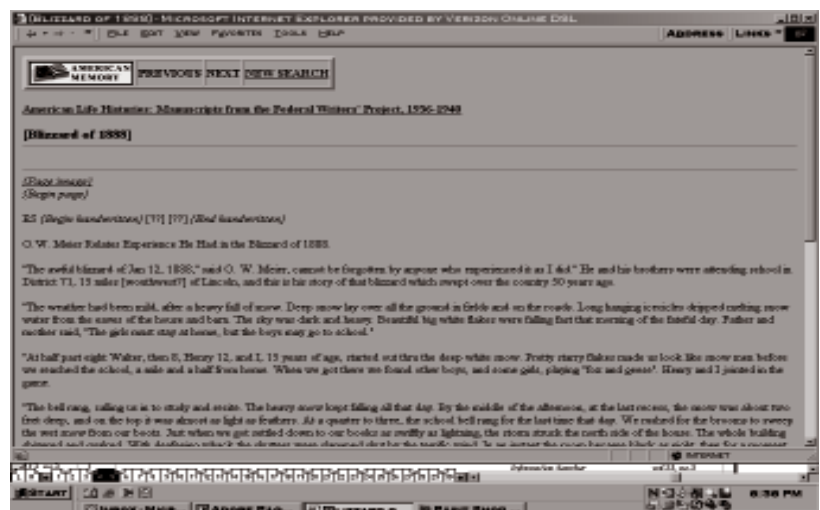
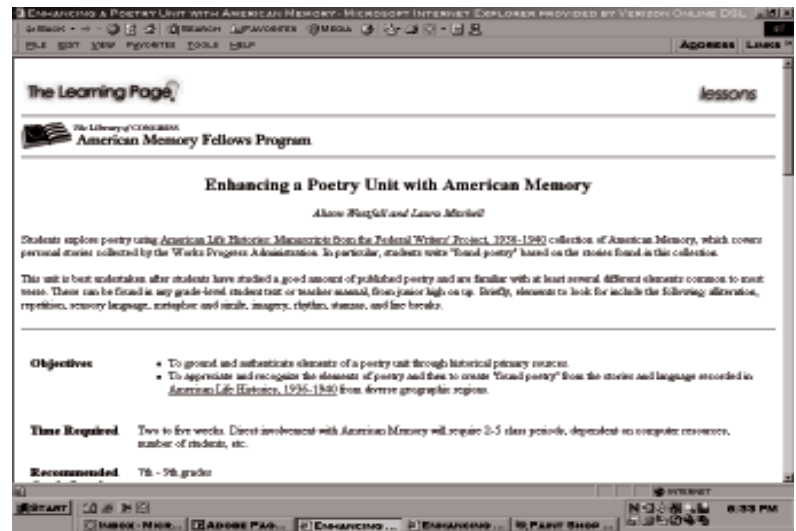
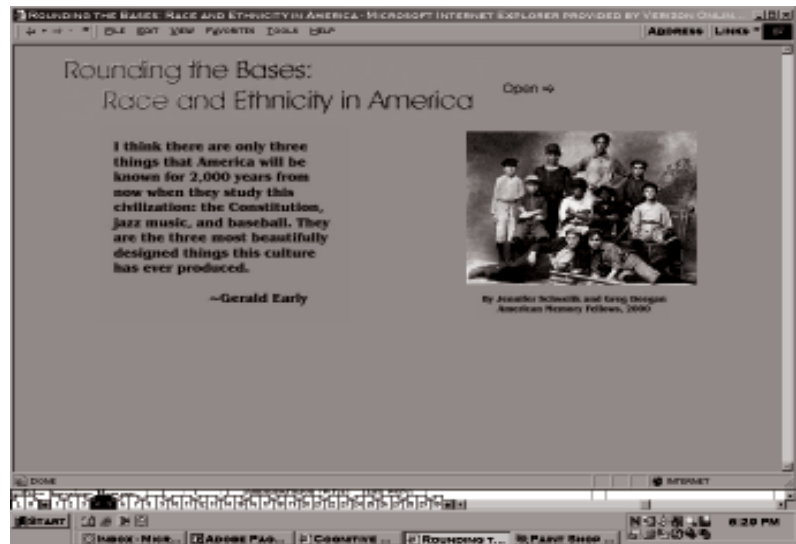
NOTE: These lessons have been created for you by American Memory Fellows, teams of educators who worked with the collections of resources at the Library of Congress. You may use them as they are or adapt them in any way that meets your needs. Use the entire lesson, just the worksheets, the resources they link to, or change them as you see fit. Lessons “By Theme, Topic, Discipline or Era” <<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/index.html>> gives you a birds-eye view of lessons across grade levels and

subject areas. Explore those that interest you. An example of a recent lesson: Rounding the Bases: Race and Ethnicity in America <<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/00/base>> demonstrates how exciting learning about the civil rights movement can be through baseball heroes.

Natalie Farina, my co-fellow at the Library of Congress last summer, is an English teacher at Scarsdale High School. She adapted an existing lesson for her classes into an exercise that would work well for upper elementary through high school English classes. Using the lesson, Enhancing a Poetry Unit with American Memory by Alison Westfall and Laura Mitchell <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/98/poetry/poem.html>> Natalie had her students visit the American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940 collection <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>>.

Students wrote "found poetry" based on the personal stories collected by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). They were introduced to 'Found Poetry' as described in the lesson and read the "Blizzard of 1888" <[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/wpa:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(17120802\)\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/wpa:@field(DOCID+@lit(17120802)))> which was filled with graphic descriptions. They then found the words and phrases for their own poems. Many of these students had no prior experience writing poetry, and found themselves inspired while reading these graphic historic entries remarking on the ease with which they were writing. Additional exercises and resources are included in the original lesson.

Collection Connections <<http://>>



[lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/collections/index.html](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/collections/index.html)> places the lessons in the context of curriculum areas. Explore the summaries, history, critical thinking, and arts and humanities lessons. (Ex. Women's suffrage <<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/collections/vfwpix/index.html>>)

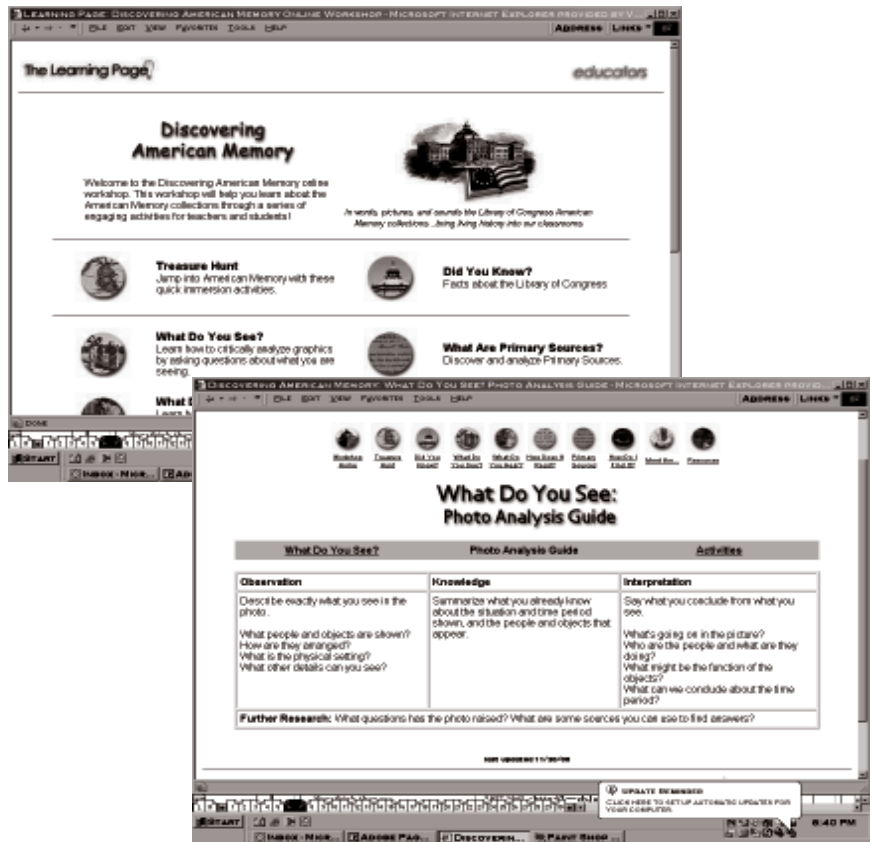
Discovering American Memory <<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/educators/workshop/discover/index.html>> - provides engaging activities for students and teachers to become familiar with primary sources and specific documents in this collection.

An example of a short assignment using original photos is in preparation for 11<sup>th</sup> graders who will be reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Students examine photos of a small town in Alabama during the Great Depression from the American Memory Collection America from the Great Depression to World War Two: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945. <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html>>

First they view two photos from this collection as a class, (projected on a screen) and learn to answer the questions on the Photograph Analysis Worksheet <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/educators/workshop/discover/guide4.html>> just giving "the facts" and *not* their subjective impressions. The first time students are directed in this activity, it is quite difficult they are used to blending what they see with what they think they see.

They then choose several photos for subjective analysis:

- \*Give several persons, buildings, and objects their own stories
- \*List assumptions, hunches, observations and feelings
- \*What are the town secrets?



\*What is the mood or tone of the town?

\*Write a letter to a friend with your impressions of the town what stories, physical descriptions will you describe?

For a powerful introduction to the same novel, or as introduction to civil rights issues in history, there is an excellent collection of photos at Photographs of Signs Enforcing Racial Discrimination: Documentation by Farm Security Administration-Office of War Information Photographers PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION 1937-1943 <[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/rr/print/085\\_disc.html](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/rr/print/085_disc.html)>

Use the photo analysis worksheet for students to describe only what they see.

### Locating Artifacts in the American Memory Collection:

As a first step browse the collections to get a feel for the available artifacts and how they are classified.

\* Go to the Orientation Page <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/orientation/index.html>>, scroll down to the Pathfinders and explore at least one of the five types of Pathfinders: Events, People, Places, Time and Topics. Examine the list of subjects in each category to get a sense of the terms most useful in your areas of interest.

Click on the terms to get to the specific collections with resources on your topic.

\*Browse through descriptions of the American Memory Collections <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amtitle.html>> by clicking on the right side of the list, where it says show descriptions and note which collections might have information on the

topic of your choice. (ex. Civil War, Great Depression, Slavery).

\*The Collection Finder <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/finder.html>> index lists collections by topic.

\*Check Broad Topic, Time, and Place for material on your subject.

Collections are also listed by original format. Scroll down and try different media for the topic you have chosen: Documents, Motion Pictures, Maps, Photos & Prints, and Sound Recordings. (Note: the collections are listed by topic, so even though they focus on those media they do contain other media types, so you may find that you are hoping for a photo and end up with a letter from that same collection.)

### **Searching the American Memory Collections**

The range of materials, size of the collection, and difficulty cataloguing many of the artifacts has made it often challenging to locate specific artifacts within the American Memory Collections. There are more than 7,000,000 digital material artifacts in over 100 different American Memory Collections in every conceivable medium and in order to enjoy the wealth it is important to be patient and flexible.

### **Tips for Searching the Collections**

Go to the collection finder search page <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amttitle.html>>, note that below the search box you have the option to view the collection list by Keyword or by Title, and you can show the descriptions of the collections. You can search all the collections (the default is to search all the collections - notice that all are checked), selected collections (uncheck those you are not interested in) or each collection individually (just click on that collection and do your search as below).

## **Additional Primary Source Sites**

**Feeding America: The Historic American Cookbook Project**  
<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/cookbooks/>

**Costume History at The Costumer's Manifesto** <http://www.costumes.org/pages/costhistpage.htm>

**Great American Speeches - from 1900 to present - includes background, text and audio.**  
<http://www.pbs.org/greatspeeches/timeline/index.html>

**Presidential Letters**  
<http://www.usps.gov/letters/volume2/pres-main.html>

**National Archives and Records Administration - Primary Sources and Activities for the Classroom**  
<http://www.nara.gov/education/teaching/teaching.html>

**Excerpts from Slave Narratives Edited by Steven Mintz**  
<http://vi.uh.edu/pages/mintz/primary.htm>

**Documents For The Study Of American History**  
[http://www.cc.ukans.edu/carrie/docs/amdocs\\_index.html](http://www.cc.ukans.edu/carrie/docs/amdocs_index.html)

**Propaganda PostersWorld War II**  
<http://www.openstore.com/posters/index.html>

**The Avalon Project at the Yale Law School: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy**  
<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/avalon.htm>

**First-Person Narratives of the American South**  
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/fpn.html>

**North American Slave Narratives, Beginnings to 1920**  
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/neh.html>

**The Wars for Viet Nam**  
<http://vietnam.vassar.edu/>

**Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music popular American music spanning the period 1780 to 1960**  
<http://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/>

**MSU Digital & Multimedia Center - Comics, Cookbooks, Humanities, etc.**  
<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/onlinecolls/>

**Making of America: at Cornell University and University of Michigan**  
Hosted at Cornell University and the University of Michigan, (MOA) is a digital library of primary sources in

Type a keyword or phrase in the search box. With phrases you must be sure that you select the appropriate option in the drop down menu box: match any of these words, all of these words (ex. slave children) when the words could appear in any order or in close proximity, or exact phrase (slave narrative). Keep in mind that you are not searching the full text of each artifact. Searching the American Memory Collection is like searching your library's holdings - you are not searching the full text of the books when you are using your online catalog, you must still examine the contents. At first use general subject terms until you get a feel for the way the search tools work. When you find an object that works, look at the subject heading and revise your search.

After working with many teachers in a variety of schools, I have found that their most successful projects that use primary sources involve locating and replicating the artifacts rather than sending the kids out on the Web to find the materials that they must fit into a project. We've all seen students find dramatic photos, put awesome presentations together with excellent graphic and sound files while gaining little understanding of the underlying historical issues and concepts. Successful assignments have activities built around pre-selected artifacts. In constructing a project, teachers and librarians can work together to develop assignments based on clear curriculum goals, where the teacher knows the individual learning needs of the students, and the librarian is the resource and artifact expert.

Our most stimulating and productive lessons have not even had

**American social history from the antebellum period through reconstruction.**  
<http://moa.umdl.umich.edu/>

**World War II Resources: Original documents regarding all aspects of the war.**  
<http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/>

#### International Primary Sources

**EuroDocs: Primary Historical Documents From Western Europe**  
<http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/eurodocs/>

**International Archival Resources on the Internet**  
<http://www.usask.ca/archives/car/internat.html>

**Nuremberg trial transcripts and materials (Incomplete) from the *Rutgers Journal of Law & Religion* Donovan collection** <http://camlaw.rutgers.edu/publications/law-religion/nuremberg.htm>

**Repositories of Primary Sources - International**  
<http://www.uidaho.edu/special-collections/Other.Repositories.html>

**European Visual Archive**  
<http://192.87.107.12/eva/uk/search.asp>  
**Historical photographs dating from 1840 to today**

**Graphic Design from the 1920s and 1930s in Travel Ephemera (International)**  
<http://www.travelbrochuregraphics.com/>

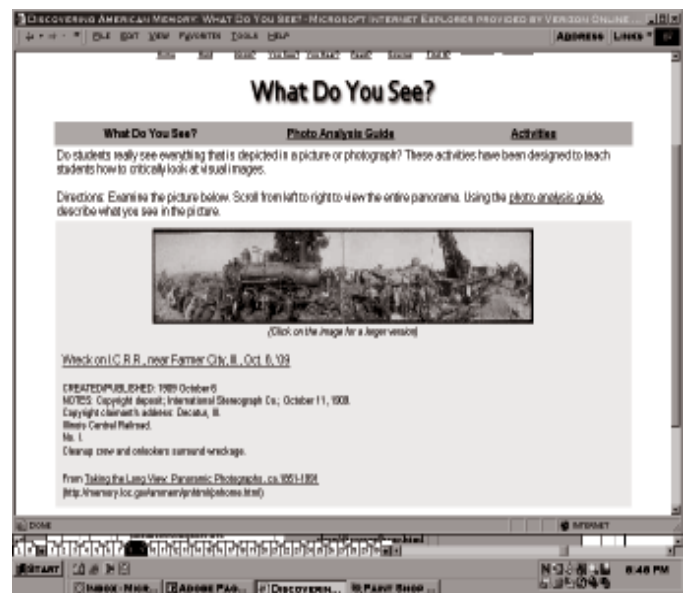
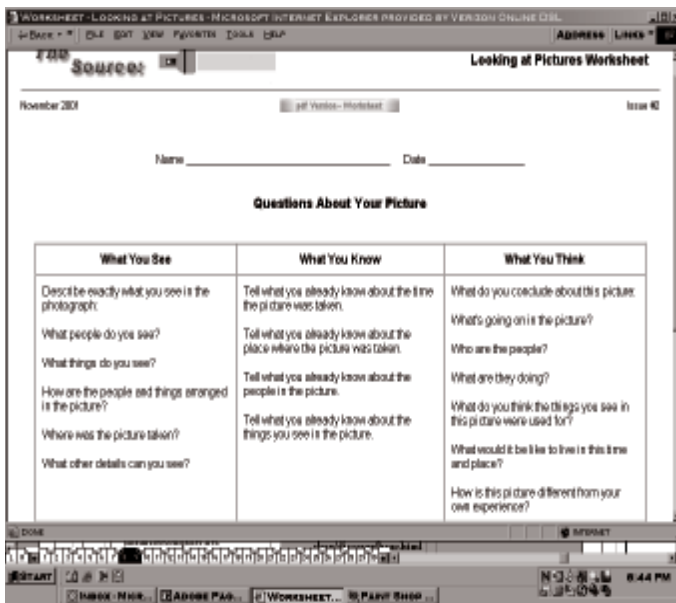
**International Institute of Social History Collections**  
<http://www.iisg.nl/collections/index.html>

#### Keeping Current

**American Memory Newsletter**  
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/educators/newsletter/>

**The Library of Congress and the Social Science Education Consortium collaborate to create an electronic newsletter of easy-to-use teaching ideas written by teachers and school media specialists. Sign up to receive more information at the site.**

**Tools for teachers and students to learn to work with primary sources**



students at the computers. We print photos on glossy photo paper using an inexpensive color inkjet printer; we show old black and white silent movies that we have saved to our hard drive or network; we create song sheets on parchment paper and stain the edges with tea. Students examine “old” scrapbooks using magnifying glasses and wearing white gloves so that they can be historians. Discussion, debate and authentic questions inspire the research that follows.

I hope you now have enough information to get you started on a new classroom project using primary resources. Summer is an ideal time for exploring the existing lessons, the primary source Web sites, and letting your imagination take you back to the past. If you need any assistance, I'm only an email message away: [dibianco@computer.net](mailto:dibianco@computer.net)

### American Memory Learning Page:

#### The Historians' Sources: What are Primary Sources

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/psources/source.html>

#### Looking at Pictures Worksheet for grades K-4 developed by Kathleen Isaacs

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/educators/newsletter/november01/tibon1ws.html>

#### Photo Analysis Worksheet: What do you see? Activities and a photo analysis guide that have been designed to teach students how to critically look at images.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/educators/workshop/discover/yousee.html>

#### What do you hear? A listening guide and activities that have been designed to teach students how to critically listen to auditory information.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/educators/workshop/discover/hear.html>

#### How does it read? A guide and activities designed to teach students to critically evaluate what they read.

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/educators/workshop/discover/read.html>

#### National Archives and Records Administration: The Digital Classroom

<http://www.nara.gov/education/teaching/analysis/analysis.html>

Includes cartoon, map, motion picture, poster analysis worksheets, and others.