

## Education as an Art

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### GEOGRAPHY IN FOURTH GRADE

By Franklin G. Kane

One of the great challenges and joys of being a class teacher in a Waldorf School is the response and growth of the children in one's own class. Within the course of even one school year so much can be observed, if one is perceptive and open, that previous ideas and plans may have to be changed, adjusted, or modified to meet new conditions. Most important in the whole inter-relationship of children and teacher is the possibility that not only do the children learn from the teacher but the teacher may learn much from the children before him. During the Fourth Grade year there was this kind of sharing and growing between children and teacher with many highlights for all involved. One particular high point in the year occurred during the Main Lesson period in Geography. (1)

The child around the ninth year undergoes an important turning-point in his development. As Rudolf Steiner pointed out, the whole approach to teaching must delicately adjust to meet the more conscious, questioning and independent being. For one thing a child of nine or ten now begins to feel more separate from the environment which until now he accepted as a larger homelike protection. As one of the ways to meet this, Dr. Steiner suggested that in the Fourth Grade a study of the local area should take place. Through observation of the history and geography of the local environment, a picture develops as to why the industries, occupations, and way of life of his home have evolved to what they are.

Unlike the early study of history that has its origin in the broad, cosmic remembrances of the old fairy tales and myths of long ago, the study of geography starts nearest the child and gradually expands, in the course of years, to take in a study of the whole world.

Living in Sacramento, California, this city became our starting point. But even more specifically we began at the central point of our classroom and from there we expanded out to the school, the neighborhood, the city, the country, the Sacramento Valley, and then, late in the year, we touched the various corners of California. This may sound ambitious as an undertaking for six weeks of study but the question of economy must be ever present. It isn't a matter of teaching lists of dates, facts, and statistics, as to the largest cities, biggest crops and most important industries. Rather the attempt made is to characterize and picture these things in a dramatic and interesting way. The children then will grasp the major outlines so that at a later date the interest and the background or "soul-mood" will still be there so that the more important facts can be assimilated.

We began our studies, as so many other Fourth Grades have done in Steiner schools, by drawing picture maps of our classrooms and then of our school grounds, our neighborhood, etc. How rewarding it was when a good, neat, accurate picture-map was completed! The children were challenged and intrigued. It wasn't as easy to portray the irregularly shaped school grounds as we thought. Pacing out the outer perimeter helped. Climbing a tree helped. Walking, looking carefully, trying more than once helped produce more satisfying results.

While map-drawing occupied much of the practical time of our geography period, a dramatic picture of early California and, in particular, life in and around the site of Sacramento before the white man came, was presented. Interestingly, only several hundred yards from our school was the site of an Indian village (this had been discovered some years back when excavations were made for a bridge over the American River). The wonderful book dictated by Ishi, the last of the Yahi Indians, (2) was

read and discussed with great enthusiasm. We took up the biography of John Sutter and his attempt to bring civilization to this area by founding a settlement, and then that fantastic discovery at Coloma which touched off the era of the Gold Rush. Field trips into the Mother Lode country were grand adventures, made even more exciting by finding "pay-dirt" even if it was only "fool's gold".

The growth of Sacramento was traced, as was the development of the large canning- and preserving-industries. At this time we could speak of that all-important Northern California resource - water - and its value, by irrigation, to the farmers in this very fertile valley. More field trips in and around Sacramento showed how the farmer and the city people depended on one another. The ocean-going vessels of this inland port created a great contrast to the tomato, rice and asparagus fields through which they sail. The rail yards (largest west of Chicago) provided another insight into the busy life of this city.

Our sweep of the whole state was much more impressionistic. The four main geographical areas were characterized. The mountains, the valleys, the coast, and the desert were described and pictured in as imaginative a way as possible. We painted and drew these areas to help experience more fully in color the striking contrasts between the hot dry desert and the cool moist coast or the high rugged Sierras and the gentle fertile Central Valley. This was further experienced by the class working together to mold a 4' x 8' paper mâché topographical map of California, which was later exhibited in the local public library.

In the grammar lessons we had been practicing verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. We had also been writing poems together and this had taken hold to such an extent that the children were producing some very fine verses. The class saw the opportunity to continue both the geography and the grammar by characterizing the various geographical areas with one or another part of speech. This became an enthusiastic exercise, which produced such results:

### Mountains

#### Nouns

peaks  
cliffs  
waterfalls  
glaciers  
snow

#### Verbs

skiing  
climbing  
rushing  
melting  
freezing

#### Adjectives

majestic  
bold  
high  
steep  
towering

The children became so familiar with being able to characterize these geographical areas that they each wrote a poem about each area. The following poems were selected by the class as the best for each area, were learned by the whole class and proudly recited at a school assembly.

### THE DESERT

The desert hot, the desert bare,  
No trees, no bushes anywhere.  
The burning sand beneath my feet  
Gave radiant and deathly heat.  
Hidden in its prickly armor  
The cactus holds the water sweet.

The desert has sand and more sand,  
Lizards, minerals, and dust.  
It's a big, barren land.

I had walked all day and night,  
Never to find even a bite.  
I had fallen to the ground,  
With nothing but stillness all around.  
Over the sand dunes help did come,  
To rescue me from the desert sun.  
(J. P. and H. B.)

#### THE VALLEY

The gentle, peaceful valley  
I love with all my heart.  
It gives us food which we can eat,  
Fruit, vegetables, and delicious meat.

The cattle go grazing  
And the sheep are lazing  
And that's what they like to do.  
The fields and orchards  
So proud and full  
Are plowed and picked when ripe.

Beautiful rivers water the fields,  
Which then grow green and bright.  
In the valley we like to swim,  
To fish, to farm, to work, to play.  
We do give thanks for the food we get  
From the lush, green, fertile valley.  
(C.A.)

#### THE MOUNTAINS

The mountains are strong and wild and proud.  
They reach so high they touch the cloud.  
Sometimes they're majestic, regal and bold;  
Sometimes they're icy, bleak and cold.  
We stand below and look so high  
At rocky hills that reach the sky.  
The mountains have pinetrees, fir trees and all,  
And all the trees are lofty and tall.  
They often have snow and lakes and dams.  
They look like humps upon the lands.  
It's fun to go swimming, fishing and hiking.  
Many a thing there is to my liking.  
(H.B.)

1. Each school day starts with an uninterrupted, two-hour lesson, when the children are most receptive. The basic academic subjects are taught then, in intensive periods of several weeks at a time.
2. T. Kroeber, *Ishi in Two Worlds*: a biography of the last wild Indian in North America. University of California Press, 1961.