

2.1 Potato Agriculture

TOPIC: Pre-Famine Ireland

SUBJECT/GRADE LEVEL: Social Studies, Grade Level 9 (Supplemental, Language Arts, Grades 9-12).

TITLE: Potato Agriculture and Life in Pre-Famine Ireland

AIM QUESTION: How did the potato shape life in pre-famine Ireland?

NEW YORK STATE SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS:

World History: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history, and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

Geography: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the geography of the interdependent world in which we live -- local, national and global -- including the distribution of people, places and environments over the Earth's surface.

Economics: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of how the United States and other societies develop economic systems and associated institutions to allocate scarce resources, how major decision-making units function in the U.S. and other national economies, and how an economy solves the scarcity problem through market and non-market mechanisms.

TEACHER BACKGROUND: Ireland is a country of potato producers; however, their relationship with the potato crop is an uneasy one. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were periodic crop failures and regular months of hunger each year as the poor Irish awaited the potato harvest. In 1845 the crop failed and it failed again in 1846, 1848 and 1849. Many poor Irish lived on a diet of potatoes and buttermilk. Since there was no alternative food sources, thousands of Irish died from starvation or famine-related diseases. Others fled. The population of Ireland in 1841 was 8,175,000; in 1851 it had fallen to 6,552,000.

Before the Irish Famine, adult male laborers lived on a diet of potatoes, between 12 and 14 pounds a day, and buttermilk, supplemented by oatmeal, wild greens, cabbage or turnips, and on occasion, pork or fish, usually herring. In England and Ireland, fourteen pound weight is called a "stone." Women and children ate approximately 10 pounds of potatoes per day.

While monotonous, the Irish potato diet was nutritionally sound and contributed to a rapidly expanding population in the first four decades of the 1800s and an increased demand for even marginally arable land. Poorer people moved to the least productive land, but even poor land could support a potato crop. It grew everywhere, was easy to cultivate, and it had a high yield per plant.

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During this period, Irish family life centered more around the hearth than around the table. The fireplace provided heat for the house and potatoes were boiled in the large iron pot that hung over the fire. The family sat around the fire at night talking and telling stories. Guest were honored with the invitation to sit close to the fire. It was considered very bad luck to let the fire go out, and if a family were to move, they carried some of the old fire to the new hearth. One of Ireland's favorite proverbs is "Níl aon tinteán mar do thinteán féin" (Neel ayn tinTAWN mar doe hinTawn fane), "There is no fireside like your own fireside."

This lesson uses poems and songs to help students understand the place of the potato in pre-famine Irish life. In the poem, "The Great Hunger," Patrick Kavanagh physical starvation during the Great Irish Famine of the 19th century is used as a metaphor to understand the emotional starvation of life in rural Ireland in the 1930s. Seamus Heaney's poem "At a Potato Digging" describes contemporary farm laborers, many seasonal workers, at the exhausting and mind-numbing task of digging potatoes after the mechanical digger has turned up the drill (potato field). The poet recalls earlier ruined harvests and a famine god who must be appeased. "The Potato" is a lively song in praise of all kinds of Irish potatoes. It is sung to a dance tune called a hornpipe. "The Potato" repeats the common, but unsubstantiated, belief that the Englishman Sir Walter Raleigh planted the first potatoes in Ireland while he was Mayor of Youghal, County Waterford in 1588-89. The was about the time when the British began their Tudor conquest of Ireland. "The Famine Song" is a traditional Irish song about the small blighted potatoes the Irish ate, if they could find them, when the crop failed in 1845, 1846, 1848 and 1849. They call the potatoes "praties" the Irish (Gaelic) word for potatoes is prátaí (PRAW-tee.)

AIM: How did the potato shape life in pre-famine Ireland?

ASSESSMENT:

- Students will demonstrate an understanding of cause and effect in history and the ability to support conclusions based on an evaluation of evidence through individual and group writing assignments and during group and class discussions.
- Students will demonstrate the importance of examining and respecting multiple perspectives when explaining historical events.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to examine and explain the significance of primary source documents.

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- Students will demonstrate the ability to explore the use of poetry and songs in the creation of metaphors for understanding historical events and the use of historical events as symbolizes in an examination of the human condition.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to apply an understanding of historical events to explain contemporary problems.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: What did you eat for dinner last night? Who decides the menu? How do they decide what to serve? What foods do you use to fill out your meals -- breakfast, lunch and supper? What would you describe as your family's dietary staple? Why does it vary from family to family, from group to group?

TRANSITIONAL ACTIVITY: Why does food, the way we acquire it, what we eat, and the way we eat it, play such an important role in the way we live? Why does the potato play such a central role in the life of the people depicted in the poem by Seamus Heamus?

ACTIVITIES:

- Discuss the ways poems and songs are used to create metaphors for understanding potato-based agriculture in pre-famine Ireland.
- Examine Activity Sheet B. Key Questions:
 - 1- Based on this picture, what do you notice about the the way people lived in pre-famine Ireland? How do they eat their meals? How do you think they prepare their meal of potatoes? How do they eat their potatoes? What kind of furniture is in the house?
 - 2- You might be surprised to see a pig in the house. The pig was a very valuable part of the Irish cottage economy and pigs do best in warm, dry surroundings. Where there were no barns or pig sties, pigs were kept in the house. They provided meat for the household; however, in poor households, people did not eat their pig. They sold it to get money to pay the rent on their land. That is why the family's pig was often called "the gentleman who pays the rent." What is your reaction to this way of life and the people who lived it? Why?
 - 3- Based on this report from the Poor Commission, how would you describe the life of the Irish peasant in the pre-famine era?
 - 4- Landlords and English officials often described Irish peasants as lazy> Based on this passage, do you agree with this description? Explain.
- Examine Activity Sheet C. Key Questions:
 - 1- How nutritious is the potato?
 - 2- Why is Treveylan concerned about the Irish potato-based diet?

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3- In your opinion, do the benefits of the pre-famine Irish potato-based diet outweigh its problems? Explain

SUMMARY QUESTION: In your opinion, how did the potato shape life in pre-famine Ireland?

HOMEWORK: Write a poem or song about the types of food and the role of meals in your family and your cultural group.

APPLICATION:

- One crop agriculture and the problem of dependence on one dietary staple continues to be a problem in many parts of the world today, especially in areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Should people be encouraged to change their diets and their agricultural practices by organizations like the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund? How should this be done? Who should bear the cost of these changes? Why?

- In parts of the United States farmers heavily depend on one product for economic survival. In areas of the south it is tobacco or cotton. In parts of New York State, it is milk or apples. Often the federal and state governments subsidize these farms. In your opinion, should farmers be allowed to decide what they produce or be encouraged to diversify? Should a crop like tobacco, which is associated with smoking and cancer, be subsidized? Should milk farmers be subsidized when this might mean higher milk prices for consumers? Explain

PROJECT:

- Keep track of what you eat for the next three days. To what degree does your diet meet the minimum requirements for someone your age? Consider: calories, grams of fat, carbohydrates, vitamins, calcium, niacin, riboflavin, iron. Compare your diet with the diet of the pre-famine Irish laborer. Which diet better meets the USRDA guidelines? Explain.

- Current Events. Create a current events folder with articles that explore contemporary agricultural problems in New York State, the United States, and the world. Select one issue and write an editorial explaining your views on this issue.

REFLECTION: Teachers found that students were particularly engaged by comparing the ways that we eat potatoes today with the ways that the Irish ate potatoes in this period. While the most common ways of eating potatoes among today's young people are as french fries and potato chips, in ethnically diverse classes, students mentioned potato pancakes and knishes, gnocchi, shepherd's pie, roti, empanadas, soups and a variety of potato salads.

ACTIVITY SHEET A: Poems and Songs describe Potato Agriculture in Ireland

NOTE -- Teachers recommended dropping Heaney and Kavanagh as too difficult to understand as a short introductory activity.

1. Seamus Heaney's "At a Potato Digging."

2. "The Great Hunger," by Patrick Kavanagh

Clay is the word and clay is the flesh

Where the potato-gatherers like mechanised scarecrows move

Along the side-fall of the hill - Maguire and his men.

If we watch them an hour is there anything we can prove

Of life as it is broken-backed over the Book

Of Death? Here crows gabble over worms and frogs

and the gulls like old newspapers are blown clear of the hedges, luckily

Or why do we stand here shivering?

"The Potato" is a lively song in praise of all kinds of Irish potatoes. It is sung to a dance tune called a hornpipe.

"The Famine Song" is a traditional Irish song about the small blighted potatoes the Irish ate, if they could find them, when the crop failed in 1845, 1846, 1848 and 1849. They call the potatoes "praties" because the Irish (Gaelic) word for potatoes is prátaí (PRAW-tee.)

ACTIVITY SHEET B: Life in Agrarian Ireland

This engraving from The Pictorial Times (February 28, 1846) is titled "'A potato dinner' at Cahirciveen, Co. Kerry." Examine the picture and answer the questions.

Questions

1- Based on this picture, what do you notice about the the way people lived in pre-famine Ireland? How do they eat their meals? How do you think they prepare their meal of potatoes? How do they eat their potatoes? What kind of furniture is in the house?

2- You might be surprised to see a pig in the house. The pig was a very valuable part of the Irish cottage economy and pigs do best in warm, dry surroundings. Where there were no barns or pig sties, pigs were kept in the house. They provided meat for the household; however, in poor households, people did not eat their pig. They sold it to get money to pay the rent on their land. That is why the family's pig was often called "the gentleman who pays the rent." What is your reaction to this way of life and the people who lived it? Why?

Poor Law Inquiry, 1836 - The Irish Peasant

Source: Helen Litton, The Irish Famine: An Illustrated History (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1994)

Word bank: Wool, tow and flax are fibers. Frieze, drugget and coarse linen are types of cloth. Turf and peat are a layer of soil rich in dead plant matter that can be dried and burned instead of wood. Brogues are shoes; a hank is a ball of yarn or coil of rope; conacre is a small plot of land.

From March till May ... he generally earns from £1.10 shillings to £2; of this £1 goes to pay the rent of his cabin, and for as much as can be spared of the remainder he buys wool, tow and flax which, in the course of the summer his wife manufactures into frieze, drugget and coarse linen to clothe the family; but every year does not afford this.

A good part of May and June is taken up with setting and landing his potatoes and cutting his turf; this turf the wife and children prepare during the succeeding months. By the latter end of May, his stock of potatoes is out, and he then gets more, or some oatmeal, on credit at high interest; he then goes to the counties of Meath and Dublin, or perhaps to England, for haymaking and harvesting and returns in the month of September.

Until the potatoes are dug, he may earn from £1 to £1.10 shillings, and his pig, now a year old, sells for about £3, making, in all, about £4.10 shillings or £5. But now

his . . .rent is . . . due. . . The tailor and weaver must be paid. He wants a pair of brogues for the winter, the wife an apron, shawl or cap, but, as to shoes, it is a small chance for her; he himself wants a fine shirt for Sunday.

The earnings of his elder children at service are too small to clothe them; and the wife (let things go as they will) must get 5 shillings to buy flax, that, with spinning it through the winter, and selling an odd hank and a few eggs, she may struggle from week to week to get salt, soap, blue, starch, an odd herring, and, with great saving and care, a few pounds of meat at Christmas. Besides this, he has to replace the pig, or how is he to pay for his conacre next year?

Questions

3- Based on this report from the Poor Commission, how would you describe the life of the Irish peasant in the pre-famine era?

4- Landlords and English officials often described Irish peasants as lazy> Based on this passage, do you agree with this description? Explain.

ACTIVITY SHEET C: How healthy was the pre-famine Irish potato-based diet?

A) Benefits of a potato-based diet

How nutritious is a potato? An average five-ounce potato contains 100 calories, 3 grams of protein, 23 grams of carbohydrates, and 0 grams of fat. According to the United States Department of Agriculture it provides the following daily nutrient requirements:

Nutrient %USRDA

Protein	6%	Iron	10%	Magnesium	8%	Vitamin B6	20%
Vitamin C	35%	Zinc	4%	Thiamin	4%	Folacin	8%
Copper	10%	Riboflavin	2%	Phosphorus	8%	Iodine	15%
Niacin	10%	Potassium	20%				

The Vitamin C provided by a potato varies with its age. New potatoes supply more than 1/2 of the USRDA. Potatoes also contain the trace elements manganese, chromium, selenium, and molybdenum. They are a low salt food that contain only 10 milligrams of sodium.

B) Problems with a potato-based diet

Sir Charles Trevelyan, the British government official who was largely responsible for relief during the Great Irish Famine wrote about the danger of depending on a potato-based diet. Porter and ale are types of beer.

"A population whose ordinary food is wheat and beef, and whose ordinary drink is porter and ale, can . . . resort to cheaper kinds of food, such as barley, oats, rice and potatoes. But those who are . . . entirely fed on potatoes live on the extreme verge of human subsistence, and when they are deprived of their accustomed food, there is nothing cheaper to which they can resort. They have already reached the lowest point . . . and there is nothing beyond but starvation and beggary."

(Source: N. Kissane, p. 18)