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Arkansas folk music lesson plan

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Arkansas's Folk Heroes: Stories in Song

**Social Studies – 6 – 12 (U.S. History, Arkansas History, World History, Civics, etc.);
English Language Arts; Geography; Music**

This lesson plan will introduce students to Arkansas folk music and three of its pioneers, Almeda Riddle, Jimmy Driftwood, and Patsy Montana. Through primary source analysis of recordings and sheet music students will identify characteristics of folk music, compare folk music to other styles of music, discuss the significance of the song, as well as the social and historical context of the lyrics.

Essential Question:

What is folk music and how is folk music transmitted from generation to generation?

Common Core State Standards:

CCRA.R.1, 2; CCRA, W.7, 9; CCRA. SL.2; CCRA, CCRA.R.1, 3, 7; CCRA.W.7, 8, 9; CCRA.SL.1, 2, 4; CCRA.R.1, 3, 7; CCRA.W.2, 7, 8, 9; CCRA.W.7, 9; CCRA.SL.1, 2, 4; CCRA.R.1, 4, 7, 9;

Arkansas Department of Education Curriculum Frameworks:

HS.6.7.1; HS.6.7.2 G.2.AH.7-8.1; G.2.AH.7-8.3; H.7.AH.7-8.9; Era6.6.AH.9-12.2; Era.6.6.AR.9-12.5

C3 Alignment:

D2.Geo.6, 10.6-8; D2.Hist.4.6-8; D1.2.6-8; D2.Geo.7, 9.6-8; D2.His.5.6-8; D2.Geo.1, 6, 7, 8.6-8; D2.His.1, 2.9-12; D2.Geo. 1, 6, 7, 10.6-8; H.7.AH.7-8.10

Possible literature resources related to the lesson plan: *150 American Folk Songs: To Sing, Read, and Play* by Peter Erdei (2004); *American Folk Songs for Children* by Ruth Seeger (2002); *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage* by Bess Hawes and Bessie Jones (1987); *American Ballads and Folk Songs* by Alan Lomax and John Lomax (1938); *Wayfaring Strangers: The Musical Voyage from Scotland and Ulster to Appalachia* by Fiona Ritchie and Doug Orr (2014)

Folk Music Vocabulary

Ballad	Jimmy Driftwood	Folk song
Alan Lomax	Patsy Montana	The Rackensack Folklore Society
Almeda Riddle		

Ballad – A narrative song. In folk music, ballads have been handed down preserving stories for generations.

Jimmy Driftwood – Singer from Timbo, Arkansas. He was a song writer as well as a collector of folk songs from the Ozark Mountain region. He was instrumental in the creation of the Ozark Folk Center. Many of his songs were hits for other artists, including “The Battle of New Orleans,” which was a number one hit for Johnny Horton.

Folk song – A song or style of music which is passed down from generation to generation often through oral tradition.

Alan Lomax – A musicologist and folklorist, he traveled around the country collecting and recording folk songs. He was also instrumental in discovering many folk musicians including Leadbelly. He traveled to Heber Springs to record Almeda Riddle.

Patsy Montana – Country and Western Music star during the 1930s. Her music drew on the music of the western United States. Her biggest hit was, “I Want to be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart.”

The Rackensack Folklore Society – Organization devoted to the preservation of folk music and folk tales in Arkansas.

Almeda Riddle -- Singer from Cleburne County, Arkansas, who became known as “Granny Riddle”. Alan Lomax recorded her singing and she became well known in the folk music revival of the 1950s and 1960s as a source for Ozark folk songs.

Background Information:

Music plays an important role in Arkansas’s history. This lesson will focus on folk music, particularly on three important folk musicians, Jimmy Driftwood, Almeda Riddle, and Patsy Montana, while pointing to important aspects of the folk music phenomenon.

Historical textbooks often focus their studies on big issues in politics or big cultural movements, but can often miss those things that touched on the lives of “ordinary” Americans. While histories can certainly create a narrative about the Great Depression based on economic data, the numbers can miss out on telling the stories of those who were affected by the economic calamity.

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One can hardly imagine telling the story of the Great Depression without discussing the music of Woody Guthrie, whose dustbowl ballads made the soundtrack for the times.

In the same manner that Woody Guthrie was the poet recording the plight of Okies and Arkies, folk songs report stories that are often missing from history textbooks. Folk music is part of a society's "unofficial culture," much of which is passed on in an oral singing tradition. Early folk music in Arkansas falls into two broad categories: folk songs and ballads. Folk songs are songs that do not present a narrative. Ballads, on the other hand, tell a story.

Ozark singers supplemented these old folk songs with more recent songs from Britain and Ireland; with indigenous ballads that told stories of Robin Hood-like outlaws, Civil War battles (including the Battle of Pea Ridge), railroad disasters, and other American themes; and with sacred and secular folk lyrics that did not tell stories but rather conveyed moods or emotions.

Folklorist John Quincy Wolf was collecting ballads and other folksongs in the eastern Ozarks when he made contact with folk singer Almeda Riddle. Riddle was born in Cleburne County, Arkansas, on November 21, 1898, where she absorbed folk songs performed by her father as well as other musicians who sang songs handed down for generations in the region. After being discovered by Wolf, she wrote down the lyrics to over a hundred songs that she remembered hearing throughout her lifetime. Wolf noted that many of the songs she reported had roots that stretched back to the folk songs found in the British Isles.

Due to Wolf's work in documenting Riddle's songs (which she referred to as "ballets," a local word for ballad), folklorist Alan Lomax traveled to Heber Springs, Arkansas, where Riddle was living, and recorded much of her repertoire. Thanks to Lomax's recordings, she became sought out by many followers of the folk music revival of the 1950s and 1960s. Many of her songs such as "Froggy Went A'Courtin'" became staples at folk music festivals throughout the country. Singers in the folk revival movement often referred to her as "Granny Riddle," and for musicologists, she was considered the representative of Arkansas's hill country. In 1970, she published her collection of songs in a book titled, *A Singer and Her Songs: Almeda Riddle's Book of Ballads*. She died in 1986. Her recordings with Lomax continue to be available through the Smithsonian Institution.

Paralleling Riddle's legacy, Jimmy Driftwood, born James Corbett Morris on June 20, 1907 in Stone County, Arkansas, near Mountain View, was first exposed to the folk songs of the Ozarks through his father and other local musicians. Driftwood learned to play a handmade guitar at an early age. This guitar, made by his grandfather from a piece of rail fence and other salvaged materials, would become Driftwood's trademark. He played the unique instrument throughout his career.

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It was in the town of Timbo, Arkansas, that Driftwood began using his songwriting talents to teach students history through songs. Driftwood submitted his songs to several record companies in the early 1950s with little commercial success. RCA executive Don Warden signed Driftwood to a contract in 1957 and Driftwood recorded his first album, "Jimmy Driftwood Sings Newly Discovered American Folk Songs," in less than three hours. "The Battle of New Orleans" was one of the songs on the album.

He continued to educate audiences, most notably those consisting of other teachers, about the power of songs as a teaching tool, and was an invited lecturer before many national teachers meetings and organizations throughout the early '60s. He became a starring member of the Grand Ole Opry in 1962 and returned to teaching, this time on a college level, teaching folklore at the University of Southern California in Idyllwild.

Driftwood helped form the Rackensack Folklore Society and the Arkansas Folk Festival. Driftwood composed (or collected and re-composed) over 6000 songs during his career, with 300 of those recorded or published. Many of Driftwood's songs dealt with some element of America's past and its history, telling old folk tales, or preserving some aspect of the daily lives of the people who sang them. Because of his promotion of folk music, artists from Bob Dylan to Bruce Springsteen can trace some elements of their repertoire and success to his unique brand of songwriting. Driftwood died on July 12, 1998, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Unlike Driftwood and Riddle, Patsy Montana's music was born out of the folk music traditions of the western United States. She was born Ruby Blevins in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1908, later adopting the more western sounding stage name Patsy Montana after moving to Los Angeles, California, in 1930. Influenced by the music of Jimmie Rodgers and cowboy singing stars then in vogue in the popular music of the 1930s, Montana drew from traditional songs written and performed by cowboys on the prairies and handed down through the decades.

She returned to Arkansas in 1932 after failing to break into the music business in California. Country star Jimmie Davis discovered Montana and invited her to sing backup on a few of his songs. She then traveled to Chicago, Illinois, where the Prairie Ramblers hired her to sing for the radio station WLS. She recorded several songs while in Chicago, including a song that would become her biggest hit, "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart."

She would become a big recording star, noted for her yodeling and image as a "cowboy pal," recording numerous records and starring in a handful of western films with film star Gene Autry. She hosted her own radio show in the 1940s on the ABC network and continued recording and performing for the rest of her life. She died in 1996, leaving a legacy of songs that would continue the old traditions of cowboy songs and ballads.

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Folk music is an integral part of Arkansas's cultural heritage, telling stories through song that preserve a former way of life. Lyrics teach about historical events and everyday life in the Ozark Mountains. Many folk musicians native to Arkansas continue traditions and contributions of Riddle, Driftwood, and Montana. These songs and artists teach the importance of cultural heritage and paint a broader picture of Arkansas's history.

To learn more about folk music in Arkansas, read the following Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture articles:

[Arkansas Folk Festival](#)

[Almeda Riddle](#)

[Arkansas Traveler](#)

[Arts, Culture and Entertainment](#)

[Folk Music](#)

[Jimmy Driftwood](#)

[Modern Era, 1968-present](#)

[Music and Musicians](#)

[Ozark Folk Center](#)

[Ozark Region](#)

[Patsy Montana](#)

[Rackensack Folklore Society](#)

Activities

Activity 1. Understand the importance and characteristics of folk music

1. Have students discuss the characteristics of folk music.
 - a. Have students listen to recordings of Almeda Riddle and Jimmy Driftwood on Youtube, or read the lyrics attached at the end of this lesson plan.
[Almeda Riddle, "Bury Me Beneath the Willow Tree"](#)
[Jimmy Driftwood, "The Battle of New Orleans"](#)

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- b. Have the students discuss the characteristics of the folk songs. What stories are the two songs trying to tell? Why would the authors of the songs want to tell these stories?
2. Many historical events such as The Battle of New Orleans would inspire folk songwriters. What are some current political or societal events that might inspire a folk song? How would the songs be passed on to others using modern technology?

Activity 2. Compare a folk song about the 1926 tornado in Heber Springs, Arkansas, to newspaper accounts of the disaster.

1. In 1926, there was a major storm that destroyed most of the town of Heber Springs, Arkansas. Many were killed in the disaster, including the husband of folk singer Almeda Riddle. Soon after the disaster, Riddle’s father wrote a folk song about the disaster, which Riddle would later include in her musical repertoire. Have students read Almeda Riddle’s introduction to the song, “Storm of Heber Springs, November 25th, 1926,” and the lyrics to the song.
["The Storm of Heber Springs, November 25th, 1926"](#)
2. Have students read a newspaper account of the 1926 storm, “Heber Springs is a Sad Scene of Desolation” from the *Arkansas Gazette*, November 26, 1926.
["Heber Springs is a Sad Scene of Desolation," Arkansas Gazette, November 26, 1926](#)
3. Have the students discuss the song based on what they have read in the news article. Does the song accurately reflect the reality of the disaster? Why would Almeda Riddle’s father write a song based on the disaster? Almeda Riddle’s husband and child were included in the list of the dead in the newspaper account and she would often have trouble singing the song. Why would she want to sing it even though it recounts a particularly emotional part of her life? What can the song teach us about the nature of folk music?

Activity 3. Compare Patsy Montana’s music to traditional cowboy ballads

1. Patsy Montana drew on cowboy ballads for her music, continuing a long tradition that began on the trails as cowboys wrote songs about their lives. Distribute lyrics to Patsy Montana’s “I’ve Found My Cowboy Sweetheart” and listen to the song on Youtube.
[I've found My Cowboy Sweetheart Youtube clip](#)
2. Distribute lyrics to “When the Work’s All Done This Fall” from *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* edited by Alan Lomax and listen to the recording of the song by Doc Watson on Youtube.
[When the Work's All Done This Fall lyrics](#)

Folk music lesson plan, Arkansas State Arkansas, Little Rock, Arkansas.

[When the Work's All Done This Fall recording](#)

3. How do the themes in the songs compare to each other? How are the songs' lyrics and musical style similar? How are they different?

Activity 4. Discuss lyrical differences in different versions of a song in folk music

1. Many folk songs recount historical events. In many of these songs rooted in history, often the story is changed to suit a lesson or a moral that the singer wishes to impart to the audience. Studying different versions of a folk song can tell us a great deal about the lives of those who are performing the song.
2. Have students read different versions of the folk song, "Jesse James" in the link below.
[Folk Song, Jesse James lyrics](#)
3. Why are there different versions of the song? How are the versions different? Which version is your favorite? Why?

Activity 5. Discuss oral tradition in folk music

1. A couple of the songs Almeda Riddle was fond of singing were "Rome County" and "Brother Green." She learned the songs from her grandfather who claimed that he knew the people who were subject of the songs.
[Folk Song Lyrics, "Rome County" and "Brother Green"](#)
2. Jimmy Driftwood also recorded many songs that were handed down to him from his parents and grandparents. One song he sang was "The English Soldier and the Irish Lady." Have the students read the introduction to the song and the lyrics.
[Folk song lyrics, "The English Soldier and the Irish Lady"](#)
3. Have students read the lyrics to the songs and discuss how songs are handed down from generation to generation.

Other Resources on Folk Music

Smithsonian Folkways

<http://www.folkways.si.edu/tools-for-teaching/smithsonian>

Online teacher resources from the Smithsonian Institution

Teaching History

<http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/ask-a-master-teacher/24330>

Teacher guide and lesson plans from the Teaching History.org website.

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American Roots Music

http://www.pbs.org/americanrootsmusic/pbs_arm_itc_historical_background.html

Lesson plans and other teaching resources from the Public Broadcasting Company.

Music from Across America

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/music-across-america>

Teacher resources, lesson plans, and activities about a variety of American musical styles from the National Endowment for the Humanities

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