

The Star in the Cottonwood Tree

Overview

Every culture in the world has stories that are part of its history and tradition. These stories reveal information about the environment and perspectives of the people who tell them. In this activity, your students can analyze a story told by the Dakota. Later, students can read and discuss stories told in other cultures around the world.

Grade Levels

K-6

How to use this supplement with the PLT activity

This supplement provides an alternative, local story to use with students when using Activity #18, The Tale of the Sun, in PLT's *PreK-8 Environmental Education Activity Guide, 2006-2019*.

Correlations to Minnesota Academic Standards

English Language Arts (2010)

4.1.9.9; 5.1.9.9: Compare and contrast stories with similar themes and topics or stories in the same genre.

6.4.6.6: Explain how authors develop a point of view from a narrator or speaker

Science (2020): L.1.3.1.1.1. Develop a simple model based on evidence to represent how plants or animals use their external parts to help them survive, grow, and meet their needs

E 2P.4.2.2.1 Obtain information and communicate how Minnesota American Indian Tribes and communities and other cultures apply knowledge of the natural world in determining which materials have the properties that are best suited for an intended purpose.

Social Studies (2021, proposed): 1.3.17.2: Explain how Dakota and Anishinaabe nations use storytelling to pass on ways of knowing (culture).

2.4.17.1: Explain how Dakota and Anishinaabe nations use storytelling to describe places and spaces.

2.4.19.1: Describe daily life for Minnesota Dakota or Anishinaabe peoples in different times, including before European contact, and today.

Minnesota Background Information

Cultural traditions include stories, sayings, dances, songs, and customs. A story is a narrative message that conveys an account of an incident or a course of events. Cultural stories serve many purposes—they tell the history of the people, convey their spiritual beliefs, teach moral lessons, and entertain. For generations, many stories have been passed on orally.

“The Star in the Cottonwood Tree” story conveys traditional Dakota beliefs of about how things came to be in the world. Students should treat this story with the same respect as the creation beliefs of other cultures, as this Dakota story offers a valuable perspective on the relationships between trees, people, and the stars.

Many American Indian myths are based on their observations of their surroundings, especially patterns and relationships in nature such as animal behavior, plants, and seasonal changes. Stars and constellations inspired many stories and beliefs shared through generations. From these observations

came traditions, stories, songs, dances, and ways of life that established respect and connections with the natural world.

Dakota people lived in Minnesota's woodlands and prairies for centuries before European settlement. In the middle of the 18th century, they moved into southern and western Minnesota where cottonwood trees are common. Importantly, tall, straight poles from cottonwood trees were revered as the center of the annual Sundance ceremony, one of the most important events in Dakota life. Every year, tribes would gather in a specific place, erect a tall pole and perform the Sundance ceremony to renew the earth and the people.

According to the [Minnesota Historical Society](#), Dakota tribes in Minnesota and North Dakota are related.

“Dakota people are comprised of four groups: The Bdewakantunwan (Mdewakanton), Wahpetunwan (Wahpeton), Wahpekute, and Sissitunwan (Sisseton) people form what is known as the Isanti (Santee), or eastern Dakota (a word that means ally). To the west, in present day South Dakota, are the Yanktonai and Yankton (who identify as both Dakota and Nakota) and the Teton (Lakota). Collectively today, these groups have tribal lands that cover areas from present day Minnesota, to South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska, and into Canada. They form the Oceti Šakowin (the Seven Council Fires, sometimes referred to erroneously as the Sioux).”

Doing the activity

1. Have the class read or listen to the story, [The Star in the Cottonwood Tree](#) (on page 6). Or play a recording by Mary Louise Defender Wilson. [A Star in the Cottonwood Tree, My Relatives Say](#), YouTube, 4:57 minutes. <https://youtu.be/P35cxB3gF7M>

Suggestion: If you have a cottonwood tree on your school grounds, take the class outside and read it under the tree, even if it is winter!

2. After reading or hearing the story, discuss:
 - How would you describe the little star?
 - Why did the little star come down to earth?
 - What did you think the beautiful sound was (before you knew it was people)?
 - What things do the people do so they can live?
 - Why did the little star want so badly to be on earth?
 - Why did the other stars say it couldn't be on earth?
 - What thing in nature does this story describe?
 - What other stories explain something in nature?
3. Compare the Star in the Cottonwood Tree story with another mythical story that describes how something in nature came to be.

Suggestions:

Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox are mythical characters credited with “creating” the Mississippi River and Minnesota’s 10,000 lakes.

4. Have students make a graphic organizer to demonstrate similarities and differences between the two stories.

Example graphic organizer

	Star in the Cottonwood Tree	Paul Bunyan and Babe
How did something in nature come to be?	A little star wanted to hide in a tree to stay close to beautiful sounds of good people	Paul dragged a giant plow behind Babe, creating the Mississippi River channel
Who are the main characters?	The little star and the elder stars	Paul Bunyan and Babe
When did the events take place?	“A long time ago”	“A long time ago”
What is this story type (genre)?	Myth, Dakota	Myth, American
Where did these events take place?	Where cottonwood trees grow in Minnesota	In Minnesota and through the center of the U.S.

Science Enrichment

1. Take students outdoors to collect dry cottonwood twigs no longer than the student’s arm. Cottonwood trees are common in southern Minnesota and nearly always have fallen twigs under them.

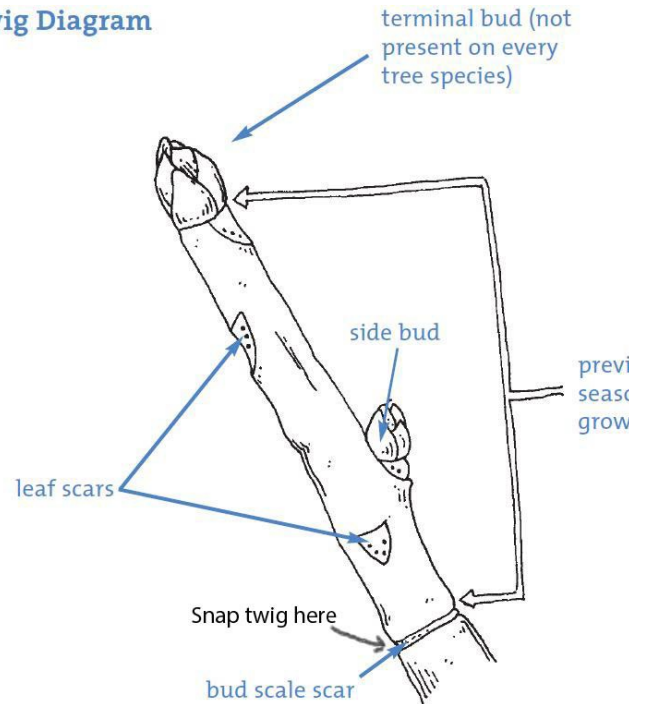
Alternative: collect cottonwood branches for students to break open.

2. Make sure each student has several (at least 3 to 5) twigs—some twigs are in better condition than others and it may take a few attempts.

- Have students snap the small dry twigs along the *bud scale scars* (circular growth joints) along the twig to reveal a cross-section of the interior of the twig. There may be several bud scale scars on one twig. Hold the twig close to the joint and snap it quickly. Some twigs may be too green or too rotten to see the five-point secret star in the cross-section. The star is actually the *pith*, the spongy tissue that stores and transports nutrients to the branch. With a little practice, you will know which twigs have the stars hiding inside.



Twig Diagram



Older students can learn about each part of the twig, and explain how it helps the tree grow. Have students tape an unbroken twig to a piece of paper and label each part.

Buds – form leaves, which help the tree draw energy from the sun to make food

Bud scale scar – mark the place where a twig stops growing for the season (fall), and begins growing again in the next season (spring).

Pith – transports nutrients throughout the plant

Terminal bud (if present) – “terminal” means end. A terminal bud is simply a bud that appears at the end of the twig.

Younger students can make their own cottonwood twigs with stars by following the steps below:

- Cut as many 4 inch pieces of 1/2” wooden dowels as for your class
- Students then glue stick-on stars on one (or both) ends of the wooden dowel sections (stick-on stars may not stick to the dowel without adding glue)

Additional Resources

"Spirit Woods" CD. North Dakota Forest Service and North Dakota Council for the Arts.
<http://www.nd.gov/arts/resources-services/online-store/spirit-woods-sold-out>

A Star in the Cottonwood Tree. Story told aloud by Mary Louise Defender Wilson. YouTube, 4:57 minutes. <https://youtu.be/P35cxB3gF7M>

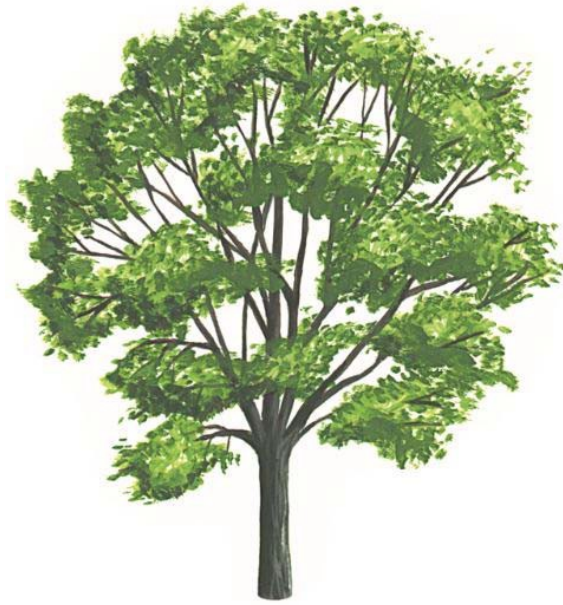
Profile of Mary Louise Defender Wilson. North Dakota State Historical Society.
<http://www.ndstudies.gov/gr4/american-indians-north-dakota/profile-mary-louise-defender-wilson>

Biography of Mary Louise Defender Wilson. National Endowment for the Arts.
www.arts.gov/honors/heritage/fellows/mary-louise-defender-wilson

Talking Sky: Ojibwe Constellations as a Reflection of Life on the Land. Carl Gawboy and Ron Morton. Rockflower Press, Duluth, MN, 2014.

The Earth Speaks: An Acclimatization Journal. Edited by Steve Van Matreand Bill Weiler. The Institute for Earth Education, Greenville, WV, 1983.

Waterlily. Written by novelist Ella Cara Deloria in 1940, this is an engaging story of pre-European contact Dakota life written from a Dakota woman's perspective. The author interviewed dozens of Dakota people to ensure accuracy. Best for middle school readers or older.



The Star in the Cottonwood Tree

A long time ago, when everything was still new, up in the sky, were many stars. Amongst them was this little star, who was very interested and curious about everything. This little star traveled across the sky, and would stop and examine so many things. One day this little star came down to earth. It traveled all around the earth looking at all the animals, all the birds, all the plants, and everything that was alive.

One day it came near this village. There was a sound coming from this village that was so beautiful and so wonderful, that the little star could not believe it. It stayed close to this village. It had never heard anything so beautiful in all the heavens and all the places it had visited around the earth. So, it stayed close to this village. It listened, and listened, and couldn't get enough of hearing that beautiful sound. One day it got to thinking, "I am a star, and I am supposed to be up in the sky with the other stars. I had better go back." So it went back up into the sky with the other stars.

But it began to think about the beautiful sound it had heard coming from that village, and thought "I would like to go back and hear it some more." Then the little star began to feel very lonesome and sad. So, when the other stars were talking about different things, the little star asked them if it could go back and live near that village so it could hear that beautiful sound. The stars said "No. You are a star and you belong up here in the sky."

So, the little star said nothing. It tried to be involved in all the things that stars do, such as shining up in the sky, and moving here and there. But it got so lonely it went back to the other stars again and said, “I am so lonesome and I feel so bad. I want go and stay near that village forever to hear that sound.”

The other stars said, “You cannot do that because those are people. They have things that they must do to stay alive. They have work to do. They have to gather food. They have to build their houses. They have to look after their children. They have to make their clothes. And they have to live. And if you move close to them, shining around, they will all be looking at you. You will disturb their lives. And they will not get along, so you can’t do that.”

So, the little star thought and thought. And finally, it asked the other stars, “If I can find a way to be close to that village without them seeing me, can I stay there?” And the other stars said “Yes. If you can find a way to stay there without disturbing the people, then you can go.”

So, the little star went close to that village and looked around and saw a cottonwood tree growing close to the village. The star said, “I will stay inside that tree, where I can hear that beautiful sound that comes from that village.”

That sound was the sound of the people. The women, the men, the children, laughing, and saying good words to each other. Today the star is still in that cottonwood tree, hoping hear those beautiful sounds.



*** Transcribed with minor clarifications from the audio story, “The Star in the Cottonwood Tree,” as presented in the CD, “My Relatives Say” featuring Mary Louise Defender Wilson. Permission granted from the North Dakota Council on Arts, the producer and copyright holder of the “Spirit Woods” CD, a joint project between the council and the North Dakota Forest Service. The CD contains traditional stories and songs of forests and trees from cultures around the world, including Germanic, Celtic, Norse, and American Plains Indian. This material is to be used for educational purposes only. It may not be reproduced or used in any other way without the written approval of the North Dakota Council on the Arts.*

Mary Louise Defender Wilson, also known as Gourd Woman, is a Dakota elder and traditionalist born into a family of storytellers on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota.