Shadowers of History
Commonwealth History Project
Mooroolbark College
Pioneer Settlement, Swan Hill
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Background

Mooroolbark College is a state secondary college in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne. The college has a current enrolment of approximately 900 students. A wide program of subjects is offered to students from Years 7 to 12.

History is offered to students of all year levels as a separate subject. The Humanities Key Learning Area includes History, as well as a variety of Geography and Commerce subjects.

Humanities teachers at the College have strongly believed in offering History and Geography as separate subjects and have maintained this through the 1990’s, up to the present date and into the foreseeable future.

History is taught as a core subject at Years 7 and 8. The main content areas for each year level are as follows:

- **Year 7**: Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome
- **Year 8**: Dark Ages, Medieval Society
- **Year 9**: Australian history to 1900, Australian involvement in wars during the twentieth century
- **Year 10**: United States history
- **Year 11**: Nazi Germany, Apartheid in South Africa
- **Year 12**: French Revolution, Russian Revolution

At Year 9, two semester-length subjects are taught. The first, *Convicts, Miners and Bushrangers*, examines Australian History up until 1901. Key topics include:

- *The First Australians*
- *Traditional Aboriginal Society*
- *Frontier Conflict*
- *European and Asian Explorers*
- *The First Settlement at Sydney*
- *Convicts and Convict-era Society*
- *Early Melbourne*
- *Squatters*
- *The Gold Rush*
- *Selection*
- *Bushrangers*
- *Federation.*
The second Year 9 History subject, *Australians at War*, examines Australian participation in the wars of the twentieth century. The main wars which are examined are the Great War, World War II and Vietnam. The Anglo-Boer War and the Great Depression are also investigated in lesser detail.

In 2006, History has been taught for 5 x 48 minute periods per fortnight cycle. However, in 2007, the college will change to a new timetable in which the length of periods will be 70 minutes. At Year 9, History will be taught for 4 periods per fortnight cycle.
About the host organisation

The Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement is an historical theme park located in the town of Swan Hill, 338 kilometres north-west of Melbourne.

Set on seven acres, the park has a multitude of both static and active displays that (according to the Settlement’s website) “recreates life in the Murray-Mallee area from the period of 1830-1930. Over fifty historic buildings and other major exhibits have been saved and faithfully restored to create a unique total experience that will fascinate and entertain visitors of all ages.”

The park’s unique features include:

- a barber shop
- a Model T-Ford
- the paddle steamers “Pyap” (used for river cruises) and “Gem” (under restoration and moored in a pond near the entrance to the park)
- an 1830’s style church
- a stereoscopic theatre
- a Cobb and Co. station
- a Koori Keeping Place.

Two teacher-educators run some of the student activities, accompanied by an Aboriginal educator and a number of park employees and volunteers.

A variety of programs are on offer. Some involve general tours of the park and can incorporate a theme chosen by the visiting school. Other programs are more hands-on and practical.

An Aboriginal cultural session can either be part of a school program or taken as an individual activity.

A number of self-guided activity booklets are also available, covering subjects such as Science, Maths, Technology and of course, History.
About the experience

I visited the Pioneer Settlement on Tuesday, September 12, 2006. I spent the day with educators and volunteers, as well as the staff and students of Koorlong Primary School, which had a group of Grade 4, 5 and 6 students completing a variety of activities.

Students were taken through a total of 12 different sessions. The activities covered areas such as Koori culture, colonial and early twentieth century transport, building construction, town life, colonial trades and the school experience. The students were involved in role-plays, interactive dramatisations, rides, a hands-on wall-building activity and a 'make-your-own-nail-in-the-blacksmith’s-forge'.

In order, the sessions covered:

- mallee roots and drop-down wall construction
- canoes, coolamons, didgeridoos and other stories of the Aboriginal Educator
- horse and carriage ride
- vintage car ride
- an old fashioned lesson in the old school
- the blacksmith - students each made their own nail
- a visit to the Aboriginal Keeping Place
- the pottery
- the dispensary and dentist - a role play exercise demonstrated the often painful way in which an infected tooth was removed
- the barber - a dramatised version of the poem "The Man From Ironbark" was told
- a demonstration of a variety of stockwhips, including some very impressive tricks.

There was also a river cruise which was normally taken on the restored paddle steamer Pyap. At the time of my visit, this was awaiting repair and so the students and myself were taken on another river cruise boat that was located outside the Pioneer Settlement. The very relaxing cruise, which passed an historical property, was a great way to finish the day for the students.

Returning to the park, I had further discussions with several of the educators and volunteers about their work. I then left, as the park was closing.
I returned about two hours later to see the “Sound and Light Show”. In this, visitors were seated on large trolleys which travelled around the Settlement. At selected buildings, the trolleys would stop and recorded narrations and dramatised voices brought old times to life.

I must confess that I wasn’t terribly enthralled at this show, perhaps partly due to my lifetime’s conditioning of film, television, internet and other forms of instant entertainment. The sound was sometimes a little distant. I can’t help but think of the booming sound you hear in cinemas or at sporting events, and I know this is not to everybody’s taste, but I do want to hear everything clearly when I am being entertained.

I wanted to see more than just the interiors of old buildings lit up in the night. I imagined how much more powerful the show might have been had there been a group of actors to bring things to life, although I know this would be far too expensive to have running on an ongoing basis.
New knowledge and practice

I brought back to school a range of teaching ideas, activities and resources. These included pamphlets examining technology, science and maths in the Pioneer Settlement, as well as the role of horse-drawn vehicles, pioneer transport, pioneer home life, grain growing, river navigation, the paddle-steamer Gem, tractors, engines and agriculture in the Murray-Mallee region.

One particular activity that I am keen to use with my Year 9 Australian History class next year involves students painting their faces with authentic Koori patterns that symbolise the emu, kangaroo, crow, hunter, snake and brolga totems. Bruce, the Koori educator, kindly explained this activity to me.

I also particularly enjoyed the roleplay that was used by (educator) Joe Blake in the dispensary/dentist. With the aid of a few props, this could be a good activity for easy completion in a normal classroom. Admittedly, it is much more effective in the atmosphere and environment of a replica nineteenth-century shop.

I have given some consideration to the idea of taking a class to Swan Hill, although the distance is a key factor here. The importance of getting students out of the classroom and into a more fresh historical environment has strong appeal. I am looking at doing this with historical parks that are closer to Melbourne and that will not create such a cost for students and parents.

The staff at the Settlement indicated that approximately 95 percent of educational visits to the Settlement are from primary schools. Although I think my Year 9 students would probably relate to most of the activities fairly well, it may be better to seek a more relevant secondary-based program to pursue with them.

Without a doubt, the greatest thing I gained from the visit was the stimulus and inspiration it has given my teaching. Since returning from Swan Hill, I have immersed myself in reading about Australian colonial history. I have hunted down copies of hard-to-find films and documentaries that I can use with my students.
These are things I had always meant to follow up, but had left to another time because they were not easily accessible. My teaching notes have gone through a major and ongoing process of being updated and extended.

I feel that I now have so many ideas and activities that I really want to do with my class that it is impossible to fit them all in to the number of lessons I have available to me for a one-semester unit. I recently sat down and began to write out a new assignment for the class, based on an idea I had some time ago. I stopped when I realised that I would be struggling to fit this activity in and still cover everything else.

I enjoyed my visit tremendously and strongly recommend anyone to take advantage of this type of professional development, if it is offered again.

The Pioneer Settlement is a fantastic historical resource and has so much to offer for either the casual visitor or a history class. Thank-you to the staff and volunteers at the Pioneer Settlement, and especially the educators Dennis Dodd, Joe Blake and Bruce Baxter for their time and help.

A special thanks to the staff and students of Koorlong Primary School for kindly allowing me to follow their group and share the day with them. Thank-you also to Robyn Floyd, our educator in the Red Earth Cluster, who alerted me to the Commonwealth History Project, and Gary Shaw, Senior Project Officer at the Department of Education and Training, for arranging the program.