



Growing Up in Okemah

Rationale

This lesson can be used to introduce students to the early years of Woody Guthrie, and to show how Okemah has changed.

Guiding Questions

What was it like growing up in Okemah in early 1900s?
How have things changed?

Materials

One copy of this reading for each student

Growing up in Okemah, Woody Guthrie had a typical childhood. He carved his name “on most everything that would stand still and let me.” He ran with a gang of boys in town and picked more than his fair share of fights. His father was successful in the real estate market and was able to provide a comfortable life for his family. In spite of the seemingly privileged life, tragedy was never far away. When Woody was seven, his oldest sister was killed by injuries sustained in a fire. At age 11 his father was badly wounded in a fire that sent him to Texas to be cared for by relatives; that same fire was the last straw that led his mother to be institutionalized. These difficulties built a resiliency in Woody that would last a lifetime, and it all started in Okemah, Oklahoma.

When oil was discovered in Okemah in 1920, it was quickly transformed into the newest “oil boom” town in a state that was already the country’s leading producer of oil. During that time, Woody describes his hometown as “one of the singingest, square dancingest, drinkingest, yellingest, preachingest, walkingest, laughinest, cryingest, shootingest, fist fightinest, bleedingest, gamblingest, gun, club and razor carryingest of our ranch and farm towns...”



Picture of downtown Okemah from Woody Guthrie archives

His father worked in the land trading business and, for a time, was able to provide a comfortable life for his family. When Woody was two, his father built a new house in the “good part” of Okemah that his family – especially his mother – was very proud of. Woody’s mother Nora



Picture of downtown Okemah taken July 2013

worried about the dangerous business that her husband Charley worked in. Guthrie claims his father was known in their part of the state as “the champion of all fist fighters,” but that didn’t provide much comfort for Nora. After experiencing financial success for a number of years, Charley was unprepared for the financial downturn of the early 1920s. When the government ended support for the price of wheat, his tenants - who earned their money farming – were unable to pay their rent. This lack of payments left Charley unable to pay his mortgage. He mournfully told his children, “I’m the only man in this world that’s lost a farm a day for thirty days.”

The large house that Charley Guthrie had built for his family was burned down by a fire of unknown origin. The family then moved to the old London House, named for its previous occupants. While most of the family was unhappy with the new house – it wasn’t nearly as fancy as the previous one – Woody decided to make the best of his new home. He liked the porch on the top story because it was the highest porch

in town and he watched the action of the town: the new cotton bales, people riding in their wagons to and from town, the growing willow trees, and the trains going up and down the tracks. The Guthries, who moved several times while in Okemah, didn’t stay in this house long, but it is the most well-known of Woody’s childhood homes.

Nora Guthrie’s behavior was increasingly erratic, and she was unable to care for the youngest children. In an effort to ease the strain on his wife, Charley sent the two youngest children, Mary Jo and George, to live with his sister Maude in Panhandle, Texas.



Tree carving at the site of the Old London House



Picture of the Old London House before it burned. Woody Guthrie archives

On June 25, 1927, a fire once again broke out at the Guthrie residence; this time it was at the hands of Nora, and Charley was the victim. Badly burned, Charley joined his youngest children in Texas where he would spend the next 18 months recuperating. Despite resistance from her family, Nora was sent to the Central State Hospital for the Insane in Norman. We know now that she suffered from Huntington's disease; the same illness would take Woody's life in 1967.

It was during these times that Woody was overtaken by his love of music. He was always on hand to listen to travelling musicians that came through town. His love of music and performing seized him. He would even sing and dance on the sidewalks when his class needed extra money for school functions. When school ended in June 1929, at the age of 17, Woody packed his instruments – a harmonica and wooden bones – and headed to Pampa, Texas to re-join his father.

Though Woody didn't return to Okemah, he remembered it fondly. It was, after all, the place where he found his passion for music, performing, and people. These things would be the foundation of his career, a career that would take him across the country and thrust him into the national spotlight.

1. You read how Woody once described Okemah in the 1920s. Using the same style, how would you describe Okemah today?
2. If you stood on the highest porch in Okemah, what things do you think you would see?
3. Woody Guthrie was fortunate enough to make a living doing what he loved best: playing music. What would your ideal career be?
4. Performing gave Woody a distraction from his life at home. What do you do when you need to keep your mind off of something?
5. When Woody left home, he took his most precious possessions – his instruments. If you had to leave home, what two items would you pack?



Information adapted from *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* by Ed Cray