

[Deep Ellum: Portrait of a Community: Lesson Plan](#)

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Lesson Plan

Grade Levels: 8-12

Duration of Lesson: 50 minutes to 90 minutes

Learning Objectives

- Analyze primary documents for information on life in the Deep Ellum neighborhood in Dallas
- Analyze how historians in the 1930's characterized the Dallas neighborhood of Deep Ellum

Summary:

Students will read a whole chapter or a section of the *WPA Dallas Guide and History* that covers the neighborhood of Deep Ellum, depending on teacher preference.

Materials:

- Chapter from WPA Narrative on Dallas
- Discussion Questions

Instructional Background Material:

The WPA, or Works Progress Administration, was a vast project enacted under the New Deal to employ out of work Americans in various sectors of the economy- including historians. One of the largest projects was the Federal Writer's Project: Slave Narrative project where historians attempted to interview every surviving former enslaved person that was still alive in the late 1930's. They amassed thousands of oral histories. However, these writers and historians also created detailed local histories, including Dallas and the local ethnic enclaves within the city.

Preparation:

It is advised that the students are able to take the assignment home to read and annotate at their own pace.

Instructional Steps:

1. Teacher should verify that students have completed the reading prior to beginning a discussion.
2. Teachers may want to pass out the discussion questions as a warm-up exercise to help facilitate discussion and allow the students to answer them on their own first.
3. The classroom discussion can be conducted in one of several ways. The students can answer the questions on the discussion questions handout in small groups then share their ideas and opinions in a

larger group setting or the class can engage in a large group discussion from the start. If the teacher chooses a large group discussion it can help to re-arrange seating so everyone is facing one another.

4. Students will discuss the questions and amend their own responses based on how their peers respond.

Post-Assessment:

Teachers should use the following questions to facilitate a post lesson discussion:

- How does the author describe Deep Ellum?
- Would you characterize the description of the neighborhood or the people who live there as racist by today's standards?
- How does this reflect a change in attitudes from then until now?

Extension Activities:

- Students can do internet research on the history of Deep Ellum. They can be encouraged to look at the history of the music, the residents, and how the neighborhood has changed. They could then write their own updated history of Deep Ellum building on, as well as changing what the WPA started with.

Saxon, Gerald D., and Holmes, Maxine. *The WPA Dallas Guide and History : Written and Compiled from 1936 to 1942 by the Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the City of Dallas* . Denton, Tex: Dallas Public Library, Texas Center for the Book, University of North Texas Press, 1992. Print.

This material is also available at: <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc28336/>



DEEP ELLUM: HARLEM IN MINIATURE

Down on "Deep Ellum" in Dallas, where Central Avenue empties into Elm Street is where Ethiopia stretches forth her hands. It is the one spot in the city that *needs* no daylight saving time because there is no bedtime, and working hours have no limits. The only place recorded on earth where business, religion, hoodooism, gambling and stealing goes on at the same time without friction. Last Saturday a prophet held the best audience in this "Madison Square Garden" in announcing that Jesus Christ would come to Dallas in person in 1939. At the same time a pickpocket was lifting a week's wages from another guy's pocket, who stood with open mouth to hear the prophecy. J. H. Owens ("Old Iron sides"), columnist in *Dallas Gazette* (Negro weekly), July 3, 1937.

Deep Ellum is the colloquialism used by both Negroes and whites for the congested Negro shopping district and amusement center lying on both sides of Elm Street between Preston and Good Streets, and the section about it for two or three city blocks to the north and south, on the eastern fringe of the Dallas downtown theater and shopping district. This Deep Ellum is the survival of the "Freedman's Town" settlement of former slaves established after the emancipation proclamation of June 19, 1865, growth and permanence of which was enhanced by the location nearby of the terminals of the town's first railroad in 1872.

The police department regards the real Deep Ellum as that area between Central Avenue, where run the all but abandoned railroad tracks, and Hawkins Street to the east in the 2500 block. Though Deep Ellum by thinning extension along the railroad tracks merges into the more pretentious Negro section on and about Hall Street to the northward, it is not recognized by the educated Negroes as a part of that more select purlieu.

Under the veneer of civilization and custom there runs in Deep Ellum the undercurrent of jungle law; superstition, hatred, and passion. Here is the transplanted farm Negro and the Negro reared in the city's alleys and shacks. It is a district sleepily quiet or restlessly gay, but in either mood may be easily aroused to quick violence, as corporation court records prove.

In Deep Ellum marts of forgotten things it is possible to buy anything from a threadbare cloth-of-gold dress to a collapsible bathtub. Most of the cheap stores are on the south side of the street. Hole-in-the-wall exchanges vie with more preten-

tious but oft-crowded stores. The passerby who gives more than a casual glance to the wares promiscuously displayed is urged to come in and make a bargain, usually at a loss to the proprietor if the latter is to be believed.

There are secondhand clothing stores, job-lot sales emporiums, gun and locksmith shops, pawnshops, tattoo studios, barber shops, drugstores. Sales here are not the matter-of-fact transactions of other retail districts, but negotiations involving critical examination, head shaking, and loud argument by both seller and buyer. It is a game they play in Deep Ellum and *lagniappe* (the small gift to make the bargain more attractive for which this New Orleans word is used in the same manner as is *pelon* in the Spanish-founded Texas cities) is often inducement of last resort. Pitchmen hawk their wares. Street evangelists exhort, their frenzied appeals often but little noticed.

An Indian herb store flourishes on the sale of a vermifuge made on the premises. This is not a place for the squeamish; the emporium's decorative motif is somewhat startling. A mangy bull-moose head towers amid stuffed coiled rattlesnakes, armadillos, a boa constrictor hide, and snarling bobcats. On a wall among Indian relics are some beautiful prints of tribal life. But the main attraction here is a collection of ex-stomachworms, neatly preserved to posterity in jars of alcohol. "Before and after" photographs, reinforced by a small pickled octopus, are potent factors in breaking down sales resistance. The alert proprietor declaims that a purchaser bringing him the worms will have the price of the palliative returned.

Clothing, like liquor and fighting equipment, is cheap in Deep Ellum. New clothing and foodstuffs, bought in job lots from unclaimed freight sales and bankrupt stocks, find their way to consumers at amazingly low prices. But the secondhand store is the backbone of the clothing business. Suits may be bought for \$3. Battered hats and caps start at 15 cents; good overcoats sell from \$4 up; the badly worn for much less. Shoes are to be had for 25 cents and 50 cents; new footwear from \$1.25. Three pairs of men's socks are offered for 10 cents. Women's dresses start at 50 cents and \$1; hats for the feminine head at 15 cents.

Convenient chattel loan offices, identified by the sign of the three balls, make it possible to exchange a day's luck for what it takes to get action in the cafe a door or two away. The transactions with the "Broker" are matter of fact, with wistfulness of present possession overcome by faith in the adventitious redemption of the morrow. Nickel-plated revolvers in a grimy window always draw admiring inspection.

Under the sign of hotel accommodations, walk-ups advertise rooms at 25 cents the night; clean beds at 15 cents. Most imposing edifice in the district is the Negro Knights of Pythias building on the north side of Elm. Also on this side of the street are found the automobile graveyards and parts stores. At Central Avenue is the Harlem movie house, flanked by beer joints, cafes, domino halls, and the Gypsy Tea Room. This is the gay white way of the Negro in Dallas.

Con men- "pigeon droppers"- the reefer man, the card sharp, the too-lucky craps shooter, and the dusky lilies of the field, faces powdered to a cadaverous blue dinginess, tight-fitting gowns supplemented by five-and-dime costume jewelry, hair groomed by the hot-iron straightening process, rub shoulders in the evenings with those innocently bent on spending their wages for a touch of night life.

Rumor holds that sweet dreams and cheap courage can be bought from the reefer man. Marijuana, the loco weed, lends itself to cultivation in Texas back yards and when smoked in cigarettes makes a cheap and powerful stimulant. Addicts are called muggle smokers.

Night amusement resorts have lost their most notorious example since the quite recent abandonment of the Cotton Club, an erstwhile popular cabaret in this section which had entrance through two wooden tunnels, one for males and the other for females. Muscular attendants searched each guest for weapons, the management well aware that the exhilaration of the swing music, bright lights, and the contortions of truckin' and the Susie-Q do not tend to restrain boisterous conduct. On his departure the guest might retrieve any weapons save ice picks or razors, which were confiscated. White people visited this place only by appointment through the city's dance hall inspector.

Refreshments solid and liquid draw the Negroes to the cafes, beer saloons, and barbecue stands. Collard greens, chit'lin's, po'k chops, barbecued beef, and cat-fish- "cat" and "fish" are well-nigh synonymous to the Negro-combine to create a seventh heaven of hedonistic reality. Lights, food, and drink are conducive to conviviality and conversation waxes in a dialect both apt and earthy. Deep Ellum Negroes usually begin their verbal intercourse with a grunted "Er-uh" and on being directly addressed answer by "Suh?" or "Who, me?"

Police are "the law." A penniless person is the "ain't got a penny one." Riddance is a word unused in their vocabulary, rather do they speak of "getting shet" of something. "Hesho' do go slick" refers to a well-dressed man. Willie is a favorite name among Negroes for both men and women. Call out "Willie!" in a group and the chances are there will be several responses. Nicknames are almost universal such as Cootie Boo, Hookie Boo (Brother of Cootie), Snapbean, Wasp's Nest, Black Cat, Papa Dad, Bug-Eye, Eight Ball, Day Break and Trigger Leg.

From the jungle lore of Africa and the later environments of Southern swamps and fields the Negro has inherited a belief in the supernatural and love for black magic. Generations gone by brewed potions of love and hatred on moonless nights, with incantations to the rooster and the goat, and magic was made into *tohys* and *conjures* with patience and ceremony by *juju* doctors and *voodoo* names.

The wiser but no less wishful Deep Ellum Negro buys his philters, love potions, lucky numbers, and incense, wooing lady luck at a fixed cost even if vicariously. One concern, the Wish-I-Wish Company on Central Avenue, offers choice of a large stock of incense, powders, luck bags, and mystic oils. There is one for nearly every complication of life- love drops to attract the indifferent, magnetic lodestone for poker players, Van Van oil to shake a jinx, High John the Conqueror lucky number root for general success. New Orleans lucky bags are featured, as are similar charms believed effective for one year. The proprietor, a white man, is called "doctor" by his clients, some of whom credit him with power to read the more potent policy numbers in the smoke of incense.

Though the quarter is of, by, and for the Negro, even he knows that:

When you go down on Deep Ellum,
To have a little fun
Have your sixteen dollars ready
When that policeman comes.

Chorus

Oh, sweet mama, your daddy's got them
Deep Ellum Blues.
Oh, sweet mama, your daddy's got them
Deep Ellum Blues.

Once I knew a preacher,
Preached the Bible thru and thru,
Till he went down on Deep Ellum,
Now his preaching days are thru.

(Chorus)

When you go down on Deep Ellum,
Put your money in your socks,
'Cause them Women on Deep Ellum
Sho' will throw you on the rocks.

(Chorus)

Once I had a sweetheart,
And she meant the world to me
Till she hung around Deep Ellum,
Now she's not what she used to be.
"Deep Ellum Blues"