

New York's Bravest: Mose Humphreys- a New York City Tall Tale

These classroom activities are designed to provide elementary school teachers grades 1-3 with lessons that teach or reinforce selected Social Studies and English Language Arts standards using The FASNY Museum of Firefighting's online collections.

Summary

Exaggeration (stretching the truth) is the key to tall tales. This kind of exaggeration makes the story more amazing and fun to read or tell. A tall tale that can be added to the list of stories such as Paul Bunyan and the like is the tale of Mose Humphreys.

In the mid 1800's there was a brave firefighter named Mose Humphreys in New York City. Over time fictional legends about his strength and heroism grew into larger than life exaggerated proportions, retold in stage plays, books and newspapers. Mose grew up seeing the devastation that fires caused. When he was young he decided to become a member of the Engine Company #40. Mose became famous throughout New York City for his daring rescues, but he always maintained that he was just doing his job.

Background to Firefighting in the 1800's

Back in the 1600's, people used a bucket brigade to pass water buckets from the water source to the site of a fire. In the 1700's pumpers like the Newsham engine were used to pump water that people filled with buckets. As towns grew in size and buildings became taller and larger, bigger hand pumpers were needed.

Up until the late 1800's, most firefighters were volunteers. Firefighters needed physical strength and stamina. They would hand haul the fire apparatus to the scene of the fire, then pump water onto the flames by pumping by hand. Water from a body of water or hydrants was drawn into the engine via hoses (early hoses were made of leather) and the firefighters used muscle power to pump the water through output hoses. Sometimes when the water supply was some distance from the fire, the hand engines would line up and the firefighters would draw water into the engine that was closest to the water into another engine, to the next, etc. to the engine closest to the fire. When this happened there was competition between the companies, as each had to keep up the pace to avoid their engine getting flooded and overflowing with water.

Competition to see which company would be first to arrive at the scene of the fire, and get closest to the flames, encouraged people to gather on the streets and cheer for their favorite company. Fanned by the competitive spirit, occasional fights would start between companies over disputed hydrant use, etc.

With the introduction of the steam fire engine in the mid 1800's, firefighting was revolutionized. A large number of men were no longer required to convey and operate fire firefighting apparatus. The steam engine could do all the pumping, and horses could convey the engine to a fire. In large cities like New York, firefighters became paid companies because of economic feasibility. Then in the early 1900's, the internal combustion engine could both convey the apparatus and pump water.

Mose Humphreys was a real person and volunteer firefighter who was born in the Bowery District of New York City around 1809. He was the captain of Engine Company #40. The tales of Mose Humphreys illustrate both the willingness to do a dangerous job, and putting others before oneself.

Materials:

- New York's Bravest by Mary Pope Osborne
- Images of fire fighting apparatus from the 1600-1900's from the online exhibit of the FASNY Firefighting Museum. [See a list of suggested images at the end of this lesson.](#)

Procedure:

Introduction

Using images from the online exhibit introduce the following words: hand engine, pumper, helmet, red bib shirt, and speaking trumpet.

- Using images from the online exhibit discuss the firefighter's uniform in the 1800's.
- Using images from the online exhibit discuss how the pumper was conveyed to the fire and how the water was pumped.
- Preview several of the illustrations from the book for historical details of the mid-1800s for the following words: top hat, cobblestone streets, shanties, oystermen, ragmen, newsboy, tenement, mansion, trolley, ragged clothes, piers and wharves.
- Create a list of words the students give to describe the qualities a firefighter should have to do this dangerous job.
- If tall tales are new to the class explain that exaggeration is what makes a tall tale a tall tale. Tall tale characters are bigger, stronger, braver, etc., than any other person. They can do what is not humanly possible.

After reading New York's Bravest to the class:

- Have students discuss some of Mose's qualities: brave, strong, modest, caring, unselfish, etc.
- Discuss how Mose died in the fire after saving so many lives, and how he represents the courage and strength of firefighters both past and present.

Additional Activity:

Firefighting has changed dramatically from the time that Mose lived. Using images from the online exhibit, discuss how apparatus changed from hand drawn, to steam powered, to gasoline powered. Discuss how the firefighter's uniform changed since Mose Humphreys lived.

Evaluation:

Have students work in small groups to create a new collaborative tall tale about a present day firefighter. Students may create drawings to illustrate their new tall tale about this tall tale firefighter.

Follow-up Activities

There are many symbols associated with firefighting: the Dalmatian, Maltese Cross, fire helmets and others. Have students research the history and meaning of these symbols and create a book illustrating their findings.

New York Standards

ELA Standard 2: Key Idea 1, Key Idea 2

ELA Standard 4

SS Standard 5, Key Idea 3

Suggested Images from Gallery

Always Ready

Litho 2

Firemen's Red Shirt

Portrait J. Baulch

Fire Scene 1854

Maltese Cross

Dalmatian

New Yorker Helmet