

IT HAPPENED HERE NEW JERSEY

The Hindenburg Tragedy

Target Age: High School
Time Period: 20th Century
Featured County: Ocean
NJ 350th Theme: Innovation

Common Core States Standards for English Language Arts:

R.CCR.7- Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

W.CCR.3- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

SL.CCR.5- Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards:

Social Studies: 6.1.12.C.8.b

FOCUS QUESTION:

How do innovations in technology, transportation and mass communication impact the people of New Jersey and the rest of the nation?

BACKGROUND:

Herbert Morrison, the radio announcer from Chicago's WLS radio station, was on assignment in Lakehurst, New Jersey when the majestic airship Hindenburg approached the air station. The passengers were arriving from an overseas journey originating in Northern Germany. Once the airship landed, they would board a train headed for New York. Due to dangerous thunderstorms and fierce winds, the expected landing time was postponed. It was approaching nighttime, and Morrison described how the ship's windows were "sparkling like glittering jewels on the background of black velvet."

Moments later the commentary turned to horror as the ship exploded in a ball of flame and crashed to the ground. A distraught Morrison, with terror in his voice, stammered into the microphone, "Oh, the humanity and all the passengers screaming around here. I told you, I can't even talk to people whose friends are on there. Ah! It's—it's—it's—it's ... o—ohhh! I—I can't talk, ladies and gentlemen."

The date was May 6, 1937. The Hindenburg was a zeppelin, as large and luxurious as an ocean liner, with 61 passengers and crewmembers. The vessel had sailed over the Atlantic Ocean from Germany, held



National Archives, Records of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) [306-NT-116817]

aloft by hydrogen and pushed along by diesel engines. The ship was created by Nazi Germany to glorify Adolf Hitler and the German people. Crowds gaped in wonder at this modern marvel as it passed over east coast cities on its way to a landing at Lakehurst. Prior to this tragic event, several pictures of this mighty ship were published in newspapers as it flew over the New York City skyline.

The recorded account of the tragedy was quickly flown back to the radio station WLS in Chicago and broadcasted later that night. By the next day, several radio stations across the county, including WNBC in New York, played the recording for their audiences. Customarily, news events were aired live, but this became the first recorded broadcast of a news event. People listened across the United States with amazement as Morrison painted a colorful picture for his listeners. He provided a firsthand account of the events and interviewed eye witnesses and survivors. This event instantly became a classic of audio history and his phrase “Oh, the humanity” has become a cultural idiom.

There have been several theories surrounding the Hindenburg explosion. It may have had something to do with the volatile hydrogen gas, electrically charged atmospheric conditions, flammable material used in construction, a snapped rudder cable, or even sabotage. Whatever the cause, the explosion with its 36 deaths ended any hope that airships would dominate air transportation or that New Jersey would become a center of this industry. Whatever brought about the Hindenburg’s end, its memory has stayed alive ever since, thanks to the newsreel film and the audio recording of Herbert Morrison. “Oh the humanity!”

ACTIVITY:

Using only the audio of the YouTube clip for the Hindenburg Tragedy, have the students listen to the broadcast of Herbert Morrison. While the announcer is describing the events of May 6, 1937, have the students write down their reactions. Discuss in small groups, then as a class. Next, show students the video of the events and ask if their initial reactions to the audio changed, evolved, or stayed the same after watching the video of the event. Consider the following questions for discussion:

- Did the students experience the events differently when they could hear it as opposed to when they could see it?
- What impact would that have on the reactions of those listening?
- In an age where most news was transmitted by radio, how might one’s imagination get the better of them?
- Through audio only, can we question whether or not the events were accurately described or embellished to the listening audience by the broadcaster?

Next, hold a discussion on the technological innovations of mass communication, especially the radio, movies, news reels, and mass produced newspapers. Ask the students to analyze the social, political and economic effects of the rise of mass media. Discuss specific examples throughout the 1920’s and 1930’s, including political speeches, sporting events, and product advertisements that would support how extensive the impact was on American life. Consider how quickly information was spread and the size of the audience.

Audio Recording: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YY0xw5r1ro>

Video Recording: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vgkvUxxZFg>

FOLLOW-UP:

For homework, have the students listen to Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds". Considering that the Hindenburg Tragedy was a real event and listeners of Welles believed that the broadcast was actually happening, compare and contrast the impact both broadcasts had on the nation and the reactions from those who listened.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xs0K4ApWl4g>

WANT TO LEARN MORE?**Places You Can Visit**

Lakehurst Naval Air Engineering Station, Lakehurst, NJ

<http://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/2160>

1938 War of the World Landing Site Monument

Van Nest Park, Princeton Junction, NJ

<http://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/2749>

Additional Teaching Resources

Hindenburg Lesson Plan from Hands on History (Through Hands on History, these lesson plans can be easily adapted to any grade and level for an interactive educational experience)

http://www.missioninmuseum.com/collect_aviation/av00001.htm

War of the Worlds Lesson Plan from Discovery Education (Primarily for the High School English or History Class, this lesson plan offers a thought provoking discussion questions on a very interesting topic)

<http://www.discoveryeducation.com/teachers/free-lesson-plans/the-war-of-the-worlds.cfm>

For More Information

Marc Mappen, *There's More to New Jersey Than the Sopranos* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 162-167.

New York Times Article, May 6, 1937

<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/0506.html#article>

Rick Archbold, *Hindenburg: An Illustrated History*. (New York: Madison Press/Warner, 1994)

Dick, Harold G. and Douglas Hill Robinson, *The Golden Age of Great Passenger Ships: Graf Zeppelin and Hindenburg* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991)

Hindenburg Disaster, YouTube Video

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vgkvUxxZFg>

CREDIT INFORMATION:

In Classroom Activity:

Pg. 1: Hindenburg explosion. National Archives Records Administration.

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