

CHC2P Unit 1: 1914-1919: Forming Identity

Activity 4: Women, Aboriginal and African Canadians in WWI

Overview

This activity focuses on the contributions of women, Aboriginal and African Canadians in World War I.

Lesson

William White: Slavery and Prejudice



"My name is William White and I am a proud African Canadian. Both of my parents were former slaves in the state of Virginia. I came north to Canada to gain an education at Acadia University in Nova Scotia. I was a star athlete at Acadia, and I graduated to become a minister in the Baptist Church. My goal in life was to preach that God had created all persons to be equal."

"When the Great War broke out in 1914 there was a lot of prejudice in Canada. Prejudice means a dislike for people who are different. There was prejudice against my race. For example, blacks were not allowed to fight in the Canadian army next to whites."

William White: Number Two Construction Battalion

Only in 1916, did the army create the Nova Scotia Number Two Construction Battalion. This unit was composed entirely of African Canadians, but under the command of white officers. Was this unit given guns to shoot? No, they were not. Instead, their job, as their name suggests, was to use wood to construct platforms and bridges for the trenches.



"I, William White, became the chaplain of the unit. As chaplain, I would lead the men in prayer, listen to their stories, and conduct the burial ceremonies when they were killed. As the chaplain, I held the rank of "officer."

I was the only African-Canadian officer in the whole Canadian army and British army."

Aboriginal Canadians in WWI

At the time of the First World War, Native people were considered wards of the court under the Indian Act, could not vote, and because they were not considered full citizens of Canada, were exempt from military service. Nonetheless, approximately 3,500 Native men (35% of the military-aged Native population), responded quickly and in impressive numbers to join the Canadian Forces on the European

battlefields. More than five hundred Natives gave their lives defending values that were meaningful to all Canadians.

This is all the more remarkable because a mere thirty years before, the last of the great 'Indian' Wars took place in the United States pitting the government against Native people. And in Canada, the 1876 Indian Act was enacted which had brought Native Canadians to their knees.

Women in the WWI

Women played a critical role in the war effort. Marjorie McColl, Elsie Malone, Wilma Marshal are fictional characters whose stories reflect the real experiences of Canadian women during World War I.

Watch the following presentation to learn more about these women at
<http://www.mrzahran.com/history/mme/womenwwi.html>

Assignment

1. Why do you think that there was prejudice against African Canadians during World War I? List some examples of prejudice against William White and the Second Construction Battalion in World War I.
2. Do you still see evidence of racial prejudice in today's society?
3. How many Native Canadians enlisted in the Canadian armed forces in World War I? Why was this such a surprise?
4. What examples of prejudice against Native Canadians are mentioned in this activity?
5. How did Marjorie McColl, Elsie Malone and Wilma Marshal each contribute to the war effort?
6. When was the Canadian income tax first introduced and why was it introduced?