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**WHAT IS AN AMERICAN? A CULTURAL UNIT
for
GRADES SEVEN OR EIGHT**

**AN ABSTRACT OF
A THESIS
PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
OF DANBURY STATE COLLEGE**

**IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF SCIENCE**

**by
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Cultural transmission is considered by some anthropologists to be among the most important functions of the school. To help provide for such transmission, to stimulate interest in and increase knowledge of their American culture, a unit of study was devised for and used with students as a part of their social studies-English curriculum. The thesis for such a unit was that an American cultural study would give to American history new and more lasting meaning for the student. (Since the unit was designed to be used as a part of the social studies curriculum, it is considered to be a "subject-matter"¹ unit. As such it is an "organization of activities around a purpose,"² the purpose being to stimulate interest and to gain knowledge of the American culture. It is therefore called a cultural unit.)

The main objective of this unit was to help the students gain some understanding of our American culture, past and present. Judging from the final compositions written by the thirty-one students, all of them had developed some awareness of the fact that we have a culture. Most of the class members showed in their responses a knowledge of specific aspects of our culture. However, all the students were aware of some

¹Chester W. Harris (ed.), Encyclopedia of Educational Research (3d ed.; New York: Macmillan Co., 1960), p. 360.

²Ibid.

basic changes in America from the 1600's to the 1900's, and of some of the qualities which make American character unique.

To evaluate a unit of this type with complete accuracy would be impossible since the basic aim was the development of concepts. From the teacher's standpoint, the final compositions were successful beyond anticipated hopes. Every student showed distinct improvement in his written work as the year progressed. All written answers reflected in some way results of the assigned readings and discussions. There seemed to be evidence of new maturity in viewpoint and of real growth in the understanding of our people and their culture.

It had been hoped that the students would gain the concepts of:

- the "Puritan Ethic" and its moral overtones
- the enterprise of our people
- the optimism of our nation
- the identification of our settlers with the land
(agrarianism)
- emphasis on the individual
- egalitarianism

No one student directly referred in his final exposition to all these ideas, but several mentioned many of them. Every class member included at least one in his final discussion paper. Perhaps the most difficult concept for the class to grasp was that of the influence on our society of the "Puritan Ethic"; yet, at least three of the thirty-one students showed in their answers some understanding of it. The concepts of equality, individualism, the importance of land, some of the

qualities innate in the American character were, in general, well grasped by the students as a whole.

From a teaching standpoint, the project was a challenge and fun. It was a learning experience, too, for it helped to crystallize, for the teacher, the partly formed ideas concerning the development of our culture. Teaching with literature of the period to point up concepts and the historical process made social studies come alive for the teacher and hopefully for the students, too. Although the project was not really fun for the students, it seemed to be a challenge. It is possible that when they have become active American citizens, the gleanings from the cultural unit of study discussed here will help them to act and make decisions as concerned members of both their own and the world society.