

## Enough with Mission Projects Already

by Nancy McTygue, Executive Director

I hate Mission Projects. I know I'm going to offend someone with that statement, but at this point in my life and career, I just don't care. No child in California should be asked to use sugar cubes, toothpicks, or the always hard to find popsicle sticks to build a replica of one or more mission as part of their study of California history. I know this project has been popular with teachers for years (I had to do it when I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and I bet some of you did too), and perhaps this brings up nostalgic memories of your childhood, a time when everyone was kind, there was no crime or poverty, and to quote Garrison Keillor, "...all the children were above average." Enough is enough, however. This activity is just wrong on so many levels - it's offensive to the Native peoples whose lives were largely shattered by the mission system, it's a waste of time and money, it doesn't build reading or writing skills, and it doesn't teach anything of substance about our past. Thoughtful teachers abandoned this practice years ago, but I'm still amazed when I hear it got assigned yet again.

The Mission Project lives on for a variety of reasons, but I'm convinced that one of them is a nostalgic connection to a past that never really existed. You're familiar with the narrative, I'm sure - happy natives working in partnership with the Church in a bucolic setting. I'm sure you're also familiar with a more complex view of the period: many native peoples had their lives upended - suffering and dying in devastating numbers in the California missions. Given the neophytes' forced labor, the introduction of disease, and the damage done to Native families and culture even beyond the missions, it is surprising that Mission Projects have lasted as long as they unfortunately have.

But that's the danger of conflating memory and history - history often loses and our children are left not with lessons from the past, but fairy tales that offer little truth or even morality. On the other hand, memory can be a powerful motivator, deepen student understanding, and promote new interpretations of the traditional narrative. Democratic movements in the Middle East, for example, have inspired countless teachers to reinvigorate their study of our own revolution, while at the same time encouraging their students to follow events in these new young democracies abroad.

This issue of *The Source* is dedicated to the sometimes dangerous and yet powerful partnership of history and memory. My colleagues have endeavored to share the lessons they've gleaned in their research, reading, and professional development programs. From the Spanish Missions to the Civil War to the Holocaust, they detail activities and resources we hope will be of help in your classroom. As you read through them, I'd like to encourage us all to think critically about the tension between history and memory. How can we take advantage of the emotional power of memory in order to deepen our children's understanding of even difficult periods in our history, without whitewashing it to fit a narrative we think will be most appealing? Let us know what you think, by writing to us at [chssp@ucdavis.edu](mailto:chssp@ucdavis.edu) or posting on our Facebook wall. Just don't do another Mission Project.