

CATEGORY: BRAZIL: PRE-EMANCIPATION

CONCEPTS: FOLKLORE, human rights, religion, agriculture, race/ethnicity, slavery, work.

ACTIVITY: A FOLKTALE OF SLAVERY: NEGRINHO THE COWHERDER

OBJECTIVES: Students will learn how the institution of slavery was incorporated into folklore in Brazil with a message of hope and freedom.

MATERIALS: Copies of the story.

PROCEDURE: You can either have the students read the story individually or read it to them. A discussion could revolve around the following:

1. How folktales can be used to give people hope in difficult situations.
2. The role of blacks in the story. It is commonly thought that slaves accepted their lot with submission. What does the story indicate about this?
3. Why a folktale of this type remains popular after the conditions it describes cease to exist.
4. Negrinho is a "folk hero." What is the difference between a folk hero and other hero figures? What are Negrinho's heroic qualities and how do you think most working people relate these qualities to their lives?

VOCABULARY: folk hero

RELATED ACTIVITIES: Until recently, the role of blacks in the North American West has been ignored. Have students research this role and report on it in class.

LEVEL: MIDDLE GRADES

Source: Gibbs, Virginia G. *Latin America: Curriculum Materials for the Middle Grades*. Center for Latin America, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. 1985. 1989.

The Story of Negrinho

"Negrinho the Cowherder" is a traditional story in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, a ranching area bordering on the Argentine pampa. The hero of the tale, Negrinho has become a mythical figure somewhat like a friendly leprechaun, who spends his time helping people find lost items. In some towns in Southern Brazil there are statues of Negrinho. When a person has lost something like money or even love, he or she lights a candle in front of the statue asking for help. He always seems to respond! Now here is the story of Negrinho's life.

Once upon a time, when the immense plains of Brazil were like the sea, broken only here and there by a few ranches, there lived an evil rancher. He was cruel and miserly. The normal hospitality of the plains was unknown on his ranch. Thirsty travellers were denied the water from his well and even the cool shade of his trees.

The rancher lived with his son, who had inherited the same cruel spirit. The only other company the rancher had was a beautiful chestnut horse and a young slave named Negrinho. Negrinho, still just a small boy, was badly treated and constantly picked on. He was alone in the world except for Our Lady, the Madonna, who watched over him as she does for all lonely people.

Poor Negrinho worked so very hard. At dawn he would prepare tea for his master and then set out in the cold morning air to ride the chestnut horse through miles of fields checking on the cattle until nightfall.

The chestnut stallion had won fame as the fastest horse in the region. One day, a jealous neighboring rancher challenged Negrinho's owner to a horse race. Such a challenge could not go unmet. Heavy bets were made because the challenger's horse was also famous for its speed. Negrinho was told to race the chestnut horse because he was a skillful and lightweight rider.

On the day of the race, the two steeds ran neck in neck for a long time, but in the end the chestnut stallion, ridden by the small slave, fell back and finally lost. The evil rancher was furious because he lost a lot of money. He started for home, plotting revenge. Once back at the ranch, he tied Negrinho up and gave him a tremendous whipping. Negrinho's back was slashed and raw, but he was forced to spend that night outside watching the cattle.

The cold wind cut into Negrinho's bare and beaten back and his spirit ached with loneliness and fear. Then, he remembered his friend, Our Lady, and fell into a peaceful sleep.

In the morning he woke up and was startled to see that the animals had escaped. The rancher's son, who was always looking for ways to torment Negrinho, had frightened them away early in the morning. The rancher again whipped Negrinho and then sent him out to find the missing cattle.

All day Negrinho rode to no avail. At dusk he passed a shrine which held the image of Our Lady. He stopped to light a candle and pray, and then remounted the stallion to continue searching the pastures in the darkness. Melted wax from the candle Negrinho had lit began to drip onto the ground. With the first drop of wax a strange, faint light appeared. With each new drop the light grew in strength and guided Negrinho on his search. He was soon able to find all the cattle and put them into the corral.

After his long day's work, he lay on some soft grass and fell asleep. Before dawn, the rancher's son was up to his old tricks and again frightened the cattle out of the corral. He ran to his father to tell him that the animals had again disappeared.

This time the evil rancher beat Negrinho until he couldn't move or even cry out. The fury of the beating was such that even the rancher was left without strength. Negrinho was then tied on top of a huge anthill and left to be devoured by the ants.

The next day the rancher sent a new slave to look for his cattle, but the animals were nowhere to be found. Three days and three nights passed but there was still no sign of the cattle. The chestnut stallion had also disappeared. The rancher returned to the anthill where he had left his young slave. What a surprise! There was Negrinho looking alive and well, and surrounded by all the missing animals including the beautiful chestnut stallion. After blinking his eyes, the rancher also saw that Negrinho was accompanied by Our Lady the Madonna. The evil master fell to his knees.

Negrinho ignored the rancher, left atop the chestnut stallion and galloped away. The cattle followed him to the distant, sloping plains where he can be found to this day.

The only difference is that now Negrinho rides the plains between heaven and earth, galloping on the chestnut horse and leading the cattle through the brilliant stars to the endless fields of freedom that were given to him when he died.

