

Taking a historic path

Seneca School embarks on a trip with the pioneers.

By Scott Mallory
Blue Mountain Eagle

SENECA — In a presentation that was part stage play, part text book and all history, students and their teachers at Seneca School transported themselves and their audience back to 1843, when the great migration west on the Oregon Trail began.

It took weeks for students in kindergarten through fourth grade to prepare for the school's first Oregon Trail Days. Soon after school started

in September, young historians in Judith Beaudet and Adelle Cerny's classrooms began studying what life was like 160 years ago in America, and why half a million people made the journey west from beyond the Rocky Mountains.

"The Oregon Trail was where the pioneers crossed to Oregon," said fourth-grader Ashley Perkins.

The students read novels, textbooks and authentic journals written by people who made the trip. They created dolls from corn husks and string, drew colorful pictures of trail landmarks and performed short skits that depicted life on the trail. They ate food based on recipes used by the pioneers, made by parent volunteers.



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Logan Delano stands near his drawing of Fort Laramie and talks about the attack on the fort by the Sioux Indians.

The classrooms became campsites and the gym an open prairie, where Seneca's "wagons," replicated by four-wheeled scooters, circled against Indian attack, raced for water and showed the proper etiquette, lead by the school's wagon master, Josh Whitman, a fourth-grader, who knew the

job's most important task.

"Make sure you're going the right way," Josh said.

First-grader Wyatt Weaver was the wagon builder.

"The wagon was the most expensive thing pioneers had," Wyatt said. "It cost \$110."

Pioneer wagons were 10-

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foot long and 4-foot wide, Wyatt said, and everything a family needed was carried in them.

The Oregon Trail's official starting point was near St. Louis, Mo. The path took a northwestern tack, through territories that would become western states and through areas that were once part of Mexico. It ended in a far corner of what would become Oregon, near where Washington would make its southwestern border.

What would become a 2,170-mile route at first had no clearly defined path, except a northern direction that would take travelers to the only practical places where they could get through the mountains to the west.

"It was the main path of westward migration," said fourth-grader Lacey Elliott.

Many of the pioneers split from the main trail to go south, toward what would become California. Those that continued north went looking for farmland all the way to the area of the Willamette Valley.

"Come on, Ma, we're going to Oregon," Megan Rider said to her first-grade classmate Rheanna Cartner, the pair playing all parts of a pioneer family getting ready to make the trip west. Second-grader Derek Rider, Megan's brother, was the narrator, who told Rheanna that she couldn't bring her boom box.

"Because electricity hasn't been invented," Derek said.

Parents and grandparents smiled as children showed off their knowledge of American history. The pioneer spirit touched everyone, some a little more than others.

Beaudet and Cerny were in period dress, and so was Andrea Officer, a kindergarten and physical education aide.

Many of the students wore



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There was circle dancing at Seneca School, with a song — "Circle to the right, the old covered wagon/Circle to the right, the old covered wagon/You're the one my darling," and then to the left, then to the center and laughing and clapping — and then adults joined the circle.

pioneer clothes. Girls were in floor-length dresses or long skirts — red, blue, purple, white, green, pink, light brown and there were polka-dots and pretty bonnets. Boys wore hats, some floppy and others straight-brimmed, and vests, some black and fancy reminiscent of saloon gamblers, and others with fringe that dangled against their jeans.

When Seneca's wagon train made its first stop, the children played the games of button, button, who's got the button; pom-pom pull away, a pioneer version of tag; and leap frog.

The group gathered to sing, belting out "Shenadoah" and "Red River Valley," as Beaudet played the auto harp.

Then there was circle dancing, with a song — "Circle to the right, the old covered wagon/Circle to the right, the old covered wagon/You're the one my darling," and then to the left, then to the center and laughing and clapping — and the adults joined the circle, including Matt Carter, who tried to "sit this one out," but instead stepped lively with the other pioneers.

The first meal, served in the kindergarten-through-second-grade classroom, was beans and bacon, shepherd's pie, corn meal mush, homemade crackers, hard tack (also called wagon biscuits and good for soaking up bean juice), fried apple pies, which were small and shaped like



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Ella Baucum eats like a pioneer. The food was prepared according to recipes used on the Oregon Trail.

turnovers, molasses cake, gingerbread cookies and shortbread cookies.

Alex Ellis, a second-grader, thought the apple pie was best. Her classmate Jerry Carter went for the beans and bacon, maybe because his mom, Jennifer, made the batch in a big Dutch oven.

Kaidee Weaver made the molasses cake.

In the third- and fourth-grade classroom, plates were piled with Indian fry bread, baking powder biscuits, hash pudding, Johnny cake (made with molasses and corn meal by Wendi Rowllins) and peas porridge, well, maybe not heaped so high with peas porridge, which wasn't exactly a favorite.

Lisa Delano was volunteered

to make the peas porridge, but didn't eat any of it because she doesn't like peas.

"The recipe said things like 'piece of butter rolled in flour,' so I had to figure out what a piece of butter is," Delano said. "And it has mint in it."

There were Seneca pioneers who liked the dish, but Delano's son, Logan, wasn't one of them.

"I don't plan on trying it," said Logan, who brought a box of minipizzas for lunch.

Logan later made a presentation about Fort Laramie that included his drawing of the fort.

One of the most important things pioneers had along the prairie trail was the ability to make a campfire, said Collin Harvey and James Mabe, during their presentation, in which they used a prop fire made of colored paper and sticks.

"They needed to keep warm," Collin said.

If there were no sticks to be found, "they used buffalo chips," James said, and the boys held up flat, circular objects that looked like the real thing.

The kindergartners bowed, with James removing his hat as he bent at the waist.

The enthusiasm that the project sparked in the students probably won't dim for a while. At least not until after today's field trip to the Oregon Trail Museum in Baker.

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