

History Corner
Richard Sills
January 2003

Students Studying the Homesteading Era

Since North Shore Community School opened its doors this fall I have been trying to spend at least one day a week there volunteering in my son's fourth grade class. Most weeks find me there Monday mornings. I usually start off the time talking to the class about the weather. Has it changed from last week? How cold did it get last night? When do you think we will get our first snowstorm? It doesn't take much to get the class talking.

Fourth graders are by nature an inquisitive group. In fact, I usually find it necessary to stop the discussion so we have a least a little time to get out on the nature trail, something we try to do every week. Since September we have witnessed many changes along the trail that winds through the woods just east of the school. There have been weeks that we have studied the difference between deciduous and coniferous trees, tried out binoculars to see what birds we can identify, searched for frogs, and even once went on a scavenger hunt. But some weeks we just go out and walk, observing the changes the seasons bring to us.

For quite a while this fall that seasonal transition seemed to be mired in mud but mud season is now finally well behind us and snowshoes are not yet necessary so walking the trails in the last few weeks has become a leisurely affair. Some mornings, if a light dusting of snow has fallen overnight, tracks of deer, snowshoe hare, and other animals can be seen. It interests me to note the depth of knowledge many students have of the environment around them. Those students that can distinguish the tracks of animals, recognize and identify the wide variety of trees, and even differentiate birds by simply listening to their songs, impress me. Helping our children to better understand and appreciate the natural environment that surrounds them is a major focus of North Shore Community School's mission and from what I can observe on Monday mornings it is working.

Along with an environmental emphasis the school is also trying to instill within students an appreciation for the historical and cultural heritage that comes with being a member of our community. This spring the fourth grade class will be studying the homesteading era, primarily the period of time from 1890 to around 1920. It was during this thirty-year period that much of our inland community was settled, creating the small hamlets of French River, Molde, Normanna, and Alden. Why our community became the destination of so many people of Scandinavian descent will be just one of many questions we will be hoping to answer. We will also be studying what life was like to those early settlers who broke the land, built their homes, and raised their children in a time before mechanized farm machinery, cars, and electricity. We will be using the "Roots" book as a curriculum guide but we are also hoping to have several hands-on artifacts that will help students understand what life was like a century ago.