

The Three R's

by Lynne Belluscio

Last week we welcomed the 4th grade to LeRoy House for the "One Room Schoolhouse" Program. It gives the kids a chance to experience – if only for an hour – the way it was in school 100 years ago.

They had a chance to read a story in an old primer, and participate in a spelling bee. One of the kids asked where the word "bee" comes from, which was a great question and everyone surmised that it had to do with the industrious insect – the bee. But as I found out, that is not the case. A "bee" such as a spinning bee, or a quilting bee, could be derived from an English word "bean" or "been" which meant voluntary help for neighbors. Or bee could be derived from the word "bene" which means a favor or a prayer. (I identify with the idea of a prayer. I am a terrible speller and I think I would have said a lot of prayers to make it through a spelling bee!)

The first written mention of a "bee" was in reference to a spinning bee in 1769 and a husking bee (for husking corn) was in 1816, although it is generally believed that the term was in use many years before it appeared in print. There were apple bees and logging bees and like barn raisings, refreshments were often served.

The mention of a spelling bee appeared in 1809 (or 1825 depending on which source you believe). Apparently it was encouraged by the publication of *Noah Webster's* spelling book which was used in schools for many generations. (I've looked through our school books and didn't find one, so I just bought one on e-bay to use next year.) In LeRoy, the spelling bee champions from each school met for a LeRoy championship and then the champions from each town met for a county-wide champion.

One of the questions that I asked the kids, "What are the three "R's" and the response was "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle." (Right answer. Wrong question.) "In school, which subjects did the students study? One starts



with R. One sounds like it starts with R and one starts with an apostrophe." So eventually, after a longer discussion we got to "Reading, Writing and 'Rithmetic" which of course leads to the discussion of "what is arithmetic?" The word today is math. And the math assignment is to answer problems from an 1849 arithmetic book. "If James buys a primer for 5 cents and a slate for 4 cents, how much money does he spend? If Jacob buys 3 pumpkins for 5 cents each and a basket of apples for 10 cents and sells everything for 30 cents, how much money does he make?"

"The reading assignment was "Ray and His Kite" a story about a boy who decides to tie a lantern to his kite and fly it at night. The townspeople think it might be a large firefly, or maybe a comet – even a hobgoblin, but then they discover what it is. (I tell the kids that a long time ago, in Geneseo on the 4th of July, some kids did the same thing, but the lantern landed on the roof of the church and started a fire!) Ray returns home and is afraid he will get into trouble with his mother, but she just laughs and tells him to go to bed."

The writing assignment starts with the kids trying to write on their slates with a slate pencil. This can be a little unnerving

until they learn how to keep the slate pencils from screeching on the slates. Then, after they have practiced writing their names, they have a chance to write their names with a steel tipped pen and ink. "Don't get the ink on your fingers or clothes, because it doesn't come off! And the blotter is to blot up any drips or puddles. If you are left handed, you will have trouble writing with the pens, because your hand will smear the ink as you write. You will have to write from above. In the old days, they made left handed students write with their right hand and if they didn't they might get a ruler smacked across their knuckles!"

Which brings us to the

discussion of discipline. "School Days. School Days. Dear old golden rule days. Reading and Writing and 'rithmetic, taught to the tune of the hickory stick." I think the kids like the idea of the golden rule but the hickory stick is a little scary. And so too, the idea of everyone drinking out of the water bucket with the same dipper or having to use the outhouse.

I think the students got a better understanding of how school has changed. And for those people who are apt to say, let's just go back to the 3 R's, it's important to remember that the days of the 3 R's weren't really the dear old golden rule days.

DON'T FORGET!



Sunday, November 4th