

The Historical Society's School Programs

by Lynne Belluscio

I was a little surprised when someone mentioned to me that they didn't know that the Historical Society offered programs to students in LeRoy. I guess they don't have kids or grand kids that go to the Wolcott Street School, because for thirty years, kids have been walking across the street and coming to LeRoy House.

Each year about 1,000 students from Wolcott Street School participate in our programs. We have over 15 different "hands-on" programs, from "A is For Apple" for the kindergarten classes, to "Easy Does It" which explores the application of simple machines to early tools. All of our programs have been adapted to the new common core curriculum. There are at least two programs for each grade level. One is offered in the fall and the other in the spring. Most of the activities are set up in the basement kitchen. (Someday we hope to have our own one-room school for all these activities.)

The Historical Society is chartered by the New York State Board of Regents as a not for profit educational institution. So education is our mission, whether it is educating the visitors about LeRoy House or Jell-O, or the many school programs that we offer.

Probably the activity that kids remember the most is our "Pioneer Sampler" program for fourth grade. In small groups the kids actually bake biscuits in the 1830 fireplace, and churn butter, as well as wash clothes with a scrub-board. This last year they sewed quilt pieces. Of course their favorite part of the program is when they get to play with the old fashioned toys.

The fourth grades visit LeRoy House three times each year. Another program is "Jack Be Nimble" where they discover

rush lights, tallow candles, candle stands, whale oil lamps, kerosene lamps, chandeliers, betty lamps, sconces - - all used before the advent of electricity and batteries. The fourth grades also visit LeRoy House for "One Room School", complete with slates, writing with steel tipped pens, a spelling bee, and old-fashioned arithmetic. Naturally we have to explain about the "3 R's" because we no longer teach reading, writing and 'rithmetic. We also have developed a one room school program for the first grades, because they do a comparison between schools now and then.

In the spring the kindergarten classes return for a program called "Grandma's Trunk." They have never seen a stereopticon viewer or an iron that has to be heated on the stove. But those are the things in the trunk. Then they have to find modern examples in a plastic tote. It is a day of discovery.

In the fall the second grades come to build a village. Each student has several LeRoy buildings that are placed on a large map, and gradually, from pioneer log cabins to the Eagle Hotel and LeRoy House, from the Presbyterian Church to St. Joseph's Church, the Village of LeRoy is built. It's great fun, and everyone learns about our Village.

A few months later the students return at Christmas time to see the old fashioned candle-lit tree with hand-made ornaments. And beneath the tree are old fashioned toys and books. The children share stories that they are learning about Christmas around the world.

We also offer "A Visit with Mrs. LeRoy," "Bucket Brigade," "On the Road - Early Transportation," an archeology activity, called "Dig It", "A Diary of a Civil War Soldier from LeRoy," and of course "Jell-O - America's Most Famous Dessert - A story of Advertising."

We also have an Underground Railroad Program that connects to the real-life story of Daniel MacDonal

d and Elijah Huftelen of LeRoy, who helped slaves escape to Canada. We also have a really neat activity based on maps of LeRoy. Students have to use all of their skills to locate railroads, salt mines, cemeteries and schools. The answers are all on the maps, they just have to look carefully.

I am always put on the defensive when someone says that kids aren't interested in history, because I know better. Unfortunately, in today's schools, history is taking a back seat to other courses and it's a shame, because we lose a sense of place and a sense of our heritage.

I'm not sure that it's important to be able to list the presidents in order, but it is important to know that slaves were given help in LeRoy to find their way to Canada. It's important to know that women weren't always allowed to go to college but here in LeRoy there was a university for women. It's important to know that people with a lot of courage and tenacity were willing to settle on the frontier and carve out a place that would be known as LeRoy. And that some of those pioneers fought in the Revolution to gain our freedom

from England. It's important to know that men from LeRoy fought in the Civil War, and that the great grandchildren of those men are here putting flags on their graves each year.

Our challenge is to help students make connections to the past and to understand that what happened before our time does make a difference. History is not a dead subject. It is not written in stone. It evolves, and is rewritten. It helps us appreciate now.

