

Outdoor education at Terra Cotta

CVCA centre a real treat for 'city kids'

By LORI TAYLOR
Herald staff writer

For many school children in Erin township, Halton, Peel and Dufferin, a visit to the Credit Valley Conservation Authority's (CVCA) Outdoor Education Centre at Terra Cotta is as close as they ever get to the great outdoors.

The CVCA operates the centre during the school year. It is open to classes of students from kindergarten to grade eight, to learn about nature, ecology and conservation.

"Basically our philosophy is not to have a laboratory approach, but to have a sensory approach," said George Roberts, Education Officer for the authority. Mr. Roberts, along with Sheila Beecham, conducts the programs at the education centre.

"We stress the use of the senses," he said. "That's the way people learn."

"A lot of teachers tell me when the kids come here, that this is the only wild area they get to in a year," Mr. Roberts said. "This is a great wilderness to them, and they want to know where the bears are. I try to impress the kids that they have nothing to fear from nature."

BRING PARENTS
"What they find great, is that I suggest that they can bring their parents here some time on their own," and you can tell them what I told you," Mrs. Beecham said.

The first thing the children are told about when they arrive, is the role of the CVCA in forest, wildlife, land and water management, Mr. Roberts said.

"That's what we're here for, conservation," he said. "I believe that to make kids more aware of the need for conservation, you have to make them feel it's important to have that green stuff out there. I guess over all, I just want them to feel about that green stuff the way I do."

"I want them to feel the need to keep the green open spaces just for people, for relaxing, to get away from man-made things for a while," he added.

Mr. Roberts said he and Mrs. Beecham try to stay away from the clinical approach of naming every plant, animal and insect in sight, although if a child asks what something is, they'll identify it. Some children try

to take advantage of this by asking questions about everything they see, but Mr. Roberts said he has developed ways of getting around these questions, such as telling the children how many different species of insect there are, "and I can't possibly know every one."

Once they have related the concept of the CVCA to the children, Mr. Roberts and Mrs. Beecham try to tie in the programs of the authority in buying up the headlands of the Credit River with ecology.

RECYCLED MATTER
"Most people don't realize that life is made up entirely of the sun and recycled matter," Mr. Roberts said. One "gimmick" he uses to show the children how this is so, is to ask them to open and close their fists very slowly, and to ask them what enables to do that. The answer is the sun, because it provides the energy, and "people are bottled energy," he said.

"That's the feeling I want to get into the kids, that they're a part of it all," he added.

The centre has its headquarters in a rather rustic log cabin near the swimming pool at the conservation area. The day's excursion, or half-day, in the case of smaller children, begins in the cabin, but the children spend most of their time outdoors. The centre is equipped with film and slide projectors and other audio-visual aids to assist with instruction.

"An education centre doesn't have to be a palace. A lot of groups have big buildings, all decorated, and with a room each devoted to different subjects," Mr. Roberts said. "All I need is a place to get out of the rain, warm enough to talk comfortably. I like to get out there, that's where it's at."

The education centre will be moving, some time in the next year, Mr. Roberts said, to the former Vaughan farm on the 9th Line at 27 Sideroad. The centre itself will be operating out of the old horse barn on the property, he said.

"I'd like to have more space," Mr. Roberts said. "For a while after the centre was set up here, I'd meet the kids at the gate, and show them around the area."

POND STUDY
The centre has a number of ponds, all of them but pond



George Roberts led a group of grade two students from St. Peter's Separate School in Orangeville on a walk through the Terra Cotta Conservation Area last Thursday. Mr. Roberts is the education officer for the Credit Valley Conservation

Authority's Outdoor Education Centre. He and Sheila Beecham guide children through the park on day-long excursions into the outdoors. (Herald photo by Lori Taylor)

study operating throughout the school year. Children play a form of blindman's bluff, when they lead other blindfolded children around. Wearing blindfolds encourages them to use their other senses, Mr. Roberts said.

One of the most popular of the programs offered by the centre is the micro-trails, he said. The children are given 10 metres of string and 10 fluorescent painted popsicle sticks to be used as trail markers. They get down on their hands and knees on the

ground, and look for tiny things of interest. Each time they find something, they put a trail marker beside it, and fasten the string around it, thereby marking off a trail in miniature.

"It opens their eyes, and they find lots of interesting things," Mr. Roberts said. "I remember once they found one of the biggest millipedes I'd ever seen. It was about as long as my thumb."

Children come from all over to the centre. They come from Mississauga, Brampton,

Orangeville, Clarkson, Amaranth, Halton Hills and Grand River, to name a few. The fee is \$1 a day per student and 50 cents for half a day. Mr. Roberts said they try to have one adult for every ten children.

"Most of the children want to come back after they've been here once," he said. Some of the children are well-informed about nature and ecology, others less so, Mr. Roberts said. Some teachers are more outdoors-oriented than others, and their students

will usually have more knowledge about these things, he said. Some of the children who don't get out into the country often, or who have never been outside the city before, are a little nervous, Mr. Roberts said.

FOX BITE?
"Some of them have a few questions as to whether foxes will come out of the woods and bite them, but it's not a great fear," he said. "They do have the idea that wild animals will bite them. I tell them that in

groups we make so much noise the animals will run the opposite way."

"Most kids are familiar with wild areas," he added. "I'd love to have them for a week. But I think even with the little exposure they get here, they probably have a different idea about wild areas when they leave. For example, when we do a pond study, most kids would never have dreamed that there is so much living in a pond."

Mr. Roberts used to work for

Bell Canada before taking on the job of education officer for the CVCA. He was president of the Bruce Trail Association for a time, and was "a nut on conservation along the trail."

Mr. Roberts is a member of the British Natural Trust and the Ontario Federation of Naturalists, among other groups, and reads extensively about wildlife, ecology and conservation.

"Every time I read, I get some extra point to teach the kids," he said.

"When you get involved in hiking, you get involved in natural things, and I feel very fortunate to have gotten this job," he said. "It's something I dreamed about."

In addition to his work as education officer, Mr. Roberts is also an advisor on all CVCA trails.

Mrs. Beecham started working for the centre fairly recently, after answering an advertisement in the newspaper. She had been a teacher at one time, and she wanted to go back to teaching again, but she wasn't sure she wanted to teach in a classroom setting. Then the ad came along, "and I've always loved to ski, and I enjoy the outdoors."

OLDER CHILDREN
Mr. Roberts said he talks to the older children about the conservator society, touching on energy, composting and other conservation programs.

"I think I do get a bit preachy on the conservator society," he said.

"I don't think there's enough emphasis on outdoors education," Mr. Roberts said. "There's more emphasis on it now than there was, and interest in the outdoors is increasing, but it's still a small percentage of the people. You take a cross-section of the people in Toronto, for example, and not many of them are outdoors-oriented."

Mr. Roberts said he estimates there will be 5,000 children going through the education centre this year if the Peel teachers strike ends soon, but not many of them are from Halton Hills. He said children from Holy Cross, Limehouse and Glen Williams schools visit the centre, but not many more. He said he would like to encourage teachers in Halton Hills to bring their students out for a visit.

Ballinafad's past comes alive for Historical Society members

By MAGGIE HANNAH
Herald staff writer

Events connected with school days in Blue Mountain School, threshing bees, famous Ballinafad residents and early days in the community were among the anecdotes told to those attending the Evening Historical Society meeting Monday in Ballinafad Community Hall.

Old atlases of Halton and Wellington counties, newspaper clippings, old pictures, a history of Ballinafad's United Church, and accounts of community history written by the late Beatrice Hills supplemented facts and stories told by Fred and Willa Shortill, Mrs. Archie McEnery, Donna Robbins, Bud Snow, and John Cole concerning their early days in the Ballinafad community.

Mr. Shortill said that the name Ballinafad was brought to the area by early Irish settlers and is taken from a place in southern Ireland near Tipperary.

OWNED FARM

The first white child born in Erin Township was a daughter of a Mr. Rozell born in 1820. He owned the farm on the north-west corner of the Seventh Line and the Halton Hills-Erin Township boundary. He was also the person who donated the land for the first cemetery, school church and community hall to Ballinafad.

Although Blue Mountain School south of the village on the Seventh Line and Peacock School north of the village were the seats of learning for area residents in recent times the original school was a log structure built on the cemetery corner probably around 1830. It was intended as the village school and served everyone regardless of which side of the township line they lived on.

Donna Robbins, nee Whiteside, read family letters telling how Robert Whiteside donated land on his property to the community for a school. This Blue Mountain school was built on a site south of the village on the Seventh Line probably around 1850. Mrs. Robbins said Luena Campbell told her, her father attended Blue Mountain school when it was on a different site from its present location on the DeKleer farm. One member of the audience said the present school was supposed to have been built around 1871 although there is no record to substantiate this.

Mrs. Robbins said a member of the Whiteside family who was born in 1858 first attended the school at about the age of 10 shortly after it was built. Thus Blue Mountain must have been built around 1868. She understood this to be the second school near that site.

EDUCATIONAL FACILITY

Mrs. Robbins said that John Whiteside, an Irish immigrant, applied to Lord Elgin in 1819 for a grant of 100 acres on Lot 31, Concession Six. His nephew Robert, also from Ireland, applied for a grant of 200 acres on Lot 30, Concession Seven in 1826. Later he applied for and received the last 200 acres of clergy reserve on Lot 31, Concession Seven for the price of 50 cents per acre. The money had to be used towards an educational facility for the area and thus Blue Mountain School was built.

Land grants were awarded on three grounds, Mrs. Robbins said. Soldiers received land in lieu of pay. Land could be granted to a farmer who worked it for two years or a man could get it if he had a sponsor.

Mrs. Archie McEnery said that Wesley Hills, a former Ballinafad native and a cousin of local historian Beatrice Hills, was the mayor of Toronto around the turn of the century. Mr. Hills received his education in Peacock School in Erin Township.

Another area resident who became prominent after he left the community was Bishop Warren, an uncle of Robert Warren. He was made a bishop as a result of his missionary work in India and was buried in Ballinafad cemetery at his request. The grave is covered by a plaque.

Mrs. Jesse McEnery said that a group from India had visited the cemetery to hold a memorial service for Bishop Warren and had invited pupils from Peacock school to attend the service. She was teaching in the school at the time.

carried that name.

John Cole said that his father was caretaker of Blue Mountain school at one point. One day he went to start the fires in his father's place and decided that rather than hitch the horse to a vehicle he'd ride it bare back and save time. Since it was a miserable, wet day he decided to put his horse in the school woodshed so it would be dry to ride home. The horse, however, balked at entering the building. He finally won the battle of wills by backing it into the shed.

Mr. Cole said that Blue Mountain school had an iron rod running the length of the structure "probably as a brace". This rod made plenty of noise when struck with stones and pitching stones at it to set it ringing was one of the students' favourite pranks to pull on all new teachers.

Mr. Cole said there was also a baseball league of sorts organized in the area for four or five years when he was a young man. Teams from Terra Cotta, Limehouse, Bannockburn, and up the Eighth Line (the Mountaineers) belonged to the league as well as Ballinafad. Teams played two games a week, one at home and one away from home. A fairly good crowd turned up for these games he said. Ballinafad and Terra Cotta were fairly evenly matched and always provided a good game.

HOTEL BURNED

One of Ballinafad's hotels burned down when he was a child of about four, Mr. Cole said. He remembers it as being a large two storey structure with a shed for horses at one side. There was an upper storey to the shed and dances were held up there.

One Sunday morning his father went for a walk through their fields and was intrigued by the sight of this chimney sticking up in the air all by itself. The hotel had burned down during the night so that only the chimney remained yet the family had slept through the whole thing since there was no telephone or other form of easy communication to alert them to what was happening.

Bud Snow said he began custom threshing with his father when he was about 15. Every housewife tried to outdo her neighbours in preparing meals for the

threshing crew and as a result the men were always well fed.

In the days when they used a steam engine to thresh Mr. Snow said they slept in farmer's homes during the week and he figures he has slept in 39 area homes as a result. Since they returned home for weekends he said he also remembers leaving home at 2 a.m. on a Monday morning to arrive at the farmer's barn in time to set up and begin threshing at 7 a.m.

LARGE TANK

In the days of the steam engine the thresher had a large tank which he took from farm to farm with him which must be filled with water to supply the engine. Once he remembers threshing in Ballinafad when a bet was made that Matt Shortill's team of oxen could haul the tank full of water out of the creek better than a team of horses.

Unfortunately the oxen's split hooves just seemed to sink in the mud and they couldn't move the tank.

"I don't know who was more upset," Mr. Snow joked, "Mr. Shortill because his team weren't as good as he thought they were or my father because he had to unhook the steam engine and take it down to the creek to get the water tank."

Mr. Snow said his father was involved in a couple of near misses with fire during the 40 years or so he did custom threshing.

Once while he was threshing at Appleyards below Silvercreek a hired man noticed a ball of flame blow out of the separator into the straw stack outside the barn. The man jumped out of the mow onto the separator, ran out the blower, caught the ball of straw and carried it over the stack before it had time to cause serious trouble. His father then stopped the machine and made a thorough search for the cause of the fire. He found an empty match box cover in the machine. It did no damage until the straw reached the blower he said and had the man not seen it the entire barn and threshing machine too would probably have been burned.

COAL OIL

Another man struck what he thought was a stone in a sheaf one time and threw it down to be examined before it went through the separator. When it was opened it turned out to be a jar of coal oil and a box of matches, Mr. Snow said.



KEEPING TIME
Heather DeBoer of Acton was this month's watch winner in the McDonald's coloring contest. Presenting the watch to the winner is Robla Switzer. (Herald photo)