

SCHOOLS

Bringing history alive

Students take on roles as archeologists during 'artifact detectives' unit

Third-graders at Cape Horn-Skye Elementary had a hands-on opportunity to explore area history recently.

They participated in the "artifact detectives," program, a new curriculum developed by their teacher, Lucia Willeman.

Students not only learned about early life in the Northwest, but were allowed to take on the role of an archeologist as they brushed, washed, measured, discussed and categorized local artifacts.

The project was supported through a Teaching American History (TAH) grant, administered by Carol Boyden, federal projects director for the Washougal School District, and by the Clark County Historical Museum.

"TAH grants over the past six years have allowed us to work with teachers from Evergreen, Ridgefield and Washougal to study primary sources and to make history come alive for students," Boyden said. "Teachers from all three districts have worked with the museum to develop these kits from elementary, middle and high school levels. This was only one part of the TAH grant."

Materials studied by the students were gathered in 2004 during the construction of the Vancouver Convention Center, which was built in one of the oldest parts of the city. Early during the project, it was learned that the site

contained a wealth of historical artifacts associated with the 19th and early 20th century. Applied Archaeological Research, Inc., a company specializing in archaeology based in Portland, Ore., was hired by the developers to study the remains.

"At first, the archeologists tried hard to document and map everything, but that soon became impossible," Willeman said. "They simply had to dig and put everything in boxes, uncleaned and uncategorized." There were 65 historic features identified and approximately 90,000 artifacts collected dating from 1870 to 1920. Only about half of the items found were processed.

Since then, the Clark County Historical Museum has used these unprocessed artifacts to develop several teaching kits, available for teachers to check out.

Willeman developed, wrote and is now piloting this unit focused on third-grade social studies core standards using these historic pieces. Other similar history kit units for other grade levels were written by local teachers.

"When I was designing this unit, I was excited to incorporate a variety of academic skills to explore an idea," Willeman said. "In this case, we used math, writing, reading, research, public speaking, art and high level questioning. Our class has been working for three weeks to develop an understanding of needs and wants, and how those change over the years as people's culture changes."

The class used photos, reprinted mail order catalogues from 1895 to 1910,

letters written from that era, and other items to build this understanding of what life was like for Vancouver residents during that time.

The students were introduced to working with artifacts by historic archeologist Jessica Hale from Applied Archaeological Research, Inc. She explained to the students how to handle, clean, categorize and store the artifacts so the museum can have them available for others to study.

"This is my fourth year as a mentor to teachers from southwest Washington and I have had so much fun helping them put together their curriculums," Hale said. "The best part is coming into the classroom and getting to spend one-on-one time with these kids. They have so many good questions and have an overall eagerness to learn more about archaeology, which makes my job so much fun."

Hale explained that she works to not only teach the kids the basics of archaeology, but give them a taste of what an archaeologist does on a daily basis.

This is done by incorporating a real archaeological collection into their learning.

"The collection comes to them dirty, messy and unorganized, just as if they were excavating it from the ground," she said. "This allows the kids to go through the process of cleaning, sorting and cross mending pieces back together. Some were lucky enough to identify trademarks and date the artifacts, while others used the scientific process to understand what an ar-



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Cape Horn-Skye Elementary third-graders Megan West and Kylie Bowen wash a turn-of-the-century cup as they learn more about the role of archeologists.

tifact might be used for. I was really impressed by their intellectual capabilities. I hope after my visit I have recruited a few archeologists into the profession."

The students enjoyed their foray into archeological research.

"I really liked cleaning the dirty stuff," said Allie Reyes-Cruz. "It was fun to clean the dust and rust away and make it look like new."

Conner Esteb's favorite aspect was scrubbing items clean to see what they would have looked like when they were first used.

"You have to take your time to do it right," he said.

"This is fun, but it is also hard work."

Willeman plans to make a few changes to the lesson and the resulting course information will be available for teachers throughout Clark County to check out from the museum.

"We are the only class from anywhere that is doing this activity," she said. "It's exciting because our Cape kids are the pilots for this particular kit. The project was invaluable in bringing history to life for these students."

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