

Hiking trail becomes outdoor classroom

I have a really good news kind of story, the tale of something very positive happening in Goderich.

Recently, radio, TV, newspapers and magazines have been pointing out the fact that the physical fitness of many of young people is in a woeful state. They chide us that kids spend too much time sitting on their posteriors in front of the TV or computers and they spend the time outdoors running, climbing, exploring compared with kids in earlier times. They don't walk enough—they get driven anywhere, even when they could have walked. Junk food is too popular, kids are too heavy. And on and on the sad tales go.

However, at Robertson School, they are doing something about it. Last Friday (a glorious day, the kind that makes us yearn for Autumn) shortly after 8 o'clock in the morn-

Trail Talk

by Wendy Hoernig

I met a group of 36 Grade 5 and 6 students, their teacher Melanie Thiel, several parents and two dogs (on leashes) at the access point to the Morris Tract. They were keen and full of energy and enthusiasm. This was Miss Thiel's Outers' Club, and their excitement wasn't just because they were getting some time off from book-work that day. In their previous expeditions, which were bike outings, they went out in their own free time after school. The first time, the 25 student cyclists covered 10 kilometres, the second time went

12 km—both times traveling on the Goderich to Auburn Rail Trail (GART). Other teachers from Robertson School and some parents also pedaled along as back-up helpers.

This time, though, they had been able to carve out some free time from school, and with lots of water, juice, snacks and hearty lunches in their backpacks, were eager to head out. They trudged back to their school just in time to head home for the weekend, with not so much energy anymore, but still some enthusiasm remaining. And pride! Yes, lots of pride in their accomplishment. They had covered about 13 kilometres, but this was quite a different story from 13 km of side-walk or even Rail-Trail walking. At least half of the route was rugged trail, leading up and down steep hills, over rocks and roots, and sometimes, thanks to our



Students from Robertson School in Goderich take part in an outdoor education event with a fall hike. (Wendy Hoernig photo)

well-watered year, it caused folks to pick their way from grassy hummock to root to rock to grass to get around boggy areas. Or, as some dismayed mothers will confirm, after dealing with their kid's post hike trousers and footwear, some just clomped gleefully right through the muck. After all, kids will be kids!

Just because they weren't in school, it doesn't mean they weren't learning. There were many incidental lessons that day: tree identification, geological tidbits, group dynamics and responsibilities, and outdoor safety. Some lessons were certainly harder than others. Some learned that dry feet are more comfortable than wet or muddy ones; that it is worthwhile carrying along bandaids or "moleskin" just in case; that if you need to attend to a problem, you do it as soon as the group stops for a rest, not just as it starts to head out again; that it's a good idea not to eat all your snacks at the beginning; and that you can survive having to take your washroom break in the woods behind some trees.

Probably the best lesson though, was that they undertook a difficult challenge, carried on despite some uncomfortable conditions, and they did it. There are probably some kids who were there they were

because they did! Moreover, I suspect that many students will be encouraging their families to explore smaller sections of that route together. They have experienced how super it feels to be outdoors in that environment, and will want to share both that feeling and their discoveries.

Miss Thiel and her group have planned more hiking and bike trips, snow-shoeing, cross-country skiing, and maybe even the experience of building a quinzee (if Old Man Winter does his duty.) Here is a group of children who are building the foundation for an active, healthy life, who are beginning to learn that life is more rewarding when one includes physical activity in one's lifestyle. We may not have to lecture them about the fact that active people are physically and mentally healthier, live longer, are happier, healthier, and recover faster when they do get sick. They may be on the way to proving this to themselves from firsthand experience.

There may well be other good news stories like this in Huron County, involving different age groups. I would be delighted to hear about them so that they can be included in this column. They are yet another way to inspire folks to get out and enjoy our very beautiful environment. Even just reading about the positive communities

helps us all feel better. So, do pass them on!

Frontenac Provincial Park

Recently Heinz and I attended the Hike Ontario Annual Meeting held in Kingston, and while there, took part in a day hike in Frontenac Provincial Park. It was a terrific hike! If you have any reason to visit in that region, I encourage you to find an excuse to find this park, there is vast scope for hiking, camping and canoeing experiences of various lengths. It is very beautiful country and the trails were well marked and maintained.

We are eager to go there again. For information contact Frontenac Provincial Park, Box 11, Sydenham, Ont., K0H 2T0, 613-376-3489.

Meanwhile, although many of the colourful leaves have fallen, there is still lots of potential for great hiking (Remember that those wonderful shuffly layers of leaves cover rocks and holes, so stick to the trails and walk with a bit more care than when the trails are bare.) Happy hiking!

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