

Seneca Students Travel Back in Time With Oral History Project

By *B. Marie Jarreau-Danner*

Many Seneca residents remember the one room, yellow, “cheese-box” houses now melted into the rich history of their town.

In the heyday of logging operations in Seneca, some employees temporarily lived in the small square structures resembling big blocks of cheese. Others lived in boxcars turned into bunkhouses.

A few of those have been incorporated into houses still in use in Seneca today.

Seneca students know how those shelters fit into the development of their town, and much more.

As if traveling back in time, the students are learning about Seneca’s logging and railroad past, and about the historic lives and experiences of their ancestors and other residents.

Using a continuing series of interviews, research tools, artwork and artifacts, the entire school has been involved in the oral history project for more than five years.

Seneca head teacher Adele Cerny said the idea came in 2001 from Seneca teacher Judith Beaudet Reed. With help from other school and community members, the project has grown to include publication of a book, “Seneca School Oral History Project,” development of two large murals, a detailed history time line, historical site maps and a museum collection.

A three-dimensional model of Seneca, including a train that hauled logs to Hines, is under construction.

Eighteen former and present Seneca residents have been interviewed. Their stories are archived in the publication.

“We created eight interview teams, where younger students were paired with older students,”

said Judith. “Even the first-graders were encouraged to take notes. Later, they all worked together with their notes and memories of the conversations. Teachers helped them blend the information together.”

Through research and interviews students gathered information about life in Seneca that focused on the presence of the Edward Hines Western Pine Company.

“We wanted to learn more about the history of Seneca when it was a logging town in the 1930s through 1950s,” student Clay Hughet explained during a recent presentation.

More than 100 people attended the debut of the publication on November 1. Students spoke to visitors about future goals of the project, and presented the artifact collection, the time line and the large murals.

Colorful details of historic events and prominent locations around Seneca are showcased in the murals. While artist-in-residence Carol Poppenga guided development and construction of the large art pieces, the students determined which scenes would be depicted.

“One of the challenges for her was that every student had to be included in the work from the sketching phase to applying the painting,” said Judith.

One of the mural scenes illustrates

“a man running as fast as he can from his cheese-box house to the outhouse in his red long-johns because it was so-o-o cold,” second-grader Jessica Carter explained with a giggle.

Youngsters were intrigued to hear interviewees speak about the record minus-54 degrees Fahrenheit recorded in Seneca in February 1933, making the small rural town the coldest spot in Oregon.

Students learned about jobs that defined Seneca’s logging era: chain pullers, kiln men, planers, trimmers. They also learned about others who provided support for the overall operations: store owners, hotel keepers, teachers, homemakers, machinists and health care providers.

Sue Pynes Woodford Beals lived in Seneca in the 1930s and 40s. She told the students her family lived in a cheese-box house before she was born. They used home remedies for health care when it was impractical to get to doctors in Burns or John Day. For intermediate ailments local nurse Carine Williams was usually called.

Leonard Trafton lived in Seneca from 1947 to 1969. He and his family lived in a house that had been a cheese-box house. Later, it was renovated and enlarged. Leonard also told the students about nurse Williams. He said Dr. John Weir traveled from Burns to Seneca once each week to take care of cuts, bone breaks and ailments more difficult than could be handled by the nurse or home remedies.

The students learned how the community shared what it had, and how cohesively residents worked and played together.

Students heard stories about logging, gandy dancers—railroad repair crews—cold weather, rabbit hunting in deep snow, Seneca money, black woolies, mill wags, jammers, and trading with the Umatilla and Paiute Indians and





Above, Seneca School Ambassadors present historical and technical information about the latest mural that depicts scenes of Seneca's history. Opposite page, Rheanna Cartner offers an original sketch of Seneca's former nurse Carine Williams for inclusion in the mural. Photo courtesy of Seneca School.

experiencing their culture.

They learned of the Seneca swimming pool and found remnants of it during their archaeological tours.

John Saunders told interviewers about being a young man in the area. He said they collected all the animal hides they could find to trade with the Native Americans, who would come down from Pendleton and Umatilla "in a mile-long line with travois."

The hides were traded for gloves with gauntlets and fancy beadwork, and for work gloves.

Deer were plentiful, Saunders said, but elk was scarce.

An excerpt from the book explains what happens when a couple of boys get into trouble:

One time he was with his cousins and

they came upon an Indian grave. Not knowing any better, they took copper buckets and Indian beads home. His aunt got all over them and chased them back to the grave. They reburied the items.

Through this project, generations of Seneca students are getting the sense of the economic changes that have altered their town.

Remembering his logging days in Seneca, Leo (Duce) Charles McKrola told of one tree logged in the Murderers Creek area that measured 18,000 board feet and eight feet in diameter—"Enough to build an entire house," he told students.

The loss of that industry brought much change to Seneca.

Historians Jack Southworth, Dennis Smith and Martin Morisette,

and the U.S. Forest Service, are among those who provided support for the school and the oral history project.

Morisette's Web site, www.co-greengold.com, is devoted to Oregon's logging history and hosts Seneca School's Web page.

As they travel back in time through conversations with older residents, students have been able to share in the memories of Seneca's past. Through their project, they also are preserving those historical accounts for future generations. ■

For more information about the project or to purchase Seneca School Oral History Project contact the Seneca School at (541) 542-2542.