

In Oak Park Heights, campers get one-room-schoolhouse learning of a century ago

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Stepping back in time 100 years is cool for, like, five days, but Abby Fry wouldn't want to do it permanently.

"Life was harder 100 years ago because they didn't have cars," said Abby, one of 22 students selected to participate in a special camp this week at McKean School, a historic one-room schoolhouse at Boutwells Landing in Oak Park Heights. "You had to have a wagon."

Dressed in a bonnet, white blouse, jean skirt and sneakers, Abby, 7 1/2 and a soon-to-be second-grader at Rocky Branch Elementary School in River Falls, Wis., looked like a modern-day Laura Ingalls Wilder on Monday.

"They had to harvest. They didn't have grocery stores," she said. "Now, we only have to go to the grocery store to get food. Then, you had to milk the cows and churn the butter, and you had to buy an ox, and you had to have gold and coins. It was really, really hard."

Abby and other campers learned what life was like in 1910 from Marian Carlson, 87, a Boutwells resident

who taught in Afton's one-room schoolhouse from 1941 to 1943 and later taught for 38 years at Washington and Stonebridge elementary schools in Stillwater.

Students attending a one-room schoolhouse learned by osmosis, Carlson said. "You overheard what was going on in the next grade, and so by the time you got there, you had a pretty good idea what it was about," she said.

"Early in the fall and the spring, the older students would stay home and help with the planting and the harvest. Some of them

had a couple of miles to walk to get to school and they had chores to do, carrying wood for Mom and helping with the animals."

McKean School, which was originally in West Lakeland Township, closed in 1940 and sat on a farm in Baytown Township for many years until it was brought to the Boutwells Landing site in 2006. Volunteers from the senior housing complex spent two years restoring the schoolhouse, building a bell tower and securing furnishings and decorations.

One of the decorations is a photo of Carlson's mother that hangs near the school's pot-bellied stove; Emma Nelson taught at McKean School from 1911 to 1913.

Back before Thermoses and microwaves, teachers in one-room schoolhouses would put a pan of water on the wood-burning stove during the wintertime, Carlson said. "Then the children would put a jelly glass of soup or mashed potatoes or something like that ... in there about recess time to warm, and at a lunchtime, they would have a hot lunch," she said.

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At camp this week, students from first to ninth grade started each morning by filing into the white clapboard school through the two front doors — boys on the right and girls on the left — when Carlson rang the bell.

First, they recited the Pledge of Allegiance, sang "God Bless America" and worked on memorizing the school's fight song ("District 19, hats off to thee ...").

After the children were settled, Carlson began teaching arithmetic. The younger children were asked to write numbers 1 through 100 on their slates at their desks; the older kids worked on word problems.

"They did math first thing in the morning ... when they were fresh," Carlson explained. "Because, otherwise, later on, they would get sleepy. They got up early. They had to milk cows, get firewood. They had all kinds of chores to do. ..."

In addition to arithmetic, the students studied history, geography, citizenship, temperance, spelling, English and penmanship. They were lined up according to age at antique wooden desks featuring holes for inkwells.

Carlson pointed out a sign on the wall spelling out the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

"That is the way you are acting," Carlson said. "You are very kind. We're very pleased with the way you treat each other. That's very, very nice."

Katherine LeClair, 13, persuaded her best friend, Kaija Olson, 13, to attend the camp with her. LeClair said her grandparents, Dave and Mary Spencer, live at Boutwells Landing and helped restore the

schoolhouse.

Katherine, who will be a ninth-grader at Stillwater Junior High School this fall, loves Laura Ingalls Wilder, author of the popular "Little House" novels and other books. Camp has given her a taste for "what life was like for Laura," she said. "I really like it."

"It's really cool how they had all the classes together," said Kaija, who wore a blue dress, braids and Converse tennis shoes. "You would think it would be loud, but it's not."

Katherine said she thought it would have been fun to live 100 years ago. "They had so many different things to do," she said. "They didn't have TV and other things to distract them."

Kaija, however, was quick to point out some of the disadvantages of pioneer life: "Pumping water all the time would not be fun. And you couldn't wear shorts — we'd have to wear dresses all the time and we would be so hot."

"But we could learn how to milk a cow and churn butter and to do things that most people these days don't know how to do," Katherine said.

Countered Kaija: "I think it would be fun for maybe a week. But I'd like to have more playtime. Think about it: There wouldn't be dishwashers."

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