

Hands-On Reading: The Pioneer Book Club

by Carol Elizabeth Jones

In 2007, the Rockbridge Regional Library began an association with Boxerwood Nature Center and Woodland Garden in Rockbridge County, Virginia. Our goal was to create programs that encouraged children to read, while also getting them outdoors to enjoy nature. Bonnie Bernstein and Hannah Klein from Boxerwood helped us to create the Survival Book Club for fifth through eighth graders. The book club featured novels about kids surviving in the wilderness, and gave the kids the opportunity to spend time outdoors learning survival skills. The culmination of the experience was a campout in May, using a shelter we built for ourselves in the woods.

The growth we saw in the Survival Book Club participants was very gratifying. Members included both home-schoolers and public-schoolers who were not necessarily acquainted when we began. Through the book discussions and hands-on activities, the club members formed a real community, showing respect and patience for one another and working together to complete projects. One or two members tended to take over discussions early on, but gradually learned to make space for others. One member's accomplishment was reading a whole book—something he had struggled with previously. When we saw how much the youngsters had grown from the combination of reading, talking, and doing, we wanted to try

another hands-on book club with a fresh theme for 2008–09. We settled on the Pioneer Book Club, with books about frontier life and activities and experiences related to life as a pioneer.

During the summer of 2008, I did some related research as part of my MLIS work at the University of Alabama. I wanted some

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background on what makes pre-teens and young teens want to read. Linda Teran Strommen and Barbara Fowles Mates used surveys and interviews in their 2004 study of children's reading habits. Strommen and Mates were interested in identifying older children and teens who were passionate about reading and identifying what influences the readers had in common. They were not looking for excellent readers, but for young teens who chose to read just because they enjoyed it.

The researchers identified the students who loved to read and interviewed them about the influences that helped to make them avid readers. They found that the

most important factor was that the students talked about books with their families. Most said that their parents had read to them when they were little and that once they became independent readers, their parents continued to talk about books with them. Students reported that family members passed around books, newspapers, and magazine articles they enjoyed. Having access to plenty of books and regular trips to the library were also part of the family reading influence.

The non-readers in the study bore out how important support for middle grade reading can be. One student said, "Maybe I gave up reading because I phased out of *Goosebumps* books." Another said, "I had a time when I liked the Beverly Cleary books...that stopped when I was about 10." The support of family during the transitional time from young chapter books to something more advanced appears to be very important. Although the library can never take the place of family, gatherings where young teens talk about books and where books are easily available can be a positive influence on the transitional reader.

Stacy Creel, who teaches at St. John's University in Queens, New York, asked graduate students to survey teens about their reading

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The Pioneer Book Club used extensive hands-on experiences to engage young readers.

habits. The students approached young teens to ask them to answer a three-five minute survey. Forty-four percent of the 127 participants said they read more than once a week. Twenty-two percent said they read at least once a week. Those who said they did not read at all gave reasons such as “boring,” or “not interested,” or “prefer T.V.”

My impression of the research was that we were onto something with the hands-on book club. The books we chose are fun to read, the discussion helps get participants excited about reading, and the projects are entertaining and engaging. In fact, the hands-on activities are the hub of the program because they mirror what the characters in the books are doing, and the experiences bring the books to life. Excited about our Pioneer theme,

we planned our every-other-week schedule and assembled a collection of books from which the kids could read. We also created an interactive website for club members to keep in touch between our twice-monthly meetings.

We recruited in the public schools and among home-schoolers, so we had a nicely varied group of twelve members. We usually did the book-talking early in the session after a few minutes of socializing. The participants had a snack while we talked and the atmosphere was warm and relaxed. After the first two sessions, children who started out shy were eager to talk about what they were reading.

We selected some twenty books, which we had on hand in paperback. Readers borrowed books and brought them back as they finished, so we were all reading differ-

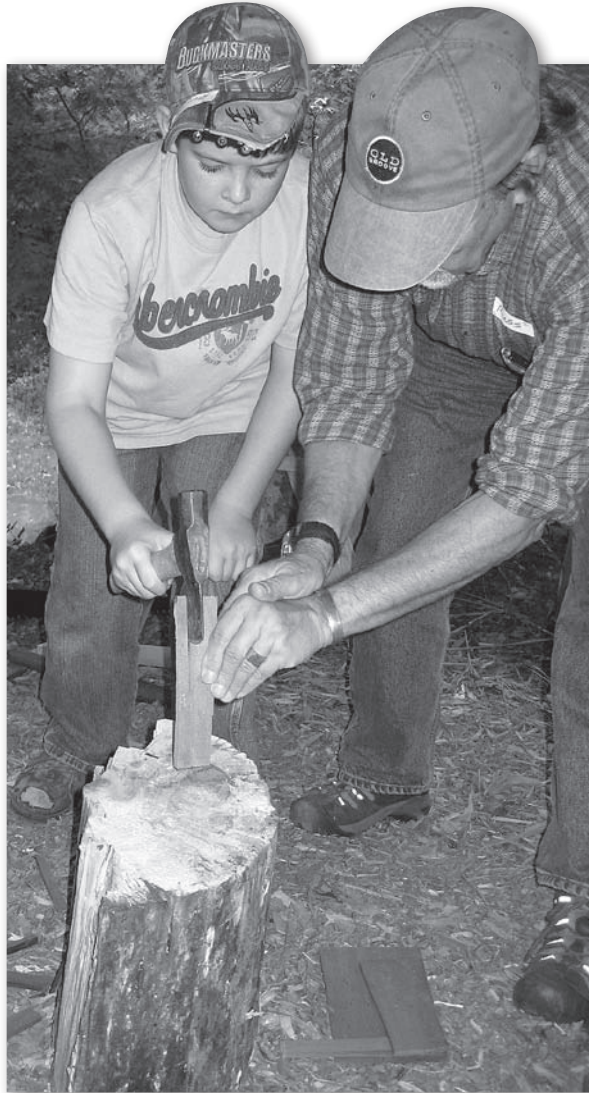
ent books at different times. Sometimes we would pose a particular questions for our book discussions such as “What role did food play in the lives of the characters in your book?” Sometimes the kids gave mini-reviews of what they were reading and advised whether they would recommend the book to others in the club.

For our projects, we wanted to come as close as we could to authentic pioneer activities. We used antique cross-cut saws, hatchets and axes to cut and split wood, and an old-time cider press to make fresh cider. A local hunter taught the kids how to use a bow and arrow and fire a flintlock rifle. The kids followed pioneer recipes to prepare and cook a meal over a fire, and made old-fashioned lye soap and beeswax candles. All of these activities were potentially hazard-

ous, but the kids learned to be extremely careful and responsible. Working together on these projects helped us to create a real community, which became dear to all of us.

The interactive website for the club has been slow to take off, but we are starting to get the hang of it. Broadband is not accessible to everyone here, so participation is somewhat limited to those who have high speed Internet. The site was easy to create using Google tools, and is an excellent way to display schedules, contact information, and photos.

If I were to choose one word to describe the mood during our Pioneer Book Club meetings, it would be “happy.” We meet at a beautiful place (Boxerwood) and after a day at school, the club members can relax and talk, and get outside to try new things. They love learning new—and dangerous—things, and take great pleasure in simple tasks such as flipping hoecakes over the fire. Although some youngsters did not mix well early on, they have learned how to be good working partners. Some of this year’s homeschoolers started out extremely shy, but are now mix-



Club members learned skills required for life on the frontier, even some skills with inherent hazards.

ing well and taking the lead in planning future sessions. Our goals in starting the Pioneer Book Club were to keep kids reading, to create a social atmosphere where they could talk about books, and to provide hands-on activities to bring books to life. While we had planned to end our meetings in March, the kids have mounted a rather strident campaign to keep the club going until summer. This kind of enthusiasm from middle-school students is definitely worth paying attention to.

Bibliography

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