

A Century of Veterans:

Researching History Through Our Local Cemetery

Lindsey B. Downey

Picture this: fifty eager third graders, nine anxious pre-service teachers, two remarkable third grade teachers, and one energetic college professor, all undertaking a multi-layered, local history project to be accomplished in a matter of ten weeks. Wow!

The project of making history come alive started when we visited our local cemetery. Prior to our visit, we had received special permission to enter the Otterbein Cemetery mausoleum to learn about 21 U.S. military veterans interred there. Many Westerville, Ohio, citizens are unaware of these memorials. We initiated this project because we thought that the memory of these soldiers and the conflicts in which they served deserved some attention. These veterans represented a century of U.S. history; they fought in the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, and World War II. Some of them died in combat, while others returned to their community and lived into old age. As teachers and students began to research the local and national history that spanned the lives of these bold men, the stories of the veterans' lives began to come to light.

Each pre-service teacher worked with a group of five or six third graders. Some major events in U.S. history from 1850 to 1950 were touched upon, from the Underground Railroad to the Great Depression. The eyes of each student began to open as they got the chance to see the world of Westerville as they had never seen it before.

It is vital for young students to see how the lives of the veterans connect to their

own lives, so teachers started at “home,” encouraging students to ask questions as if they interviewing a veteran in person. In this way, we helped students get in touch with a world now removed by decades.

Steps of the Project

The success of this project came from planning and drawing on the questions from the students as guides to teaching. The steps we took in this project were as follows:

SETTING GOALS: We wanted “history to come alive” for the students, to research local history, to make connections to national and world historical events, and (at the end) to celebrate our work and the lives of these men in a meaningful way.

FINDING LOCAL HISTORY RESOURCES: Westerville, Ohio, is rich with history. You might not think this is true of your community, but digging into the history where you live will probably reveal some surprises and suggest some great ideas for student activities. We asked local historians from the Westerville Library to guide us in our journey. On several field trips to the library, they pointed out key books and periodicals, and also provided some insights that were not to be found in books. A visit to our local cemetery gave our project a hands-on anchor for the children when thinking about the past.¹

USING RICH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND PRIMARY SOURCES: A read-aloud trade book, a history textbook, an old newspaper clipping, or an old photograph—these were all sources that

provided insights into the lives of the veterans. Students learned what life was like for children in, say, 1880—how they played, went to school, got medical care, worked, and lived with their families—by researching books in the local library, by reading information on websites, and by looking at pictures in books.²

ALLOWING STUDENT VOICES: We took the students to the local library to do some preliminary research, assigned them tasks to do at home to further their knowledge, then let the students hone in on a topic from their time period “to become an expert on.” When we, the pre-service teachers, could not be there to teach the students, the two third-grade teachers took charge and continued teaching about the defining events that have made up our history. It was a team effort. The students then represented their learning by writing a response about their topic and illustrating it on a scrapbook page. Also, in small groups, students (with teacher assistance) wrote eulogies about the veterans from our community. The students then read their eulogies at a ceremony at the Otterbein Cemetery Mausoleum on Veterans Day, 2007.

MAKING HISTORY PERSONAL: We wanted to help the students make the pictures and words of their history books come alive. The students were able to look into personal lives of local heroes and develop knowledge and respect for a period of history. This knowledge and respect will carry on with them as they continue to learn about the history that has shaped the lives we live today. The students were also made aware that the

Tribute ceremony marks end of local veterans

■ *Third-graders write eulogies of the 15 war veterans entombed in the Otterbein Cemetery Mausoleum.*

By LISA AURAND

Suburban News Publications

In the misty morning, Emerson Elementary third graders recited history to those present: their parents, teachers and an honor guard from AmVets Post 89.

They were honoring Westerville veterans who are buried in the building behind the group, in Otterbein Mausoleum.

The ceremony at 10 a.m. Tuesday, Nov. 13 was a Veterans Day memorial service arranged by their teachers and Otterbein education professor Karen Robinson as an end to a hands-on history project done in tandem with Otterbein students.

Over the past few months, the Emerson students met with a group of Otterbein education students periodically over two months, researching 15 veterans buried in the mausoleum.

The project was a win-win collaboration, Robinson said.

"The Otterbein students get real experience working with an 8-year-old," she said. "They begin to look at sources for historical learning — newspapers, photographs ... my students (went) to the local history museum and the library. They (looked) for information to bring to the children's attention."

The goal was also to "empower (Emerson students) to do some speculation and some wondering. Our main objective is to have them begin to understand how does one learn about Westerville and the people who live here."

A lot of questions were asked at Tuesday's ceremony: "Why did you fight?" "Did you want to fight?" "Did you use the telephone in Westerville?" "What kind of weapons did you use?" students wondered aloud.

There were facts, too, ones they'd pieced together from obituaries and newspaper stories, and all their research will be preserved.

"I liked making the pages for the scrapbook," said Emerson student Kaleigh Meeks, whose group researched World War I veteran Clarence A. McCleod.

In addition to their eulogies, the students also as-

sembled what they'd learned onto the pages of a colorful scrapbook, which they presented to Beth Weinhardt, the Westerville Public Library local history coordinator.

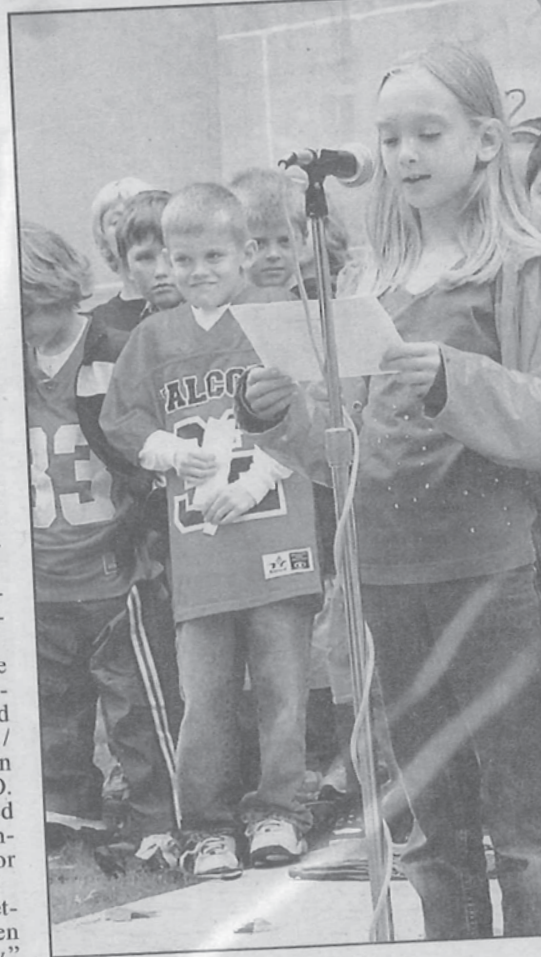
"It's exciting and somewhat ambitious" to ask the students to write eulogies, Robinson said in September at the start of the project. "I hope that we end up with some eulogies that have the children's voices in them rather than just the dry facts."

And Tuesday, these students stood in the cemetery, reading aloud details from the veteran's lives they discovered through their research.

Some groups recited poetry they had written themselves.

"Injury / kept going / he was brave / fought in Spanish-American War and World War I / heaven / peace," one group read in unison about Oscar O. Koepfel, who was awarded the U.S. Army Distinguished Service Cross for his bravery under fire.

"There's something pretty wonderful about children learning about history," Robinson said to the audience Tuesday, before the honor guard fired a rifle volley in the veterans' memory.



Emerson third-grader Kaleigh Meeks reads a eulogy for Oscar O. Koepfel, who fought in the World War I and died in the Philippines. She and other students read eulogies for Westerville war veterans entombed in the Otterbein Mausoleum at a Veterans Day ceremony held Tuesday, Nov. 13.

actions they portray can have a big effect on the world in years to come.

DISPLAYING STUDENT WORK: Students wrote brief items (from one paragraph to page-long responses) about their topic. They also created pages to go in a scrapbook that represented the life of their veteran(s) as well as national events that occurred in that era. The students also shared eulogies that they had written at a ceremony.

Primary Sources, Primary Questions

We introduced primary resources to the students and used them to guide us in the

goal of making history something more than just words in a book. We wanted this study of history to be an authentic experience that students would remember. Eyes widened and questions began to arise as the students looked at obituaries of their veterans.

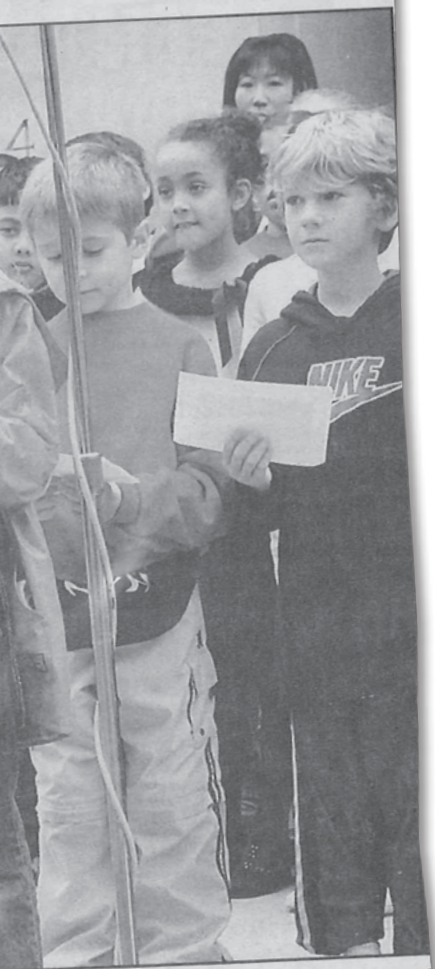
Based on the obituaries, students composed "questions for our veterans" and then used these questions to compose in eulogies. The eulogies demonstrated how children view the world and connect with history as well as how they might have engaged in conversations with the veterans if they were still with us today. The questions represented the students' developmental level; they were

about things such as food and pets: "Did you have to eat food with worms in the war? What school did you go to? Did you use the telephone in Westerville as a kid? Did you have any pets? What kinds of toys did you play with as a kid?"

These questions allowed students to explore the ways that they were like the veterans they were studying, as they found some commonalities in childhood of 1850 and 2007. Our deceased veterans could not answer these questions for us, of course. Teachers and librarians provided some stories and pictures about how the lives of children have changed in America over the decades.

The students' research led to pages

rans lesson



SNP photo by Lisa Aurand
ogy for Westerville veteran Clarence A. Mc-
1942. Kaleigh and other Emerson students
ed in the Otterbein Cemetery Mausoleum at

created for a scrapbook that we would eventually give to the Westerville Library's local history museum. The students wrote about the wars and events that made up their veterans' life:

The Westerville Trolley came in 1895. The trolleys were even called pneumonia cars. The price to go on the trolley was \$1.50. The trolley only allowed women and children, but men could jump on back.

I saw a uniform used in WWI. The uniform was green and brown and had a triangular shape badge. I learned that the WWI soldiers ate

gross stew. Other foods they ate had worms in it!

Beginning at 4:40 PM and continuing until WWI was over, C. W. Ackerson would sound taps on his bugle. Every person would stop working and listen. They were honoring all the people that were at war. They would stand up and pray for all the soldiers out fighting.

During the Civil War, the Underground Railroad was important. It started in 1554 and it protected many slaves. If the window of a house had a candle in it, the house was safe, and if there was a quilt in the window, slaves were already there. The Underground Railroad was based off of the North Star.

Inspired to Write

The process of learning about history taught us all a lesson on bravery, what it is to work for the good of family, how to appreciate the lives we live today, and how to find joy in the simplicity that life can hold for each of us. We decided to hold a ceremony in honor of the veterans on Veterans' Day. Students shared their words and their respect with Westerville citizens by reading the eulogies they had written. Also, the students dedicated the scrapbook that summarized what they had learned to the veterans memorialized at the cemetery. The ceremony was made complete with a 21-gun salute and the playing of Taps, as performed by our local VFW chapter. In honor of the deceased veterans, the teachers and students had written together:

You were young, you were strong
Giving all you had to give,
Some say you gave all.
You were courageous, you were bold
Giving your life and whole heart
To the red, white and blue.
You had unshakeable courage
Giving your time to an army of one.
Humbly you marched,
Humbly you fought

Defending our country—
Priority over all.
Through rain and tears,
You withstood all pain and fear.
We thank you endlessly,
We call you our soldiers, our heroes.

In addition, we also wrote a grant to have a granite plaque made with each of the veterans' names on it. The plaque will be placed outside of the Otterbein Cemetery mausoleum as a form of dedication and appreciation for these men. Through the process, students realized that, in novelist Victor Hugo's words, "No person was ever honored for what he received. Honor has been the reward for what he gave."

We all walked away from that Veterans' Day ceremony a little bit taller, but a little more humble as well. As it says in the scrapbook, "Our thanks alone are not enough for all you did for us, but we hope that our never-ending remembrance of each and every one of you may live on in your hearts forever." 🌟

Notes

1. The mausoleum is a free-standing building in the back of the Otterbein Cemetery. Each marble face piece is inscribed with the person's name, birth/death, and possibly brief information about their lives, including military service.
2. Louis Prang, *Prang's Civil War Pictures: The Complete Battle Chromos of Louis Prang* (New York: Fordham University Press: New York, 2001); P. Gardner and Jamie Wu Liu, *Multimedia Collections: Civil War* (Huntington Beach, CA: Teacher Created Materials, 2001); Pamela D. Edwards, *Barefoot: Escape on the Underground Railroad* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).

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