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TOP STORY

Annual River Appreciation Day Teaches Sixth Graders About The 'Mighty Mo'

By Riva Sharples For The Plain Talk 16 hrs ago



The 12th Annual River Appreciation Day was enjoyed by approximately 150 sixth graders from Vermillion, Irene-Wakonda, and Centerville on Wednesday, Sept. 12. The event featured seven river-related “camps” for the middle schoolers, a boat race, music, a drum circle, and more. This year, the day also included a camp for high school students, which resulted in the project “WE River,” now on display in Gallery 110 of the Warren M. Lee Center for the Performing Arts at USD. Dozens of volunteers, USD students, and financial sponsors helped make the day possible. Pictured are sixth graders and high school students who attended the camp, along with helpers and others who helped make the day possible.

Courtesy Photo

It was a beautiful fall day on the banks of the Missouri River last Wednesday, Sept. 12, when more than 150 sixth graders spent half a day at Clay County Park learning about the mighty waterway that flows through South Dakota.

During the event, the 12th annual “River Appreciation Day,” a day organized and run by area volunteers, students from Vermillion, Centerville, and Irene-Wakonda rotated through various stations, from art and poetry to nature camp and boat-making, learning about the “Mighty Mo” as they went.

“Outdoor education is vital to students connecting words and concepts into functional knowledge,” said Grace Freeman, one of the founders of River Appreciation Day. “It offers experiential learning, which deepens connections to the lessons. ... I think outdoor ed is as important as service learning for youth. Since we all have different learning styles, a dynamic learning environment is essential. It helps you feel connected and adds worth to our lives.”

After 12 years of putting on the camp, Freeman and other volunteers have perfected the event, offering a fun and engaging format for students. The entire experience lasts about three hours, and volunteers offer a morning session and a second afternoon session to avoid overcrowding at either. This year, volunteers added a “combined camp” in between the morning and afternoon sessions during which students attending both time slots were able to enjoy music and fellowship together.

The students, sprawled out on blankets set along the shore of the Missouri River, listened to river songs by fiddler Owen DeJong, guitarist Nick Schwebach, and vocalist Laurie Brown while enjoying sack lunches they had brought along. The joint camp ended with a group photograph and observing Native American drumming led by Jerome Kills Small.

During the morning and afternoon camps, local naturalist and author Jerry Wilson spoke briefly about the river, providing many facts: The Missouri River is America’s longest river at 2,315 miles in length. The stretch of river that runs past Clay County is particularly special because it is the only free-flowing section of the river that is left.

“This area of the river here is still natural. It’s undeveloped. It’s wild,” Wilson told the students. “We are really lucky to live here by the river and to be able to enjoy it. ... It’s a real asset, and I hope you appreciate it.”

Wilson surprised students by informing them that while they were sitting there on the banks of the Missouri River, they were also visiting a national park, the Missouri National Recreational River, which encompasses a 100-mile stretch along the river,

including Clay County.

“We hope this day will help you see that you are an essential part of this world, and nature is worth protecting,” said Wilson. “It’s our responsibility to protect it. Someday, it will be a place for your children to visit.”

During the morning and afternoon sessions, students were divided into small groups. Then, each group rotated through seven different stations or “camps,” including Poetry Camp with poet Norma Wilson; Art Camp with artist and educator Janet Beeman; Nature Camp with herbalist and Master Gardener Sarah Wells; River Camp with Dugan Smith and Teresa Mentzer of the National Park Service; Frog Camp with biologist Jacob Kerby and the USD Biology Club; Boat & Safety Camp with boat-builder and river enthusiast Harry Freeman; and Aquifer Camp with Geologist Sarah Chadima.

At “Poetry Camp,” students sat at picnic tables overlooking the Missouri River, where they wrote Haiku poetry about the river. Nearby, students used charcoal to sketch their view of the beautiful Missouri River at “Art Camp.”

Across the parking lot at “Boat & Safety Camp,” Freeman taught students about canoes and navigating the river and then helped student teams create their own miniature boats that they would “race” on the river at the end of the program.

At “Aquifer Camp,” Chadima taught students all about river water, while “River Camp” gave students the opportunity to walk through the Missouri National Recreational River’s “mobile visitor center” and learn how the Missouri River was formed.

Sarah Wells, manager of the Union County Conservation District, had animal furs, tracks, and skulls for students to study at “Nature Camp.” Meanwhile, at “Frog Camp,” students got up close and personal with different frogs and toads.

A boat race -- during which the small boats the students had crafted were placed in the river -- was the final event of each session. Students stood on the banks of the Missouri River, watching with anticipation as their boats, just tiny specks in the wide Missouri, floated quickly by. The first three boats to cross the “finish line” were scooped up and awards were presented to the lucky boat creators.

River Appreciation Day was founded in 2005 by the late Nancy Carlsen, her sister Cindy Kirkeby and Grace Freeman as an event for fifth graders. Eventually, the event was changed to serve sixth graders, which it has done since then. Today, the event is heavily supported by volunteers, who serve as presenters and helpers, and is planned by a River Appreciation Day Committee.

This year, USD Sustainability Professor Meghan Jarchow brought 31 college students to help guide the middle schoolers during the day. There were also 36 Vermillion high school students on hand from Joseph Delvaux's classes to participate in the event. These students served as helpers for part of the day and were also able to participate in a camp designed just for them.

“What’s neat is that a lot of these students remember attending River Day when they were in sixth grade,” said Kirkeby of the high school students. “They are eager to come and help out and to have their own camp as well.”

The high school students were led by artist Amy Fill and Aquatic Ecologist Jeff Wesner. During their time on the river, the students worked on a collaborative book installation called WE River. They also had the opportunity to explore the diversity of aquatic insects that live in and along the Missouri.

The project created by Vermillion High School students during the 2018 River Day can be seen in Galley 110 in the Warren M. Lee Center for Fine Arts at USD. The project features drawings and puppets and “celebrates the Missouri River and the diversity of artistic talent in the Clay County area,” according to a press release from USD. The exhibit is on display Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., now through October 12.

Sponsors of River Day 2018 included: the Living River Group of the Sierra Club, the South Dakota Water Festival Fund, USD School of Education and Center for Academic Engagement, the Vermillion Area Arts Council, the Vermillion Basin Water Development District, Walmart, the Clay County Park Association, the National Park Service, the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish, and Parks Outdoor Campus, American Rivers, the USD Basic Biomedical Sciences, the WH Over Museum, the Freeman family, and Print Source.