



SEVEN OAKS
SCHOOL DIVISION
community begins here

Community

B E G I N S H E R E

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A Historical Sight

Governor Semple students take a journey through time

On June 19, 2007, a group of people gathered on the grounds of Governor Semple School to watch a battle take place – a battle originally fought almost 200 years ago.

This was the Battle of Seven Oaks: a significant moment in Manitoba history when a band of Métis clashed with a group of men from the Hudson's Bay Company. But this time, the battle was a re-enactment by Lori Hartung's Grade 4 class from Governor Semple School, the culmination of an exciting project that got the students thinking about history... and how there is more than one side to every story.

The History of the Project

The project began when the Seven Oaks Monument Refurbishment Committee (which includes Winnipeg MLA Gord McIntosh) was looking at updating the Seven Oaks Monument at Rupertsland Avenue and Main Street. The goal was to update the Monument (the oldest in Western Canada) to provide a more balanced view of the Battle. Heritage consultants Wendy Molnar of Cultural Visions Consulting and Murray Peterson of Peterson's Projects were brought on board and it was they who began working with Lori Hartung to develop a lesson plan for her students.

"It was such a perfect fit," recalls Wendy Molnar. "The event nearly happened in their backyards and their

school was named after one of the leaders involved in the Battle!"

It didn't take much to get Mrs. Hartung's students excited about the project... and their excitement was contagious.

Hartung, who admits that she knew very little about the Battle herself before starting the project, notes, "We weren't just giving them all the answers or saying, 'This is what we're doing.' It was an investigative approach for all of us and I think sometimes the passion for learning comes out more when a teacher is learning along with the students."

Where to Start?

The key question students had to answer was, "what happened?"

Sam, one of Mrs. Hartung's students, put it simply: "The monument had only one side [the Red river Settlers] and it wasn't fair, because the Métis didn't have their side on it."

To get both sides of the story, the students had to become historians and researchers. A trip to the Manitoba Museum helped them develop their skills as "Museum Detectives," learning



Mrs. Hartung and her students pose with the Seven Oaks Monument at Rupertsland and Main

to ask questions and extrapolate answers based on their observations.

Students also got to hear several different accounts of the battle. For example, storyteller-historians Grant Anderson and Lawrie Barkwell from the Manitoba Métis Federation shared the Métis perspective of the Battle. Students listened attentively to their guests and asked questions to help get a better sense of the lives of the Métis people.

One student named Josh remembers, "I learned how the Métis Nation started in Manitoba."

Representatives from the Manitoba Historical Society and the Seven Oaks Historical Society also discussed the connections between the historic battle and the community today.

"I learned about the school's name – Governor Semple," says Connor who

learned how the man his school was named after was in charge of the Red River Settlement... and often cited as the one responsible for the battle.

"I learned about street names and researching," adds Sydney, who can likely tell you where Pritchard Avenue originated.

But the students went beyond listening to guest speakers. They dove in and conducted their own research. They went online to find information that they shared and debated over. They visited the St. Boniface Museum to learn more about the Hudson's Bay Company and Métis heritage, which allowed some students to learn more about their own heritage.

Students also got to visit Manitoba's Provincial Archives where they got a guided tour, which included a rare glimpse into the vault where some of the most valuable materials from the Hudson's Bay Company Archives are kept.

"We told the students how special it was to be invited into the vault," explains Murray Peterson. "When the archivist took them into the viewing room and then pulled the blinds so that they could see into the vault, all the students held their breath. They were so excited to see the old books and journals! It was a special moment."

Mrs. Hartung agrees. "Going to the Archives and seeing the actual written documents of John Pritchard describing what happened at that time... that was a very significant moment for all the students."

With the findings they had uncovered and the opinions they had formed, the students began to pour their knowledge onto paper in the form of their re-enactment play.

The Re-Enactment

After three months of painstaking research, discussion and writing, Mrs. Hartung's 19 students (along with some additional volunteers to represent the Battle's numbers) took to the grounds of Governor Semple School and re-enacted the legendary Battle of Seven Oaks for an audience of parents, peers, school staff, community leaders and even Manitoba's Honourable Minister of Education, Citizenship and Youth, Peter Bjornson.

It was an experience that neither the students nor the spectators will likely ever forget.

"There was actually one scene in the play where everyone felt in that moment that they were really looking at what had happened," recalls Hartung. "It was really kind of eerie when you saw all the bodies on the battlefield."

Wendy Molnar agrees. "When the 'Métis' galloped across the schoolyard to the 'swamp' and confronted Governor Semple, the audience gasped," she remembers. "I think we could all hear the hooves of the horses galloping across the prairie."



The Métis wait for their cue

Murray Peterson also noted how people were surprised at just how much the students really knew about the events.

"We had spies in the audience who asked questions of the kids after the re-enactment was finished," explains Peterson. "They were amazed at how much information the kids actually knew about the event... how they were able to logically explain what is a very complex historical event in simple, understandable terms."

Governor Semple Principal Gary Jackson put it this way: "They were living the research they had done. They had created such a powerful experience that for the people who were there, it was June 19, 1816."

Since then, the students – now in grade 5 – have done their re-enactment once more. As they effortlessly reprised their roles, they also retained the many other lessons the project had taught them: lessons about history, research, community and about how the story you hear isn't always the whole story.

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