

Room 202 on the Road: The Dane County Cultural Tour

by Mark Wagler and Ruth Olson

Watching well diggers pull a core sample, listening to a Hmong shaman describe traditional healing techniques, observing a butcher making bratwurst, interviewing a Hardanger fiddle maker—these are some of the assignments in Room 202 at Randall School. This 4th/5th grade classroom in Madison, Wisconsin, is embarking on an ambitious plan to create a cultural tour of Dane County, expanding their sense of home in the center of Madison to include many places in their county.

The Dane County Cultural Tour is the pilot for a larger statewide project, “Cultural Maps, Cultural Tours,” run through the Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures (CSUMC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “Cultural Maps, Cultural Tours” provides the services of professional folklorists and Web designers to help classrooms in Wisconsin document local culture in their own communities and allow viewers to take virtual cultural tours of the state.

Room 202 is studying Dane County through guest speakers, readings, Web research, email correspondence, multiple one-day outings in Madison, and a four-day trip to help students gain a deeper knowledge of Wisconsin culture in the towns and rural areas outside Madison. Primary focus is on occupation and contemporary expressive culture (storytelling, music, foodways, crafts, recreation, and celebrations), with attention to history, geography, and land use.

Students helped shape the focus of the project, expressing particular interest in exploring arts and culture associated with fishing, food traditions, architecture, music, farming, yard art, and needlework. They are using various media—writing, drawing, photography, video, and audio—and planning and selecting materials together for the “Cultural Maps, Cultural Tours” digital archive, <http://csumc.wisc.edu/cmct/index.htm>, and a tour booklet.

Folklorist Anne Pryor helps a student interview a vendor at the Dane County Farmers’ Market in Madison, Wisconsin, as part of the extensive preparation for countywide fieldwork.

What makes an elaborate project like this possible? Collaboration. Folklorists Anne Pryor of the Wisconsin Arts Board and Ruth Olson of CSUMC helped classroom teacher Mark Wagler with preliminary fieldwork to find good people to meet and places to stop during the tour and will accompany students on the county tour. CSUMC Web designers are helping students plan Web pages about Dane County cultures. Parents wrote a grant for partial project support and are cooking the meals for the trip. A number will be coming along. Parents offered other skills as well—a professional photographer is helping the students learn photography; an experienced editor will guide booklet production.

Students have prepared by studying map-reading and photography as well as histories of sites or cultural traditions they will visit. Importantly, they conducted fieldwork in their own families and communities. Students raised money for the project by creating cultural potholders—symbols of their own family cultures. So far they have documented the Dane County Farmers’ Market and Hmong culture at the Bayview Center, an apartment complex with many Hmong residents. Within Madison, additional trips will focus on Mexican American, African American, and Cambodian cultures. These one-day outings give students documenta-

tion practice before the big trip.

The county tour will take students to rural areas largely settled in the 19th century by immigrants from Germany, Norway, the British Isles, and other European countries. Spending three nights together as a group will help them build and experience community in the classroom, among families, and with other people in the county. Earlier this year Room 202 sent out letters inviting other 4th graders to participate by tracking the students’ progress through the Web site, suggesting places to visit, or inviting Room 202 to their community and visiting a cultural event with them. For example, they will meet a 4th grade class in the small town of Deerfield, where they’ll spend the night in a Lutheran church.

The Dane County Cultural Tour is meant to help the children gain a clear picture of cultures beyond their own community. Students at Randall School, like other urban students, think of themselves as residents of the city of Madison rather than Dane County. Traveling around the county will help them see how Madison, and even the larger towns, are sprawling into rural areas. Without learning to know the cultural richness of rural areas, students have less opportunity to develop a land ethic that respects cultural as well as natural ecologies. Perhaps this project will stimulate more family outings to nearby areas—and help students to “see” local culture instead of just passing through.

Mark Wagler teaches a joint 4th/5th grade class at Madison’s Randall School. His wife, Ruth Olson, is Associate Director of the Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures.



Photo by Mark Wagler