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# **A History Exercise in a Program of Outdoor Education**

In recent years, more and more schools have discovered the outdoors as a medium for education. Some teachers have made use of the lakes, valleys and mountains for specific academic instruction in the realm of science and biology; others have attempted to create a more humanistic experience, using the challenge of the outdoors to build initiative and character. Whatever the aims, most educators would agree that outdoor education is a positive trend. The article that follows focuses particularly on one individual outdoor exercise that dealt with history.

## **operation outdoors — some background**

The idea for an outdoor project emerged during the 1971 school year at John Grant High School, Lachine, P.Q. when the head of the Physical Education Department and the author began to discuss the limitations of the school day and the potential of a twenty-four hour a day session with students. Soon a committee of four teachers was set up, and a target date planned for the following June. A site was selected (Camp Chapleau of the Old Brewery Mission) and costs were estimated, but only after the committee attended Queen's University for a winter workshop directed by a former head of the Minnesota Outward Bound School, did a joint point of view become clearly formulated. The committee then resolved to provide, above all, an experience incorporating challenge and adventure, character growth and group cooperation. Specific learning exercises were to be second-

ary, though those which were included would be well planned and directed rather than left to chance.

Soon June arrived, and *Operation Outdoors I* became a reality. The five full days spent at Camp Chapleau went by without mishap. Canoe trips, bicycle rides, hikes and other adventure-exercises were included within the schedule so that when the time came to leave for home, nobody, staff included, wanted to go. The following September, the group met once again and *Operation Outdoors II* (1973) was born. Additional activities were planned, though the purpose remained the same — to create a challenging experience for the students.

The belief of the committee was that any subject would be made more relevant and interesting if a field experience were used. Since history was my speciality, I considered that *Operation Outdoors 1973* could provide an excellent opportunity for an historical exercise since an attempt could be made to take something familiar to the students and to show them living historical relationships. My own personal involvement with history began when I was a youngster curious about the “Massacre of Lachine” (the area in which I was raised), and about “Grandfather Lane,” who brought the first bicycle to Montreal and rode it through the streets of the city during a holiday created especially for that purpose (according to Mother). Perhaps, if the history of the camp area were revealed to the students in ways in which they could understand and enjoy, some really meaningful appreciation of history would be engendered.

It might be noted that advocates of using the outdoors to provide meaningful education can consider themselves in good company. The roots of the movement, like so many other things, can be traced back to the Greeks. Though the Spartans may have gone a little too far in providing challenge to learn survival techniques, other Greeks believed in the worth of “experience” in education. For example, Aristotle noted:

... and experience seems pretty much like science and art, but really science and art come to men through experience.<sup>1</sup>

In more recent times, while many schools of educational thought tend to claim Jean Jacques Rousseau as their patron, outdoor educators most probably have the right to claim him as their own. They see the merit in Rousseau’s “natural man” who learns geography, mathematics, music and all he really needs from the world around him. Other theoreticians have endorsed this view. Thus, early in the 19th Century, Heinrich Pestalozzi, famous for his “object lessons,” wrote, “The first tutor is nature and her tuition begins from the

moment that the child's senses are opened to the impressions of the surrounding world.”<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Froebel also believed in the education of the “whole man” with emphasis on nature and people's relationship with the environment. For example, he considered:

To be in touch with nature in the open air is of the greatest importance to the young. The effect is to ennoble and strengthen and to give life a higher significance. So, little walks and rambles are of high value as means of education and instruction.<sup>3</sup>

Since Froebel's time, other educators have emphasized the “whole man” and the outdoors — witness Cecil Reddie's private school at Abbotsholme, his disciple, Herman Lietz at Ilseburg, and the “Wandering Birds” movement in Germany, as well as Baden Powell and the Boy Scouts. Perhaps the most significant influence on the contemporary outdoor education movement is that of Kurt Hahn. In 1934, Hahn, a Jew fleeing Nazi Germany, founded “Gordonstoun” at Morayshire on the forbidding coast of Scotland, where the emphasis was on the development of judgement rather than on the accumulation of knowledge. Based on this model, “Outward Bound” schools may now be found from the slopes of Kilimanjaro to the forests of Lake Superior. The rationale for Outward Bound is best summed up by the head of the North Carolina Outward Bound School when he writes:

By using nature and an increasingly difficult series of challenges to confront the individual with unknown stress situations, we seek to heighten each person's sense of self-confidence, compassion for others, and respect and dignity for mankind. We provide the circumstances that allow an individual to gain a better understanding of his or her own resources and their outer limits.<sup>4</sup>

*Operation Outdoors* as a whole drew on this wealth of historical thought and experience, blending the cognitive, physical and affective elements while adding a modern touch. It held out a promise of adventure worthy of “Mission Impossible” — and that is what we called our learning game, our outdoor exercise in local history.

## **mission impossible — an historical game**

No doubt the main objective behind our “Mission Impossible” was an affective one. Students have perhaps always associated “history” with school courses and textbooks, not with the flesh and blood of

earlier human beings. But now we were confronted with the question: "Could a simulation game based on a popular television series tie their own experience, the place where they 'were at,' to historical field work and analysis?" It was worth a try — one had little to lose but everything to gain.

"Mission Impossible" followed the T.V. pattern of achieving certain objectives (against impossible odds?). Students were brought into the recreation hall where the briefing began. No longer were they students of John Grant High School. They were, as of that moment, military agents who had been parachuted behind "enemy" lines. Their task was to obtain as much "intelligence" as possible to be used in a coming "invasion." Within minutes, the group had been divided into brigades, each with a brigade captain, and official *sealed* orders were distributed. These order cards formed the basis of the historical inquiry exercise. Led by a counsellor, a student reconnaissance patrol sped off down the camp road on bikes to investigate the abandoned mica mine shaft. Another group attempted to locate a field from a map and aerial photograph (furnished by our Air Force, naturally), while yet another brigade searched out the camp custodian to interview him about the area's earlier days. They were aided by still photos of the Camp Chapleau brochures taken during the 1920's and 1930's, as well as a 16 mm. film used for publicity *circa* 1949. Others made camp landmark comparisons using old maps of the region, while at least one other brigade investigated the economic background by examining some land records, an abandoned railway thoroughfare (now a hiking trail), as well as an abandoned, burnt-out farm.

The classified order cards (top secret) were formal and structured in their outlined questions and instructions, not only as a means to capture the atmosphere of a military operation, but also to ensure that specific information could later be contributed to the entire group's "debriefing." One student from the group was chosen Brigade Captain, and it was his or her job to summarize all the intelligence brought in by the patrols. A tape recorder was made available, and a deadline of twenty-four hours was set to complete the report.

*Mission Impossible* became *Mission Accomplished*, and I was surprised at the amount of information received and the quality of thinking which took place. The primary purpose of the whole activity — to instill a positive feeling for historical inquiry — seemed to have been met. In fact, one group of students insisted on returning to the farm during their "quiet hour" after lunch in order to carry the investigation further. Certainly, the students had fun that morning and they had also learned.

## outcomes of the exercise

Perhaps the most important historical concept that became associated with *Mission Impossible* was that of change and continuity between present and past. The seventies are times of rapid social change, especially in the urban areas. Unfortunately for the local historian, change is so rapid in the cities that a bulldozer and paving machine will impose their will before an individual knows what is happening. In rural areas, however, traces and ruins of the past tend to remain for Nature to hide through rust and wild brush. During the various activities of *Mission Impossible*, both staff and students came across constant reminders of the continuity between present and past. A concrete culvert dated from its year of construction (1926) was noticed by one boy while hiking along the abandoned railway bed. In the 1949 movie made for camp publicity, teen-age girls were pictured caring for young babies. One student remembered that her mother had been a counsellor at the camp in charge of babies — just about the time that film was made. To her astonishment, the girl thought she recognized her own mother smiling at the camera. Could this be an example of what Morris Cohen described when he wrote, “We cannot speak of any historic process unless there is a continuity, unless there are elements of identity between present and past.”<sup>5</sup>

*Mission Impossible* was also able to introduce the students to other types of historical evidence and media for understanding the past. Official land records from the County Court House in Lachute, Quebec were consulted to help discover the origins of both camp and abandoned railway. From the same source came copies of deeds of sale for the camp property as well as for the neighboring farm. The National Archives in Ottawa were able to supply census records of the township, while the Department of Mines and Surveys provided aerial photos of the region. The Old Brewery Mission cooperated by permitting the photographing of their early camp brochures dating from 1924, as well as allowing the use of the 1949 film mentioned above. These resources, however, could have as easily been used inside the class room. The difference was that then the materials would have remained untouched by experience. On location and actually needed to overcome a problem, the documents served a real function and bridged the gap between the fantasy of the classroom and the reality of the field experience. Moreover, students were able to cross-check some of their conclusions. The church graveyard in Montfort revealed names that also appeared in the land records. A search of the abandoned farm had turned up an old envelope addressed to “H. Barlow.” It was exciting to discover that, according to the land records, he was the purchaser of a piece of property in range 11, lot 16, in the year 1921.

In an article about local history, Robert Douch pointed out that perhaps its most important contribution is the opportunity it provides to experience the two main elements of historical study — the study of materials leading to an understanding of historical method, and the kindling of the historical imagination.<sup>8</sup> If it is true, then the kinds of data used in the “*Mission Impossible*” game can help form the raw material out of which history is written. A faded fuel bill or hardware store receipt can, in its own way, help the student recreate the past in terms much closer to his/her own. The mundane trash of an abandoned farm can also illustrate a modest sort of immortality that belongs to its former residents. These people, perhaps long dead, can be brought back to life through the finding of remnants of personal items they once cherished or used. Marc Bloch called such evidence the “tracks of history.”<sup>7</sup>

There are other concepts which the students explored. The “ability to judge duration” as Carl Gustavson puts it, usually only begins to appear around the time students turn twelve or thirteen.<sup>8</sup> When such events as they are able to “guestimate” are located on a time line, along with the dates of their own birth or time they began school, students can become more aware of judging themselves as parts of that living process of human growth that has emerged from the past, yet will inexorably project itself beyond one’s future lifetime.<sup>9</sup>

Collingwood’s prerequisite that a historian “rethink” the past before attempting to write about it might be brought into local perspective with *Mission Impossible*. For instance, to sit quietly (black flies willing) beside the crumbled ruins of a log cabin can create empathy for the past. The “Hermit’s Cottage” which the students visited on the opening day’s orientation hike provided such an opportunity. It was a dilapidated structure with tumbling log walls, but there were still traces of a home-made fish hatchery that had been made in the fast rushing stream nearby. What had happened to the cottage? Who had the “Hermit” been, and what had he attempted to do? The young people asked questions themselves, and they began to formulate hypotheses to provide their own answers. How did all these outcomes coincide with the expectations set for the regular history curriculum?

## the game and the syllabus

The History 210 Syllabus for secondary education in the Province of Quebec clearly justifies projects such as *Mission Impossible*. The stated objectives for this Grade VIII course are to teach about the multi-dimensional nature of human beings and the temporary nature

of human existence, as well as to initiate students into historical procedures such as research, analysis, the critical examination of documents, the establishment of historical facts, and their interpretation in order "to achieve an explicative view of history."<sup>10</sup> Few in-class projects are able to fulfill so many of these objectives as a well-planned exercise in outdoor education.

There is perhaps an even more important argument for using the outdoors and that is to move history teachers from the defensive position they have recently taken up in schools to one of positive confidence. If history teachers are to escape from the often beleaguered situations in which they seem to be teaching material that has little relevance, they must ensure that their classes do more than dispense information or develop skills. They must touch their students in a spiritual sense with the hand of the past. The effectiveness of outdoor education to achieve that goal cannot be overestimated. As Clifford Lord has written: "The materials are legion and of infinite variety; the possibilities are numberless; the horizons unlimited."<sup>11</sup>

## footnotes

1. Aristotle, "Art and Experience" in Margaret Gillett, ed., *Readings in the History of Education*, Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1969, p. 46.
2. Herman Krusi, *Pestalozzi: His Life, Work, and Influence*, New York: Wilson, Hinkle and Company, 1875, p. 155.
3. S. S. Fletcher, *Froebel's Chief Writings on Education*, London: Edward Arnold, 1912, p. 117.
4. Lou Gomolak, "Students Boost Themselves at Outward Bound," *Nation's Schools*, June 1973, pp. 46-48.
5. Morris R. Cohen, *The Meaning of Human History*, LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 1947, p. 63.
6. Robert Douch, "Local History," in Martin Ballard, ed., *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of History*, London: Temple Smith, 1970, p. 112.
7. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953, p. 545.
8. Carl G. Gustavson, *A Preface to History*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955, p. 14.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 2,3.
10. Government of Quebec, Ministry of Education, *Hand book 03, 1975-76*, Service général des communications du ministère de l'Éducation, 1975, p. 03-38.
11. Clifford Lord, *Teaching History with Community Resources*, New York: New York College Press, 1963, p. 82.