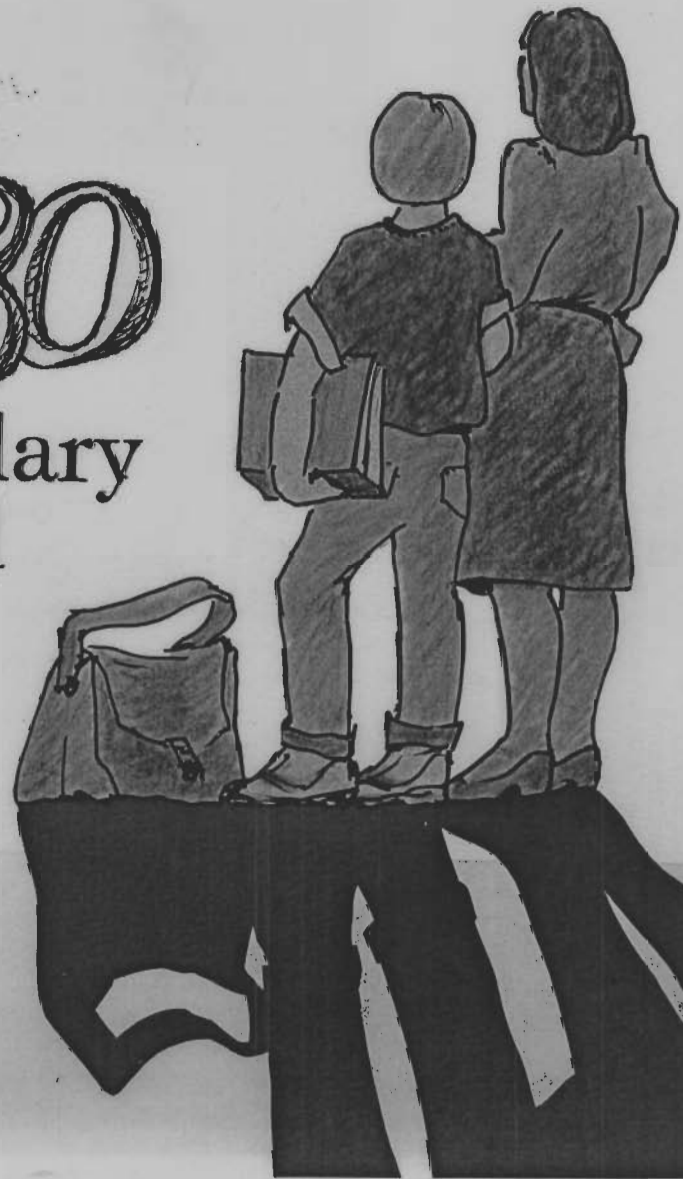


VISIONS OF TEACHING & LEARNING

80

Exemplary
Middle Level
Projects

John Arnold



LIVING HISTORY: THE GLEAM OF BAYONETS

Blue Mountain Middle School (Hendrick Hudson School District), P.O. Box 14,
Montrose, NY 10548 (914-737-7500)

Oscar Scherer, Principal

Years in operation: 20. Social Studies/Interdisciplinary, 7-8.

Joseph L. Ryan, originator, and all team teachers

As the sun reaches its zenith over Blue Mountain Middle School, the parking lot is transformed into a drill field of the 1860s. Troops (7th and 8th graders) in Union Blue and Confederate Grey form up to march and perform the manual of arms. Over the ranks of troops stream the regimental colors, which are carefully researched and created in Unified Arts. The officers and N.C.O.'s snap at the heels of the reluctant and unskillful, carefully mindful of their role. A system of merits and demerits based on behavior and attitude is used to establish rank, with its accompanying responsibilities.

This year-long living history project will culminate with a twenty-four hour slice of Civil War soldiers' lives, ending at a local historical site, Museum Village. The troops will march six and one-half miles, set up an authentic camp, and cook a soldier's meal. There will be a mock battle and military review for parents and friends, followed by a square dance with a sulter stock selling root beer purchased with "scrip." Soldiers are paid in "scrip" based on rank. Guard duty must be mounted for one hour tours throughout the night, followed by a "battle" the next morning which is filmed for our archives. The troops return to Blue Mountain Middle School having "seen the elephant", as Civil War veterans say.

This Civil War project is one of many Living History projects we have developed over the past 20 years at Blue Ridge. Our troops have been on Lexington Green at 5:30 a.m. for the 210th anniversary of "the shot heard round the world" in full American and British Revolutionary War uniforms. They have slogged through the rain and mud at Gettysburg with an eight-mile night march. They recreated the battle at the Railroad Cut and marched Pickett's Charge. Sounds of Hussians, French grenadiers, His Majesty's forces, and the Continental line have echoed through our campus. In researching our efforts, students have communicated with Buckingham Palace and the President of France.

We began with a team of teachers approach but soon evolved into a cross-curriculum project involving not only academics but art, music, and technology. No matter what the gender, race, or ability level of the students, the vast majority of the 100 or so who participate each year thoroughly enjoy and truly learn history from the project. This in large part explains why its creator was chosen as the first Outstanding Teacher of American History in the United States.

Our unique program has spawned a series of graduate courses for teachers. The College of New Rochelle (New Rochelle, NY) has pioneered courses with a Living History approach such as "Westward Ho," on a wagon train in Nebraska; "Saratoga," a battlefield study; "Williamsburg," in depth and behind the scenes; and "Military History," in cooperation with the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Seeing the need for Living History materials for trained teachers to use, the Rockland Teachers' Center in Stony Point, New York has created a Living History Repository. This repository includes ten tents, thirty toy muskets, a reproduction musket, cider press, spindle/wool cards and cast-iron cook ware. These materials are being increased as more teachers become interested in the program.

Blue Mountain Middle School continues its educational leadership in the area of Living History. The success of the program is due to the broad-based support it receives from students, teachers, administrators, and the community. The positive media coverage from television, newspapers, and professional journals has certainly helped.

If you are tired of being a two by four teacher (between the two covers of a book and the four walls of the classroom), give Living History a try. It's more than the gleam of bayonets.