

## THE BELOIT PROJECT

Editors' Note: Anthropologists, teachers and museum staff may find an applicable model in this report on an innovative anthropology teacher training institute, the Beloit College/Logan Museum Social Studies Project.

Elementary school students from the Wisconsin/Illinois stateline area are finding something new and different in their social studies this year. When second graders in Beloit, Wisconsin study North American Indians, they set aside their texts as their teacher shows them examples of teepee construction, students build their own model and then compare it with an actual teepee on display at a local museum, interpreting the symbolism of decorative motifs and analyzing the origins of materials used in its construction. Sixth graders at a Rockford, Illinois school studying early man visit a museum to examine its paleolithic collection in order to complete teacher-developed worksheets; some students sit by a terminal in front of the paleolithic exhibit, as the computer sends them off to examine artifacts in order to answer its questions. And fourth graders in a rural southeastern Wisconsin school compare Plains Indian saddles to those they are familiar with on their own farms, while they study the impact of the introduction of the horse on Plains Indian culture.

These and other projects are the result of the participation of elementary school teachers in a recent program at Beloit College in Beloit, Wisconsin that has helped to create a new and exciting role for anthropology and museum collections in local elementary education. Funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), a teacher institute in cultural anthropology for elementary educators was held at the Logan Museum of Anthropology on the Beloit College Campus. The aim of the intensive seminar was to familiarize educators with the collections of the Logan Museum, and to aid them in the design of new curricular materials which integrate Logan Museum

collections into the local social studies curriculum.

### Discovering a Need, Shaping a Resource

Although primarily a teaching museum for Beloit College undergraduates, the Logan Museum also saw area elementary and secondary school students as an important constituency who needed well-developed, structured museum programs rather than just guided tours. Educational outreach activities by the museum had been informal and uneven, since the Logan Museum has no museum education staff. In 1979, Jennifer Hope, a Beloit senior, funded by an NEH Youthgrant, constructed a unit of study for fourth graders on southern Wisconsin effigy moundbuilders. With the cooperation of local teachers, 500 students participated in the pilot project, which subsequently was incorporated into the regular curriculum.

The need for other such programs which could heighten the impact and significance of the museum as a community asset was addressed by a collaborative effort between the chair of the Beloit College anthropology department, the director of the Logan Museum and an assistant superintendent of the Beloit Public schools. The major problem with the expansion of museum-based programs was that the effigy moundbuilder program had depended on a small staff of informed and trained students who directly supervised fourth graders in the museum. Since the college could not assume enough students to staff any new programs, the collaborators realized that teachers would have to be trained to conduct any new programs. Accordingly, a teacher institute was planned and funding obtained for the summer of 1983. The institute syllabus was developed following a series of meetings with local school administrators, elementary teachers and

(continued on p.4)

and museum and college anthropologists.

For six weeks in June and July 1983, teachers spent three hours each weekday afternoon at the Logan Museum in a seminar led by five anthropologists. The institute provided an intensive course in cultural anthropology, covering a wide range of topics, but organized around three areas -- cultural ecology, symbolism, and social organization -- unified by the common theme of "human cultural values". Each of these perspectives was used as a context in which to interpret material culture and the group would regularly leave the classroom and move into the museum for demonstrations with actual exhibits and artifacts. Special sessions offered presentations on museum management and museum education techniques, and days were set aside for teachers to consult with staff members on their individual curriculum design projects and to work in the storage and cataloguing areas of the museum. At the close of the institute, each teacher submitted an essay based on seminar assignments as well as a written unit of study developed for their classroom. Each teacher received a stipend and graduate credit in education for their participation. Their new units of study are being implemented during the 1983-84 school year.

### Taking Some Risks

The institute staff concentrated on teaching anthropology, providing solid academic work for the teachers, and challenged them to devise effective materials through which they could "translate" that anthropology to their students using their pedagogical skills and their knowledge of their own social studies curriculum. Although an education professor and a museum educator consultant from the Milwaukee Public Museum provided stimulation and expertise in evaluating the quality of their "translation", the notion that anthropology experts and elementary educators could join their specialized skills in a productive way involved several risks.



One was simply the question of whether cultural anthropology could be made useful to teachers. All the anthropology staff operated from a kind of "blind faith" and "abstract loyalty" to the notion that of course cultural anthropology is relevant to just about everything! But to make specific connections with the content of a particular social studies curriculum in a limited amount of time had the staff a bit apprehensive. Our fear was also based on the fact that so few teachers had any background in anthropology. The staff was asking a group of neophytes not only to learn from scratch, but also to find new areas of application to their pedagogy.

But this turned out to be not such a risky proposition at all. The surprise for most of the staff -- and for many of the participants as well -- was the discovery of just how much anthropology was already part of the local curriculum, although not explicitly labelled in this way. "Culture", "culture change", "social organization", "symbols", "culture/environment relations", "status/role", "technology",

and a number of other concepts were already part of the elementary social studies curriculum. What the institute seminar provided was not so much an introduction to these concepts as a holistic framework (the theme of human cultural values) for the interpretation of new pedagogical materials (museum collections) which unified and organized what many teachers had otherwise considered separate topics. To a certain extent, then, the project did not introduce anthropology into the curriculum; rather, it identified and unified "covert" anthropology, making it overt and giving teachers some new tools with which they could make new connections in their teaching materials. More accurately, then, the institute strengthened the anthropology in the local curriculum.

Another concern, however, was a bit trickier. The museum's role was to provide teaching materials and to broaden its educational impact. The Beloit project proposed to make all the collections, including those in storage, available to participating teachers; but the museum staff was not uniformly excited about this proposition! The staff recognized that museums strive to achieve two sets of sometimes conflicting goals regarding their collections: preservation of the holdings in perpetuity and exposure of the holdings to the public for education and enjoyment. But they were sensitive to the fact that sometimes the stresses involved in the latter goal could work to the detriment of the former.

#### Teachers Using Artifacts

To address this problem, teachers were formally sensitized to the risks involved in maximizing access to the museum's collections through a rating scale, borrowed from a similar system at the Milwaukee Public Museum. With this scale, artifacts are classed from "extremely durable--#1" (a pecked-stone axehead, for instance) to "most fragile- #4" (for an older feather-covered basket). Using this scale, the curator designated articles that could be held by elementary school children (#1), artifacts that

should be held by the teacher while each child gently touches the surface (#2), items that could be handled by the teacher alone for general viewing (#3), and items that should be handled by museum staff (#4). Artifacts rated #1 through #3 would ordinarily be considered available for inclusion in "kits" which could be transported to the local school classroom, while #4 items would usually be restricted to use during visits to the museum. Once this system was adopted, the teachers were then instructed in the handling of different classes of materials or objects in a diverse ethnographic and archeological collection; for example, they learned not to rub any painted surface, to be aware of pendant fringes, to respect the limited flexibility of fibers, to understand the significance of worked stone cutting edges, and to anticipate the brittleness of dried skin drumheads. With pleasure and some sense of relief on the part of the museum staff, the teachers proved to be adept at anticipating most of the problems inherent in handling even unfamiliar ethnographic materials and readily accepted the guidance of the museum staff.

In the museum galleries, each teacher was assigned an exhibit, selected by the staff to provide a cultural context, and was given selected complimentary objects from the museum collections. The teacher then presented and interpreted the subject of the exhibit in an original way to the other institute members. On the basis of this experience then, the teachers proceeded to the selection of their own curricular unit, outlined the course of study for the classroom, and, in consultation with the museum curator, prepared a list of artifacts from the museum's collections to be used to communicate in a special and immediate way the intent of the lessons. These lists were then placed in the museum's files for reference. In the future, whenever a teacher wants to implement one or another of the prepared units of study, a phone call to the museum can set the museum staff to assembling the desired kit out of the storage areas.

(continued from p.5)

In this way, a local museum with limited staff can overcome the lack of an education department to carry the rich learning potential represented in the collections to the school populations of the surrounding communities. Perhaps, most importantly, the project has convinced all involved of the potential for further systematic and structured cooperation. The challenge now is to devise new ways to continue and expand the success realized in this first step.

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