

# Eagle pupils see how their ancestors lived off the land

*Editor's note: This story marks another installment of Today's Lesson, which chronicles classroom activities in Farmington Public Schools.*  
BY TIM SMITH  
STAFF WRITER

Buffalo skins and beaver skulls stared the Eagle Elementary School students in the face as they listened with amazement to outdoorsman Jim Miller.

## His stuff's been in the movies

Outdoorsman and writer Jim Miller is one of the nation's leading advocates of the study and application of traditional wilderness skills and crafts. He's best known for his all-natural brain tanning method of producing buckskin without the use of toxic chemicals. Skin tanned using the process was used in movies such as "Thunder Heart" and "Legends of the Fall." He also holds diverse workshops out of his Willow Winds Traditional Tanning and Primitive Skills Workshops, near Alpena, Mich. He visits schools all over the United States, including Alaska.

recently wowed three fifth-grade classes with his show-and-tell feast for the senses. His day-long presentation in the media center illustrated why Americans should be thankful for the natural resources-laden country they live in and why they should respect how their ancestors lived off the land.

The Friday, Nov. 21, program at the Farmington district school culminated a unit on Native Americans taught by fifth grade teachers Colleen Kowalske, Sarah Henison and Kay Carlson, said Eagle Principal Susan Johnson.

"Let's pretend that it's me and the beaver," said Miller, describing a trapping scenario to Kowalske's class, sitting on the floor in what was a virtual museum of artifacts collected in the woods and streams of Michigan. "If I take his life, I better use it well."

He then took a twig and placed it into a nearby trap, to show the kids that killing an animal is serious business. The trap slammed shut and Miller's audience jumped.

Miller followed with an example of what "using it well" entails. He took a deer tendon and, with a stone, pounded it over a log.

"It turns white," he said, then displaying how the tendon split into thin, thread-like fibers.

Holding up one of the strands, Miller detailed how similar tendon threads were used to sew buttons onto one of his coats.

Miller, answering a student's question, said hunters and trappers have mixed emotions about taking the life of an animal. "It's a beautiful animal," Miller explained. "When you get a deer or a raccoon it's food for your family, skins, things you can use. . . But you feel bad. . . So, we make a few things from the animal that are part of celebration."

He then hid up a percussion instrument, called a shaker, primarily made from a deer. Our ancestors, he continued, used such instruments to sing songs "about the earth, and to be thankful about the things that came to us."

Miller next broke down the process of how to create a leak-proof water container, made out of birch bark. Sap from a pine tree seals up holes and cracks. The same kind of container and many of his other creations are on display at Fort Mackinac.

Unquestionably the most-exciting part of his presentation came next. He started a fire from two pieces of wood.

"If you start a fire, you have to know what kind of wood to do it with," Miller said. In Michigan, cedar trees and cattails do the trick. He held up a piece of dead cedar tree bark and crunched it up into a "real cottony" ball. That ball would be used to ignite the fire.

Before continuing his demon-



stration, Miller asked the students to rub their hands together furiously.

"Rub faster and harder. Anybody's hands smoking yet?" He explained that it is exactly what happens when the right two pieces of wood are rubbed together in such a way.

"Rubbing two sticks together, anybody can do it," Miller said. "All of your ancestors did it and all of your ancestors lived close to the earth and understood it. That's how they took care of themselves."

Miller notched a healthy chunk of wood from the cedar tree and then slotted into one of the notches a fat, dried up piece of cattail. He rapidly twisted and turned the cattail with one hand while holding down the other piece of wood. Soon, there were

enough sparks to drop into the ball of crunched-up bark.

Cupping the ball in his hands, Miller blew on it until it burst into flames.

"Oh my God!" exclaimed several of the Eagle students, almost simultaneously.

Following the class, fifth grader Shannon Sabbag, 10, said she enjoyed learning about how people can use nature to live. "I learned that the world is not just stuff that is there to be pretty. It's stuff to be used."



**Hot topic:** Above, Outdoorsman Jim Miller, during his recent visit to Eagle Elementary School, shows fifth graders how to start a fire using twigs and tree bark. Left, he blows into a ball of crumbled bark to help ignite a spark into flames.

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Parents and students will have a chance to hear the final proposal of the Walled Lake schools redistricting committee at 7 p.m. Monday at Western High School.

The proposal will be presented to the Board of Education for review and possibly a decision during the regular meeting at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, at the Educational Services Center, 850 Ladd Road, Building D.

All families whose students would be moved under the new proposal have been notified of the hearing by mail.  
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