

POINTS OF VIEW

Lay down tracks to fun in snowy suburbs

The best way to get through winter is to meet it head-on. In fact most people interviewed for the weekly Community Voice feature in the Jan. 4 Troy and Rochester Eccentrics indicated just that.

"I love the cold," says Robert Line of Rochester Hills, who spends 20 percent of the winter north of Sault Ste. Marie ice fishing and snowmobiling. Troy resident Frank Dimercurio likes to be outside fishing and hiking.

Russ Helgeno of White Lake also "likes to be outside," playing hockey with his kids and ice fishing.

Only Sue Gibson opts for staying warm inside her Rochester Hills abode. "I like to quilt."

So I hope Line, Dimercurio and Helgeno were as happy as I was to see Tuesday's snow.

It fell as I was wishing we could have snagged just a half foot or so of the Sunday-Monday blizzard that buried the East Coast.

It fell as I was still bemoaning that we were left out of that earlier storm that blasted Cleveland and parts east

and eluded us by mere miles.

Lots of us, despite the temporary inconvenience of driving as the snow falls and before it is cleared, don't like seeing the bare ground during winter.

The flakes that fell Tuesday covered those patches of grass peeking through the lawn snow. And they added a base to those sledding and tobogganing hills from West Bloomfield to Troy and from Southfield to Rochester, which need a significant snowfall for optimum fun.

Last weekend we could still cross country ski along the two miles of trails in the West Bloomfield Woods and along the 4.2 miles trails-to-trails course adjacent to it.

But on each run the snow became harder packed, therefore icier, and more bare spots appeared.

Which led four of us Monday, tennis players all, to the tennis racquet of winter — snowshoes.

We were hardly the first in the area, according to Del Scott, who rented them to us out of Moosejaw Mountaineering in Keego Harbor.



JUDITH DONER BERNE

"Our snowshoe business has doubled every year," says Scott. "We can't keep them in stock."

One size fits all as far as shoe size, but we discovered a range of overall dimensions, from a compact 8-by-22 inches and about 2.2 pounds for the runner to the sizeable 10-by-36 inches weighing 4.5 pounds for the hiker/backpacker.

All had metal cleats to deal better with those bare spots and ice than skis can.

We chose to experiment with the aluminum versions with fabric bindings.

But Scott also sells the larger hard wood snowshoes with rawhide laces modeled after the originals.

Advice in the snowshoeing guide she gave us turned out to be true. The smaller, lighter snowshoe was good for running, wet or icy snow conditions and steep terrain.

The larger snowshoe was better on flat terrain, and we can only guess on lighter, drier snow.

As we mushed through the quiet woods for pure sport, the idea that snowshoes spurred the earliest migrations from Central Asia north into Siberia and Scandinavia some 6,000 years ago stuck in my mind.

And Scott, a naturalist who spent eight years with the Audubon Society, said early North American as well as current snowshoe design has been influenced by footprints of the beaver and hare.

It bears repeating that the best way to enjoy winter is to meet it head-on.

So perhaps ice fishermen Line, Dimercurio and Helgeno will consider adding snowshoeing to their range of outdoor activities.

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I plan to. However, it can't be reciprocal. I draw a line in the snow at ice fishing.

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Request is more than just local school threat

Biggest mistake you can make is to call it a "Royal Oak story."

It's a national story, emanating from the South. The target is public education. The story is the same; only the names are different.

A splinter group of the Plymouth Brethren, a small Christian sect, wants the local public school district to provide a special curriculum and environment for 22 children in sixth-eighth grades in Royal Oak. The school administration has dropped the idea for this year, but this doesn't mean we won't see more of these proposals.

No teaching about evolution. No sex education. Separate entrance to Longfellow School. One teacher for three grades, a re-creation of the one-room schoolhouse of Tom Sawyer's era. Separate lunch facilities. No coed gym classes. No TV or VCRs. No computers. Dress code for the kids.

Some of the Brethren's requirements are harmlessly antique, but others are distinctly religious. America's space

program has exposed the error of Genesis 1:6. Our republic's health program has funded research into genetic cures, the practical application of Darwinism. The World War II movies shown this year remind us of the need for all races and creeds to fight together against Nazism, Fascism and militarism.

Who are these people, this faction of the Plymouth Brethren? Well, they avoided the press for weeks. The district held a public hearing on the issue, and no spokesman from the group showed up to give people the courtesy of explaining what they intend to do with our sales taxes.

According to a Detroit Sunday Journal account, members of this Brethren splinter group don't vote; they don't apply for civil service jobs; they won't belong to unions.

Oh, but it's all right for them to dip into the state Treasury to prepare their children for work in the 18th Century. America has been through this frequently in the last decade or so.



TIM RICHARD

The federal courts ruled against Tennessee parents in *Mozart vs. Hawkins County Public Schools*. The parents maintained the elementary reading series including "Cinderella," "Goldilocks" and "The Wizard of Oz" violated their fundamentalist religious beliefs.

The federal courts shot down fundamentalists in the cases of *Aquillard vs. Edwards* (Louisiana) and *McLean vs. Arkansas Board of Education* over laws requiring that the religious doctrine of

creationism be taught on a scientific par with evolution (Balanced Treatment Act).

In other cases where fundamentalists controlled schools, they banned "Lysistrata," "Macbeth" and "The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin."

The notion seems to be that parents (guided, in the background, by fundamentalist preachers, of course) have some kind of constitutional right to overrule teachers, principals, superintendents, school boards and state departments of education. They demand a separate curriculum, free of references to minorities, foreigners, environmentalism, women in non-traditional roles, "The Diary of Anne Frank" and so on.

There's no such right, say the federal courts.

Clark Durant, president of the State Board of Education, parrots their line with his incessant references to "parents."

The Plymouth Brethren episode is the latest in a long line of cases where a religious group seeks the tools (partic-

ularly the money) of government to promote its sectarian ends. Sometimes they're mistakenly called "conservative," but there is nothing conservative about their statist agenda.

Footnote: The religious right is fond of berating public schools as inferior, referring to them as "government" schools. Well, the Pontiac-Oakland Legal News recently reported on how law school graduates fared on the July 1995 State Bar exam.

"Government" schools — University of Michigan, 86 percent passed on first try; Wayne State University, 82 percent.

Private schools — Detroit College of Law, 67 percent passed on first try; Cooley (John Engler's alma mater), 61 percent; U-D Mercy, 65 percent.

Chief reason for flunking was "poor performance on the essay portion." So much for the religious virtues of "rote" learning. Thank goodness that our new public high school proficiency tests will emphasize essays.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events.

No oversight profits schools

In case you missed it in the hustle and bustle of the holidays, here's the top of an Associated Press story on the price Michigan taxpayers may pay for charter schools:

LANSING — Michigan taxpayers could be asked to shell out \$107.4 million more for education if Gov. John Engler reaches his goal of 200 charter schools by next fall, a report released Thursday says.

The report by the Senate Fiscal Agency says taxpayers would face the extra bill if just 10 percent of the projected 194,000 charter school students come from private or home schools.

In other words, if a child whose parents have been choosing to pay the fees for sending her to a private school now enroll her in the same institution, now called a "charter school," the taxpayers will be stuck with the tab. Called a "foundation grant," this year's public support for charter schools amounts to \$5,536 per pupil enrolled.

As state Rep. Mary Schroer of Ann Arbor said in response to the Senate Fiscal Agency report, "What we're seeing in a lot of places is schools that were private becoming charters so the vast majority certainly are private school students." In Oakland County, for example, all — every one! — of the charter schools now operating were formerly private schools.

The record is perfectly clear. The stated purpose for authorizing charter schools in the first place was to encourage innovation in the public education. Frankly, I doubt that providing public funding to established private schools will stimulate much educational innovation.

The main innovation so far produced by charter schools appears to be in finance: It replaces private resources with public taxpayer dollars to pay for children enrolled in private schools.

This wholesale raid on the public treasury is taking place when both the Michigan Legislature and Engler have removed any trace of educational accountability or public oversight.

In rewriting the Michigan School Code just before year end, the Legislature eliminated the requirement that all schools — public or charter — follow a mandatory school curriculum.

Result: Michigan is now one of two states in the nation that have no common set of standards defining what kids are supposed to learn in school.



PHILIP POWER

So religiously inclined parents may be pleased at their savings when they enroll their child, at public support, in a charter school that offers a religion-oriented curriculum. They may be not quite so pleased in a few years when their child leaves school without the kinds of basic skills required to get and hold a good job.

Worse, without public oversight of the expenditure of public funds, charter schools are at risk of turning into lucrative schemes to enrich operators with taxpayer dollars.

Here's how: Take the per pupil foundation grant of \$5,536. Enroll 100 kids, giving your budget a half-million dollars revenue, thanks to Michigan taxpayers.

Pay your teachers less than \$20,000 each. At a (desirable) 20:1 student-teacher ratio, hire five and throw in a few fringes, bringing your labor budget to, say, \$120,000. Scrounge some materials and books and rent a building cheap (from your church?). Add a salary for head of school and a secretary. You've got total expenses of, maybe, \$300,000.

Then divvy up the \$200,000 "profit" in salaries and fees to your officers and directors. Not bad for a year's work!

Is this happening now? Not that I can prove. Can it happen in the future? I'd bet on it. Is there any public oversight mechanism to prevent this kind of scam? None whatsoever!

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047, Ext. 1890.

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