

Florida Mesa fifth-graders explore nature at Colvig Camp

How do you get a rambunctious fifth-grader to settle into absolute quiet for more than five minutes? Put him on a horse for the first time in his life!

At least that was the case with Florida Mesa Elementary student Genesis Oji as he sat as still as a statue after mounting a horse for the first time ever during a recent school trip to Colvig Silver Camps. He was among nearly 50 fifth-graders in Anita Albright, Anne Swisher, and Andi Drumm's classes who spent three days and two nights at Colvig participating in traditional summer-camp activities to build self-confidence and trust between students.

Although camping trips like these most often occur in spring at the end of the school year, Florida Mesa's fifth-grade teachers decided to begin the annual learning cycle with the field trip. "It gives us the opportunity to spend time with our students outside the classroom to get to know what their interests are, how they interact with other students, and how they respond to new situations," said Albright. "It usually takes me until December to get to know my students this well."

Albright, Swisher, and Drumm developed the outdoor adventure last year, when they took their students to Camp Redcloud near Lake City. But 10 hours of school bus travel to and from Lake City cut into education time, so the three looked closer to home for their base camp. Colvig Silver Camps, just a 30-minute trip from Florida Mesa, proved to be the perfect setting. And with the help of discounts from camp owner Clay Colvig, donations from the morning Rotary Club and Florida Mesa parents, and a \$1,000 award that Drumm received as the 2005 Walmart Teacher of the Year, the trip became a reality.

Learning to take risks

On a drizzly Thursday morning after their first night in camp, students were sitting on their bunks writing about the previous night's activity. Principal John Arndt, who spent the night with Genesis Oji and six other boys in what could only be called a rustic hut on stilts, read each student's journal entry, offering praise and gentle corrections for spelling and grammar.

Writing, he said, was a key component of the trip. "We want students to slow down and reflect upon what they've done, what they've learned, and how they felt. That reflection time is really important for kids this age."

Then it was time to head off to the day's activities.



Students divided into small groups to learn about and ride horses; kayak in Colvig's small lake; try their skill at archery; hiked and learned about plants, trees, riparian ecosystems, and animal tracks; and solved the puzzle of ropes courses. At night, adults told the requisite ghost stories before settling the kids into their cabins for a night of giggling before crashing to sleep.

At the horse arena, students learned about brushing horses before saddling to prevent sores, the important of wearing cowboy boots (the heels keep your feet from slipping through the stirrups), and donning safety helmets. Several girls had extensive experience riding horses. One, a 4-H equestrian, had won trophies for barrel and pole racing. Other students, including Genesis, had never been on a horse in their lives.

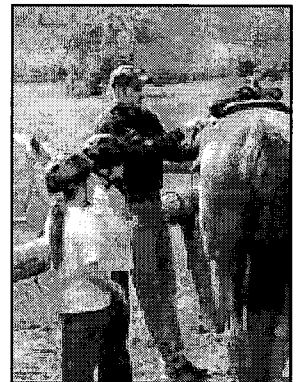
"Why won't he stand still?" asked one nervous rider as the horse shifted his weight from one leg to another. "Can you stand perfectly still for that long?" replied another.

The novices tried to direct their horses around the arena, but didn't have much luck. The horses just followed the mare or gelding in front. The fact that they didn't have much control didn't diminish the students' fun, however. They couldn't wait to tell their friends about the experience upon returning to their cabins to prepare for lunch.

And that was the whole point of the camping trip, said Arndt.

"The kids are bonding with one another. If they get to know each other and trust each other, if they learn that it's safe to take risks without getting teased, then they're more likely to take a risk in the classroom. It's all about developing the whole child," he said.

For more information about the camping trip, contact Arndt at 247-4250.



Florida Mesa fifth-graders spent three days at Colvig Silver Camps in September learning how to kayak, ride horses, and shoot a bow and arrow. Students also spent time writing about their experiences.