

Taking the Plunge: Developing an Immersion Program

by Lisa Plank

What do you get when you invite 29 third graders to their local museum for an extensive learning experience? You get excitement, connections, and ownership.

The third graders of Mrs. Diane Titcher's class from Murray Lake Elementary School spent two full days in February engaged in learning about history at the Lowell Area Historical Museum. They served as the pioneering class for the new Museum Immersion program.

In the past, Titcher's students participated in an immersion-style program at Grand Rapids Public Museum, where they explored how West Michigan developed into what it is today. That positive experience inspired Titcher to approach the Lowell Area Historical Museum to see if a similar program could be started in the area to educate students about local history. The museum's staff and board, who

were always seeking new ways to interact with students, had worked with immersion projects in larger museums, so they excitedly agreed to begin an immersion program of their own.

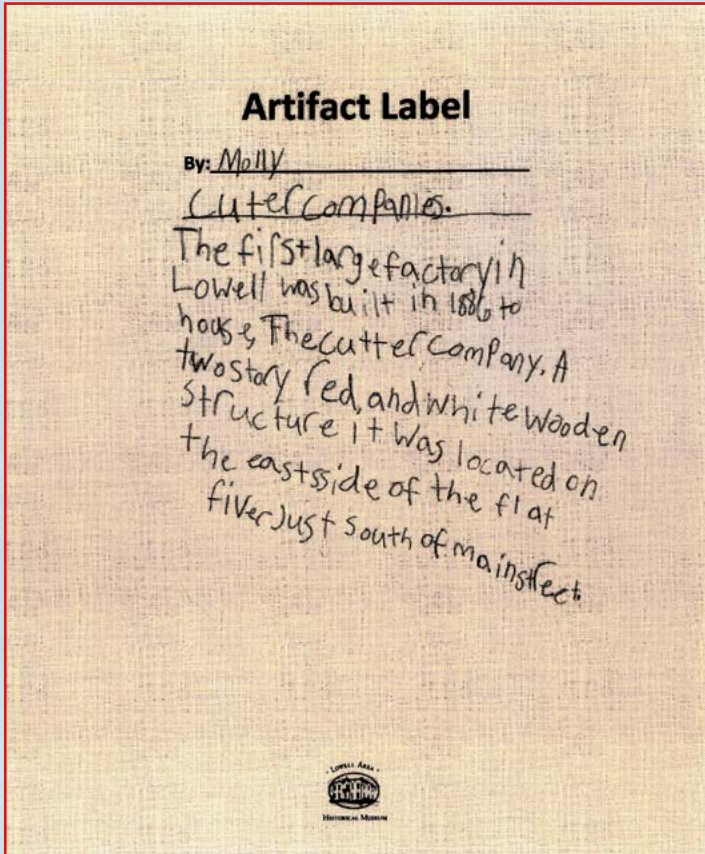
The Lowell Area Historical Museum is located in the small Michigan town of Lowell. The museum's mission is "to enrich, delight, and inspire our community and its visitors through the preservation and presentation of Lowell area history." The museum works to fulfill that mission through a wide range of exhibits, public programs, publications, and educational opportunities. It also has an active educational program that includes guided tours, in-class presentations, and on- and off-site workshops.

It quickly became apparent that there were several obstacles that needed to be overcome to successfully implement the Museum Immersion program. The first challenge was the museum's small size. It is located in an 1873 historic house with the typical small rooms of that time that do not easily accommodate 29 students.

Staffing was another challenge. The museum is run by part-time employees and volunteers, which is not ideal for such a labor-intensive program. The teacher may lead many of the activities, but the museum is still responsible for a great deal of preparation and support.

The final challenge was the budget. The cost of providing staff support for the program was one piece of the financial need. The other expense was bussing. Teachers expressed concern about finding the money—or the time to write grants for the money—to get their students to the museum.

The building layout and size limitation issue was resolved by dividing the class into three smaller groups each day. After the groups were determined, each one participated in a series of three activities that had different focuses. The museum's exhibits were utilized heavily to fulfill Titcher's wish of having her students learn about how the Lowell community developed.



Above: An artifact label that was created during one of the Museum Immersion activities. (All photos courtesy of Lowell Area Historical Museum.)



Above: Students gain a better understanding of local history.

The program also allowed students to explore stored items in the collection and research particular topics, which are activities that would not be time-permitting during a typical field trip.

A museum volunteer or staff person led the activities, but the heart of the experience was letting each student have time to explore areas that interested him or her within the activity. After investigating all the exhibits on the first day, the students were each asked to choose one article to further explore.

Every student filled out an inquiry sheet with the object's location, his or her name, and a sketch of the artifact. Staff then gathered the sheets and put together research packets for the students with information on their artifacts. The following day, the students were given their packets during one of the small activity groups. After learning more about the items they were curious about, the students created artifact labels that they shared with their fellow students.

The program's other activities included creating a timeline of Lowell using the exhibits and drawing a map of key points of development in the town's history. "Newspaper Detectives" had each student investigate a decade in Lowell's history and then share important events with fellow students.

In "Life of a Museum Artifact," students were given the opportunity to learn how museums collect items, what



Above: Mrs. Titché's third-grade class explores and learns about the local history of Lowell.

Students' Feedback From Their Immersion Experience

"I think it was the best time in a museum I ever had."



"I LOVED with a capital L museum week."



"I thought it was the best experiment I ever had."



"I really love the Lowell Historical Museum. Thank you for letting us go places other people can hardly do. It was the coolest, funnest, and most breathtaking adventure in my life!"



"I have seen lots of museums, but the Lowell Museum is my favorite."



"I really loved the field trip, but my favorite thing was writing about the artifact. Also I liked the exhibits because they tell you lots of facts about that subject."




happens to artifacts after they enter the museum's collection, and how organizations keep track of every artifact. The students then created their own artifact records and prepared the artifacts for storage. A favorite activity was a behind-the-scenes tour of museum storage areas, which are not typically open to the public. The students appreciated their special access to the entire museum.

The initial staffing concern was eradicated due to the teacher, staff, and volunteers working together to devise a plan to cover the program's needs. Mrs. Titcher worked with museum staff ahead of the actual visit to develop an individualized visit for her class, and future participating teachers will follow the same protocol. Everyone involved with the experience came away from it feeling that the effort needed to plan and carry out the program was well worth it.

The final challenge of obtaining funding was solved by a grant from the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs. The grant enabled the museum to devote a portion of staff time to developing the program. It also covered the cost of bussing the students to the museum.

Museum Immersion for Mrs. Titcher's class was a special opportunity. The extended period of time the students spent at the museum enabled them to really sink into what they were discovering. They gained an appreciation for the complexity of museum operation and also increased their comprehension of their community's history and how it all fit together.

While all students participated in the same activities, each student had the ability to focus on what interested him or her the most. Basically, curiosity led the investigations. That approach let each student feel in control of his or her learning experience, and the level of concentration, focus, and excitement from each and every student was impressive. The staff and volunteers involved with the program were deeply impressed by the third graders, their questions and perception, and at the end, their sense of ownership about their community's history.

The Lowell Area Historical Museum will open this program up to other teachers in the 2016-2017 school year. Training and preparation assistance will be provided to each participating teacher. The program is limited to a small number of classes each year. Interested teachers can find out more by contacting the museum. To see a video overview of the Murray Lake third graders' immersion experience, please visit www.lowellmuseum.org. 

Lisa Plank is the executive director of the Lowell Area Historical Museum and an active advocate for small museums. She has worked at museums around Michigan and in South Carolina and Minnesota.



Above: Students examine artifacts at the Lowell Area Historical Museum.

Below: Students were able to take a closer look at objects in the museum that sparked their interest.

