

Published November 27th, 2019

Fifth-grade students enjoy First Thanksgiving event at Wagner Ranch Nature Area

By Sora O'Doherty



Toris Jaeger and students prepare the adobe oven for baking cornbread Photos Sora O'Doherty

A part of the fifth-grade curriculum at Orinda elementary schools is a "First Thanksgiving" event at Wagner Ranch Nature Area. On different weeks, the students join naturalist Toris Jaeger in the event, during which they prepare a Thanksgiving feast, along with enjoying sports and crafts that Native Americans would have practiced. On Nov. 21, it was the turn of the students from Wagner Ranch Elementary School.

The nature area was a blur of busy students that morning along with a naturalist who seemed to be everywhere, giving instruction and inspiring quiet attention when she called for it. Jaeger never sat down as she oversaw the event, which involved the students making fires, using sharp knives and bows and arrows. A good number of parents were on hand to help, as well as the nature area staff that assists Jaeger. When it came time to eat, Jaeger suggested that the aides and parents should be served first, as a mark of respect and appreciation for all they do for the students. The

students were bursting with pride as they served the foods they had prepared. Wagner Ranch Principal Jim Manheimer joined the students for lunch, sitting and chatting with them as he enjoyed the meal.

Jaeger, who has been the naturalist at the nature area for 41 years, inherited the First Thanksgiving event, and has made significant changes to it over the decades she has been in charge. In fact, she muses, she might seek to change the name of the event from "First Thanksgiving" in the future. This year one student who attended the event, Harrison Fuesier, was accompanied by his mother, Leigh Fuesier, who had attended First Thanksgiving when she was a fifth-grader in Orinda.

Back in the day, students dressed in costumes as "pilgrims" or "Indians." Jaeger put a stop to the costumes. Jaeger had believed that she had Native American ancestry, but was proved wrong by a DNA test. Still, she is accepted, she says, as a "spiritual" member. Her views on the real "first Thanksgiving" differ greatly from the rosy view sometimes presented in school plays. Early immigrants, she says, stole from Native American stores of food and even robbed graves. "It was arrogant of the settlers to call the event the "First Thanksgiving," Jaeger says. It might have been their first Thanksgiving, but Native Americans had a long cultural history of gratitude and harvest celebrations.

At the nature area event, students prepare and serve everything for the meal, except the main course offerings of sliced roast turkey or salmon. For appetizers, they cut up carrots, celery and apples, popped corn, and offered trays of dried fruit. They made fresh cranberry sauce, roasted corn on the cob, and prepared cooked pumpkin, stewed apples, and pilgrim beans. Corn bread was prepared from scratch, baked in the adobe oven and served with honey and butter that the students churned themselves and formed in decorative molds. They also prepared the beverage: apple cider.

For about four hours the students took turns working on the food preparation. They scrubbed their hands at the sinks in the outdoor kitchen at the nature area, and followed instructions scrupulously. Jaeger gave detailed instructions on everything from how to wipe down a work area to how to prepare the adobe oven for baking. In addition to parent volunteers, Jaeger is assisted by paid staff members Kim Curiel, Laura Lowell and Liliana Spindler. There have been young people who have wanted to work at the nature area, Jaeger says, but they cannot afford to work at the low pay offered. Jaeger hopes that one day the nature area will be put in trust with an endowment to pay staff.

Katie White was a parent volunteer, there with her identical twin boys. She was delighted by the weather, and echoed comments of other parents who all expressed gratitude that the children have this great opportunity to learn outdoors in the nature area. Bill Real is an instructional assistant at Wagner Ranch. He was especially impressed with the opportunity offered to the fifth-graders to build relationships with students in different classes, while also learning history. Wagner Ranch has two and a half fifth-grade classes, taught by Sean O'Connor, Ivy Guesenkamp, and Annalisa Bruckner. The First Thanksgiving event fits into the curriculum, which in fifth grade deals with California Native Americans and early explorers.

Mary Jernigan, a certified archery instructor, was hired to teach archery. She believes that the sport builds confidence in children who don't necessarily enjoy more common team sports. Archery adds to the program, she said, because Native Americans used games to teach skills that would be required in adulthood.

"Archery is an incredible sport," she said. "Everyone has a unique ability and kids get a different challenge to learn concentration and technique."



Home-made cornbread baked in the adobe oven and butter churned by the students. Photos Sora O'Doherty



Fifth grade student building up the fire in the adobe oven during First Thanksgiving event at Wagner Ranch Nature Area Photos Sora O'Doherty

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA