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ONE COOL TRIP

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BY JOANNE PEARCE
WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY KELCI MACDONALD
Allison Overbeeke, the teacher of the winning class, says she found the confidence and teamwork demonstrated by her students inspiring—one even tried to raise his hand to correct Martineau’s pronunciation of Mi’kmaq. “It’s a fitting stage for the drama that is about to unfold.”

“IT LOOKS LIKE A ROOT BEER FLOAT,” says 13-year-old Isaiah Gee as the group reaches French Hill Falls, on the Mersey River in Kejimkujik National Park. It’s an apt description, as the water is tinged reddish-brown by tannins in the sediment carried down from wetlands.

The previous day had been spent at Fort Anne National Historic Site playing cricket, being inducted into founder of New France Samuel de Champlain’s “Order of Good Cheer” and becoming the first people in 400 years to sleep in one of the habitations at Port Royal. But day three is about the Acadian woodlands and rich wildlife of the national park and historic site, and learning about its importance to the local Mi’kmaq. Kejimkujik protects 426 square kilometres of land and the cultural landscape, with more than 500 individual stone carvings telling the story of the Mi’kmaq ancestors. The name of the park itself is a Mi’kmaq word now interpreted as “land of fairies.”

The students laugh and dare each other to cross the creaking boards of a pontoon bridge on the Mersey River, and after lunch, interpreters teach them about Mi’kmaq life and how to use a throwing tool called an atlatl, used in hunting for launching metre-long wooden darts at prey. In the afternoon, the group is bused to a site with park rangers dressed in a scarlet doublet and Mackenzie tartan kilt, takes them to the barracks’ orderly room (which was for administration purposes), saying he needs some volunteers. Mark Van Hieren and Caleb Hoffmann’s hands shoot up. They’ve been given parchment paper and pens and, following Mackenzie’s instructions, sign their names in big swooping loops. “OK! You’ve now signed up for the British military,” says the sergeant, who continues on to Halifax’s Citadel National Historic Site. There, the students break for a lunch set on cream tablecloths with Mackenzie tartan runners—a nod to Francis Humberston Mackenzie, who had raised the 78th Highlanders Regiment that was stationed in Halifax by the late 1860s.

ON THE FINAL DAY of the trip, the class takes a short bus ride to visit Halifax’s Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. There they tour a Titanic exhibit and learn how to communicate using the international naval flag systems and Morse code. While some find the exercises challenging, others later say nothing was harder than having to put up with the rain that pours down during their free time. With this true Halifax sendoff, the group heads to the airport.

Back in Lethbridge, Overbeeke and her students hang a framed copy of the photo at Peggy’s Cove outside their classroom. “I wouldn’t mind if we get another trip to go back!” says 13-year-old Chelsea Oyebola.

Maybe these young travellers will return some day, drawn back to the East Coast to trace the memories of their Nova Scotia adventure.