Woldumar’s Historically Themed Events Create Opportunities for All Ages
BY: LINDSEY BRANDVOLD, 10/20/2009

The clip-clop of horse hooves can be heard above the clanging of blacksmith tools hammering out iron. The smell of a warm, homemade apple pie wafts through the air as children squeal, chasing each other up the steps of a log cabin porch. This is not the scene of a local village in the 19th century. This is the scene of the American Heritage Festival at Woldumar Nature Center in Lansing, where unique opportunities are created for area residents as history is brought to life to be enjoyed by all who participate.

Woldumar Nature Center has been focused on community outreach since its foundation in the late 1960s. Originally formed as a conservation education program for young people, Woldumar is now celebrating its 40th anniversary. It impacts over 40,000 children and adults with its outreach programs each year. The center features 150 acres of land, over five miles of it devoted to trails for hiking, skiing, or leisurely strolls through nature, and exciting annual events such as the American Heritage Festival that make history exciting for all age groups in the local area.

The festival takes place in early fall, and has been an annual tradition at Woldumar for over thirty years now, creating a unique opportunity for Lansing area residents to enrich their historical knowledge. The event highlights many aspects of history, including Civil War era reenactment, covered wagon rides, traditional square dancing, pottery, quilting, and blacksmith demonstrations, as well as tours of the Moon Log Cabin. “I love the environment!” says Colleen O’Conner, local artist, sculpting a new creation on the potter’s wheel as her young son assists her by pumping the foot pedal. An array of ceramics lines the shelves behind her as she demonstrates for onlookers the complicated craft of forming clay. She explains that this is the first event she has ever been involved in that has a historic theme. “It’s great; the questions that people ask
make it really interesting. [These events] intrigue adults and kids, especially kids. It helps them to learn about history in a fun, hands-on way.”

The festival is an occasion for Lansing dwellers of every age to get a taste of history by allowing them to actively participate. The way that history is spread out on the paths of Woldumar makes it an especially ideal learning environment for young children. As she guides her son through the herb garden, mother Stephanie Garcia explains that she was on the Internet, looking for things to do in the area, and came across the American Heritage Festival. She decided to bring her kids because she wanted to be able to make history more interesting for them. “They are able to see things, as opposed to just reading about them. They can see what it was like to live with no TV or lights.”

Lansing’s young adults also benefit from being involved in historically-themed events such as the American Heritage Festival, not just from attending, but by volunteering as actual participants. Jill Manning, local college student, is in charge of giving apple-peeling demonstrations in the Moon Log Cabin. While offering samples of freshly-made hot applesauce and warm, just-baked cookies, she describes the excitement of being a part of the festival. “We’ve had a lot of people come through the cabin. All sorts of people come; they can learn things, learn how to do things, and open their minds.” This event may also help to shape Jill’s future career. She says she was inspired to become involved in the festival because she loves history and wants to become an actress someday. “This is a good way for me to get used to talking to and in front of people.”

Becoming involved in historically based events may just open the door to learning about one’s own family or personal history as well. Many Lansing area residents who flock to Woldumar for the festival may be unaware of the fascinating stories of the people who run the
Anson and Lorrie Roland, husband and wife Civil War reenacting team, travel to various events all across Michigan every year, and the American Heritage Festival is the 8th event they have been involved in since May. Anson describes how he was initially drawn to Civil War reenactment, and how it led to the discovery of a piece of his own history: “My wife actually got me started before we were even married.” (When Lorrie is asked how she originally became involved, she responds, amused, that it was her husband who first got her interested.)

“She loves to sew, and she loves the [ballroom] dancing. I asked her, ‘what’s there for me?’ and she said, ‘well, you can dress for the time period and do the cooking.’” As Anson speaks, he looks over his shoulder at an iron rack that is propped on logs over a fire. He says that there is a ham and a pie both being cooked by way of “cast iron cooking,” a method commonly used in Civil War camps that would have resembled the one he and his wife are in charge of at the festival.

As Lorrie bustles from the sewing to the laundry in the background, Anson goes on to tell of his exciting find: “The soldiers that fought in the Civil War really believed in it, it was something they felt strongly about. As I got started in Civil War reenactment, I began to do some research, and found out that my great-great grandfather was actually in the civil war, and actually fought in Gettysburg.” He proudly elaborates, “He was in the 7th Cavalry.”

Children, young adults, and grown-ups alike in the Lansing area have been able to reap the benefits of participating in the historically themed events offered by Woldumar Nature Center. There is no need to wait for the American Heritage Festival to come around again next year to partake in the joys of history; Woldumar will soon be hosting another historical event. Their annual “Chili’ Winter Evening,” which will take place in January 2010, will feature horse-drawn sleigh rides, bonfires, chili, hot drinks, tours of the Moon Log Cabin, and a barn dance,
among others (see http://www.woldumar.org/events.php?event=chili for more details).

Woldumar Nature Center creates fun and unique opportunities every age by hosting educational events such as the American Heritage Festival and the “Chili” Winter Evening. These events have already positively impacted many Lansing area dwellers, and only more good is to come.