



Environmental Education on the Potomac

The Little Cottage

By Nancy Wagner (originally published Hard Bargain News, September 2001)

The little cottage on Hard Bargain Farm by the side of Bryan Point Road is quiet now, but back in the Fifties it was abuzz with small children's voices. For fourteen years, it was the home of the Accokeek Cooperative Nursery during the school year and, for several summers, for the Accokeek Workshop "Junior Naturalists". In addition, the Accokeek Workshop "Piano Classes" met there after school.

The Accokeek Cooperative Nursery (and kindergarten) was started by the first group of families who had bought land from the Fergusons right after World War II. They loved pioneering in the woods so far from Washington, but also wanted their children to have the advantages the city offered. "E" Kenah (later a president of the Foundation) and Louise North (a founder of the Foundation) started a playgroup in 1951 in the Christ Church hall. In 1952, the playgroup, joined by several families outside the Moyaone Reserve, was held in an empty classroom in the Accokeek Elementary School. However, in 1953 the school had no room available and the mothers scoured the area for new space.

"Fergie" (Henry Ferguson) came to the rescue and offered to the cooperative the tenant house Alice Ferguson (Mrs. Fergie) had built in the Forties for her farm help. It was more than perfect. The cooperative turned the two small bedrooms into one large room for the three-year olds (who came two mornings a week) and the four-year olds (who came three mornings a week). The kindergarten met every day in the living room. In fall, the kitchen was used by everybody making applesauce from apples harvested in Fergie's orchard...

What made everything so special was the location on Hard Bargain Farm. The school's program (with the help of Dr. James Hymes, head of the University of Maryland's Early Childhood Department at the time) included all the usual block playing, painting, and story time. However, it had more to offer. Seasons were not an abstract theme—in autumn the children found walnuts with their pungent smell and yellow stains the Native Americans had used; in winter they slid on ice in the pasture across the road; and in spring they found tadpoles and watched the herring swim up Accokeek creek to lay their eggs. They learned where their food came from; watched Mr. Xander (Hank's father) milk the cow; watched the pigs grow fat; followed Paul Burton around as he plowed, planted and harvested the corn; and then they played hide and seek in the dry corn field. Evelyn Biles, later a Hard Bargain naturalist, was one of the kindergarten teachers.