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Compiling the Autobiography of Narrow Lane

By MARY CUMMINGS
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IT has been almost five years since students at the Hayground School in Bridgehampton recorded their first interviews with residents of Narrow Lane and took their first photographs. Yet the project is still far from finished.

Some of the students have graduated from the school, which goes through the eighth grade, and new recruits, ages 9 to 15, have signed on. Cameras and tape recorders in hand, they continue to knock on doors along Narrow Lane, which runs for two and a half miles between Bridgehampton and Wainscott.

Jonathan Snow, the school's artist in residence who is the project's guiding force and himself a resident of Narrow Lane, was confident that his neighborhood had more than its share of interesting residents. But even he could scarcely have imagined the diversity and drama of the life stories he and his students have recorded in their visits with Narrow Lane's artists and farmers, old-timers and part-timers, workers from the migrant camp, people with deep local roots and people with ancestral ties to the Deep South, Latin America, Poland and elsewhere.

One of their earliest interviews, in 1999, and probably one of their easiest, was with Richard Hendrickson, now 91, a lifelong Bridgehampton resident who grew up on his family's farm and remained there. A born storyteller, Mr. Hendrickson reached back hundreds of years to describe in biblical images the silent wilderness of towering trees that preceded the villages and roads that came later.

"In the beginning," he said in his interview, "it was all forest." Later, two-wheeled carts, pulled by oxen ("stronger than horses") created the "two ruts" that became Narrow Lane, the route that took colonists from Bridgehampton to Northwest Harbor, where English ships arrived with supplies for the settlers.

"He could have been walking down it himself," Mr. Snow said in recalling Mr. Hendrickson's evocative narrative.

After hitting the historical highlights, Mr. Hendrickson moved on to recall his own youth on the farm. Every day 4,500 eggs had to be collected, 30 cows had to be milked every morning and evening, "and it didn't matter whether it was your birthday, Christmas, a funeral or a wedding, you milked twice a day." Mr. Hendrickson said. For fun, he and his schoolmates "played marbles or flew a kite," he said, and the neighborhood was their world.

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With the history of each of its old houses at his fingertips, he told the students how the old Bridgehampton school had been moved to Narrow Lane by a Dr. Gardiner, who made the building his home, and how it was later lived in by a Mr. Giuliani, a junkman and rag picker. "It's still there today," he recalled, "opposite the house built by Mr. Wilford, a Boer prisoner of war from Durrell Island, off Bermuda, who married a local Bridgehampton girl."

It was a promising start for a project, which is designed to teach children "how to listen to another person attentively," Mr. Snow said, a skill he described as "one of the harder things in life to accomplish." He said he also hoped the students would develop an appreciation for the value of information gathered from primary sources and would gain confidence in their ability to evaluate and organize what they collect.


On a more practical level, the project teaches students how to use a camera and tape recorder and helps them develop skills in interviewing, transcribing and editing. When the Narrow Lane Project is complete, which may not be anytime soon since no one really seems to want it to end, the plan is to put the edited narratives and selected photographs into a book that will paint a portrait of the community and reflect what the students have learned about the very concept of community.

Edythe Collins, 14, said she had been nervous at the beginning: "For the first two interviews I wondered, 'What would I say?' I was worried about getting it recorded right and about not making any unnecessary noise."

With time, the nervousness disappeared. "With a lot of people, you really had to ask only one question to open up a whole thing," she said.

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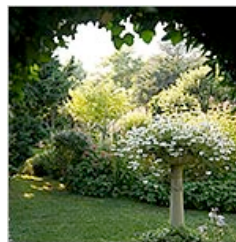
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