

Agriculture comes alive for 5th graders

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By Dick Hagen

Two hundred fifteen 5th grade students from BOLD (Bird Island, Olivia, Lake Lillian)/St. Mary's schools, Renville County West and Redwood Falls public school participated in the 'agricultural experience' of a lifetime on Thursday, October 13. These youngsters visited four Renville County farms plus the incredibly big Southern Minnesota Beet Sugar Cooperative for direct visits with each farmer plus Calvin Thompson, SMBSC spokesperson.

With wide-eyed amazement students viewed, touched, smelled, and heard the sounds of agriculture like never before. And asked an incredible variety of questions. Check these comments from a few BOLD 5th graders:

"Amazing. Best school day I've ever had," said Lyle Chadwick.

"Driving alongside the beet harvester and the big beet trailers was really cool," commented Emma Thompson.

"The sheep farm was really neat. I had never seen so many sheep," related Shelby Stovern, viewing over 2,000 feeder lambs at Brad Myers sheep farm.

"Seeing so many cows being milked all at one time," amazed Isabelle Boehme at the 650-cow Nosbush Dairy Farm. Equally amazing, kids got to see a newly born calf and the special attention of the mother cow. Also huge bunkers storing thousands of tons of forage feed.

The incredible agenda for these youngsters, traveling in 5 school buses with FFA students and adults providing 'on-board' counseling included stops at Nosbush Dairy Farm, Fairfax; Brad Meyers sheep farm, North Redwood; Brad Nere corn farm, Danube, Keith McNamara beet field, 5 miles south of Olivia and the SMSBC sugar beet plant, Renville.

Starting at 9 a.m. at each 'destination farm', each bus rotated through the schedule with stops about every 45 minutes. At each stop, the participating farmer would explain exactly what the students were seeing. At the corn farm stop for example, corn was being harvested and corn stalks were being chopped right there in front of each group of students. Farmer Brad Nere telling the students about corn first explained that there are three different kinds of corn: field corn, sweet corn and popcorn.

"Today you are seeing field corn being harvested. Field corn is the biggest crop in Minnesota, and in all of America. Much of it gets fed to livestock, especially cattle and hogs. But much of it also provides ethanol fuel and gets processed and used in hundreds of food items. Your menu would be pretty dull if corn wasn't part of the ingredient listing," said Nere.

Kids literally did ask dozens of questions, like “How many kernels on an ear of corn?” Nere suggested they teach themselves the answer. He gave each student an ear of corn saying, “Take this back to your school, shell off the kernels and count them. Then you’ll know.” He also told the students that there were about 32,000 ears of corn on each acre of corn.

At Keith McNamara’s sugar beet field, a 12-row lifter was harvesting with big semi-trailers running alongside the lifter getting loaded with up to 30 tons of beets in 10 minutes or less in a non-stop harvesting panorama. On board the bus, McNamara explained the process of planting and harvesting a sugar beet crop such as the number of sugar beet plants per acre, how deep the roots grow, why the roots didn’t grow so deep this year because of the wet spring, how much a beet weighs, what happens to the tare (dirt and plant residue also picked up by the harvesting machine).

His take on the event? “Education is the key to our future. And a better understanding by these young students about how food is produced in America is vital. The more educated we can make these kids, the brighter their future and the better future of U.S. agriculture also.”

With 5 bus loads of students stopping at his field (a bus every 45 minutes), he was both amazed and intrigued with the variety of questions. “Some questions were so very unique. But you could just sense these kids had an eagerness to know and to learn. Education is a repetitive process so with such very good results on this first tour, I could see this expanding to more schools next year.”

Asked about the 215 students visiting his sheep farm Brad Myer, perhaps speaking for every ‘host farmer’ simply said, “It’s been as rewarding for me as for these students. They’ve asked some very intelligent questions. I’m excited that they are interested in agriculture. There aren’t enough young people caring about farming and agriculture.

“In my industry I go west to buy my breeding stock and my feeder lambs. At these sale barns I see the seats filled with 65 to 75-year old farmers and ranchers. That scares the dickens out of me. We need these younger kids to get excited about agriculture.”

Myer and son Dusty operate Middle Creek Sheep Farm with 900-acres crop farming, an 800-ewe lambing operation, and also a 3500-head yearly feeder lamb business.

Calvin Thompson, President, SMSBC said he was terrifically impressed with the student visitors. Thompson got on board each bus as it slowly traveled through the factory beet piling area describing the many activities of the beet factory which employees 700 people during the fall harvest campaign and 300 workers year round. The kids learned SMSBC is the biggest total tonnage sugar beet factory in the world!

“We process about 600 tons of sugar beets per hour; that means about 14,500 tons every 24-hour period. One sugar beet produces about ½ ounce of processed sugar so it takes about 36 sugar beets for a 10-lb. bag of sugar.”

A student asked, “How much sugar do we eat?” They were surprised when Thompson told them that per capita sugar consumption today is 46 lbs., only half as much as recently as 1970. Thompson said sugar intake shouldn’t get blamed for obesity. “Lack of exercise and sloppy diets are the main culprits,” he noted.

Students also learned that one ton of beets produces about 300 lbs. of sugar with beet pulp and beet molasses, both livestock feeds, primary co products of the sugar beet. “These kids had a lot of great questions. They were intrigued and fascinated by all the big trucks bringing beets into the factory.” To make the sugar factory visit even more relevant, Thompson asked kids in each bus load questions about sugar. Like “When was the sugar making process discovered?” They learned it started about 250 years ago. In 1747 German scientists developed the technology. Much of the equipment in U.S. sugar factories today was developed and made in Germany.

SMBSC has over 500 growers who plant and harvest about 110,000 acres of sugar beets each year. SMBSC growers are located in 17 counties in southwest Minnesota. Kids learned that it takes only 8 hours from the arrival of a sugar beet at the plant until it has been processed into crystalline sugar. The huge factory processes about 3 million tons of sugar beets each year.

Adult chaperones on the five student buses were also amazed and impressed with the agricultural knowledge soaked up by these 215 students. “I couldn’t believe all the questions being asked. And I was totally impressed with the tremendous information and cordial welcome each of our host farmers and Cal Thompson provided. It was truly a home-run day for all,” summed up Jeremy Frank, Vice President, Home Town Bank, Olivia.

As the buses traveled from farm to farm, the adult chaperones (including FFA officers from 3 area schools) prepped the students what they would be seeing at each next stop. This ‘preview’ chatter definitely helped stimulate even more questions as students arrived at each host location.

The event was sponsored by the Ag and Renewable Energy Committee of the Renville County HRA/EDA. ProAg of Renville County did much of the legwork in lining up the farm and factory stops. Donations were provided by Direct Feeder Supply of Hector, the Renville County Corn & Soybean Growers, Renville County 4-H, and Renville County Pork Producers.