

What's Old is New

CONNER PRAIRIE THRIVES WITH STEM FOCUS

By Matt Ottinger

When recalling youthful excursions to Conner Prairie, memories are dotted by conversations with blacksmiths, petting farm animals and hard-to-suppress cravings for gift shop rock candy.

And that is all still found within its vast acreage.

Yet circa 2017, Conner Prairie has blossomed into much more, with an emphasis on experiential learning for children and a focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education.

Conner Prairie received a \$2.3 million grant from the National Science Foundation in 2012 when it launched Create.Connect, an innovation-centered indoor exhibit that encourages exploration.

It's a hands-on exhibit that teaches various aspects of wind energy, airplane and windmill technology among other sources of wonder.

"Part of our mission is to inspire curiosity, so it's a great way to do that. But it's also a way to take the historic narrative and STEM and combine those to help the learning experience for both children and adults," explains Norman Burns, president and CEO. "We discovered that we more than achieved a lot of the parameters we set in place for Create.Connect. The stay time for both the children and the parents (exceeded our goals)."

The March Passport to Hi-Tech event incorporates the Create.Connect experience as a means to boost STEM learning among young girls. Director of Programs and Education Chris Petrelli says placing science in a context of a story, specifically history, engages girls in the subject matter more than it otherwise would.

"It's our way of taking girls ages 5 to 12 to heighten their interest in STEM education and careers," he adds. "We bring in as many as 50 to 60 outside vendors – a number of large and small organizations."

Additionally, Conner Prairie offers Girls Science specialty camp, which incorporates Project Lead the Way instructors from area schools. He adds the Eleven Fifty Academy and Women & Hi Tech

also play roles and that a boys' camp has been added.

Workshop it

Teachers themselves can find educational resources on-site as well. Conner Prairie offers a free professional development workshop for educators – the most recent of which was held in September 2016.

"Project Lead the Way takes about 30 educators out on the grounds to show them how they can use us as an interdisciplinary resource," Petrelli reveals. "That's one of the main things strategically that we've worked on the past few years."

Field (trips) of dreams

With so many activities to choose from, itineraries can vary among school groups.

"Field trips are designed by teachers, but we offer guided tours," Petrelli imparts. "A teacher will make a reservation, and we'll provide a series of pre-visit materials that include logistical information and educational activities and supplemental materials. But the teacher designs the visit based upon the lesson plan."

Students from 80 of Indiana's 92 counties (as well as 43 schools from neighboring states) visited Fishers-based Conner Prairie last year.

"We're always looking to grow with underserved populations," Petrelli offers, noting budgetary challenges exist for some schools and transportation costs are a factor. "We've partnered with some of those schools to find sponsorship and opportunities within their communities to help fund those field trips."

As more students are exposed to this type of learning, the better the world will be for both the students and their future employers, Burns contends.

"Fortunately, that's what the humanities do, and what a place like Conner Prairie does," he concludes. "In general, the idea of having a liberal arts base of education means you're getting students who are well-rounded and capable. Instead of just being technicians, they're whole people."



Conner Prairie's Create.Connect exhibit promotes STEM learning by accentuating marvels such as airplane flight and wind energy.



RESOURCES: Norman Burns and Chris Petrelli, Conner Prairie, at www.connerprairie.org. (If your company is interested in sponsoring a trip to Conner Prairie for students in your local school district, contact Denise Kruse, director of corporate sponsorship, at kruse@connerprairie.org.)

Getting to Know Conner Prairie

On the prairie

- Fishers interactive history park welcomes over 340,000 guests of all ages each year
- Served nearly 63,000 students last year
- Created with land purchased by Eli Lilly in 1934
- Spans 800 wooded acres in Hamilton County
- Indiana's only Smithsonian Institute affiliate
- 328 employees (87 full-time; 83 part-time; 158 seasonal)

For the older crowd

- Nearly 1,100 attended 2016 History on Tap craft beer event
- Hearthside Suppers allow groups to prepare meals together in cozy atmosphere of William Conner House during winter
- Prairie Plates provides farm-to-table dining experience specifically for adults with food prepared by top local chefs
- Holiday Cheers includes candlelit stroll through 1836 Prairietown during December, featuring fine foods, wine, spirits and craft beer

Old schooling

- Award-winning Follow the North Star journey: Participants become fugitive slaves in 1836, seeking freedom on the Underground Railroad
- Headless Horseman Halloween experience welcomed 34,000 attendees in 2016
- Prairie Tots and Prairie Tykes – opportunities for very young kids to engage in revolving topics based on seasonal changes
- 1863 Civil War Journey puts visitors in the southern Indiana town of Dupont during invasion of Confederate General John Hunt Morgan
- 1859 Balloon Voyage
- Martin Luther King Day – museum opens for free with special programming and premieres two one-act plays on African-American history in Indiana
- 1816 Lenape Indian Camp explores life, culture and the relationship between Lenape Indians and American fur traders



Conner Prairie still highlights the history-based education it's known for via exhibits like the 1863 Civil War Journey.

"We pioneered the Opening Doors philosophy back in the early 2000s and created a training model that's been used by over 1,000 museums worldwide. Prior to Opening Doors, you'd open the door to someone in a costume giving a monologue about history. We're opening doors to the visitor so they have an active exchange and enrichment. They dictate it based upon what their interests are, and it becomes a different type of educational opportunity."

– Norman Burns
Conner Prairie president and CEO



Celebrating nature is also a staple through its Treetop Outpost and summer camps.