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## Kindergartners 'go Along' To Ohio

The Capital Times :: LIFESTYLE :: C1

Saturday, September 9, 2006  
Mary Bergin

I have a new traveling companion for the school year, and you can call him Slinky. We just got back from Ohio and soon will head to Iowa. Before winter, we'll explore Chile and Patagonia, around the time that summer is about to arrive in South America.

My new buddy's adventures will be followed by kindergartners in Beth Zingler's class at Lena Grade School, which is in a town of 500 in Oconto County, north of Green Bay. I got acquainted with Mrs. Zingler because of a statewide "Here at Home" summer field trip for teachers who wanted to learn more about Wisconsin's ethnic, cultural and geographic diversity.

"Their social studies curriculum includes travel around the world and emphasizes multiculturalism," field trip organizers said about Mrs. Zingler's school. That got my attention.

I've long been intrigued with the Traveling Teddy Bear Program, a Society of American Travel Writers project that began in 1994. Journalists take stuffed animals on their travels, passing the teddy bears from one writer to another and photographing them in all kinds of places, to help children develop their knowledge of geography and an interest in travel.

"I'm a Traveling Teddy, a bear ambassador," the animal's ID tag is supposed to declare. "My goal is to travel to places my owners can't go and meet people they can't meet."

Although I could simply join in the SATW effort, I wanted more control over this project and to give it a Wisconsin spin. Slinky is a stuffed animal, but he's a badger not a bear and he used to live in Mrs. Zingler's classroom supply box. The teacher is partial to badgers because she is an alumna of the University of Wisconsin.

"I love teaching the children about exciting places they may visit when they are older and welcome speakers throughout the year who have actually traveled to the places we pretend to visit," she says in an e-mail. She asks her students to create a postcard for their parents after making a "pretend trip."

"Music, food, clothing and crafts are important parts of the cultures of other places, and kids share a special interest in animals that inhabit other places. An emphasis on similarities between cultures and a positive view of differences are essential to our studies."

So these are the things that I'll try to keep in mind during my own travels. I hope to visit Lena sometime next spring to take Slinky back home.

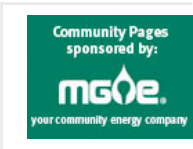
One of my more unusual summer projects was the development of a geography quiz for fourth-graders, through Rand McNally, the atlas manufacturers. The research was a reminder of how easy it is to forget so much of what we learn as children. If there were a way to make a more personal impression, maybe we'd remember more.

Quizzes are one of many resources available to teachers and parents at [www.randmcnally.com](http://www.randmcnally.com). The National Geographic Society demonstrates an interest in youngsters, too, through its annual National Geography Bee as well as games and experiments. Go to [www.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.nationalgeographic.com) and look for "kids."

Statewide, the expectation is that Wisconsin public school students will be able to understand and use maps as a practical resource by the end of fourth grade. That includes constructing a world map from memory, "showing the location of major land masses, bodies of water and mountain ranges."

In Lena, it looks like this education begins even earlier than the fourth grade. One of the Lena kindergartners gave Slinky his name recently, and then the teacher packed him up for a trip to Madison in a shoebox. He's getting along pretty well with the cats' mutual aloofness.

The badger and I took our first trip together to Cleveland, and that involved hours of train rides. A Metra train took us from Crystal



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Lake, Ill., to Chicago. Amtrak took us from Chicago to Cleveland. A light rail system was one way to get around inside of Cleveland and its suburbs.

Three days later, we retraced our route, but in reverse. Before leaving Crystal Lake, to come home, we even looked over a McDonald's that had seating in a railroad car.

The point is not to tell the world all about how Slinky goes on these adventures, but to make a connection with one classroom at a time, in hopes of enlarging the world as students see it and helping them dream about one day experiencing it on their own.

\*

Another topic: Our Web site finally is up and running. Check out [www.roadstraveled.com](http://www.roadstraveled.com).

\ "Roads Traveled" is a weekly travel column that emphasizes Wisconsin and its border states. Your feedback and ideas are welcome. Write to Midwest Features, P.O. Box 259623, Madison, WI 53725 or send an e-mail to [info@roadstraveled.com](mailto:info@roadstraveled.com).

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