

Wisconsin School Forests

By Julia Pferdehirt

A Readers Theater script to accompany chapter 8 (Grandma's Walk) of the historical fiction book [*Wisconsin Forest Tales*](#).

Author Julia Pferdehirt wrote this Readers Theater script as a way to introduce chapter 8 of the [*Wisconsin Forest Tales*](#) book and give students an opportunity to read aloud with classmates. Students take turns reading at each asterisk (*) within the script.

Wisconsin School Forests

* What do Australia and schools in Wisconsin have in common? In 1925, a terrific idea came to Wisconsin all the way from Australia. The idea was for schools and communities to own forest land for the special purpose of teaching people to care for and use forests.

* The first school forests were up north, in the little towns of Laona, Wabeno and Crandon.

* From the start, kids were involved. At first, students planted trees. Foresters from the university and the state forestry program taught about forestry. The word “conservation” became part of every student’s learning.

* As time passed, some schools hired naturalists. In cities like Madison or Milwaukee, a visit to the school forest was the first time some students had ever been in the woods.

* Today, we have more than 300 registered school forests in Wisconsin. Trees and nature are the classrooms and textbooks. Students learn by doing and exploring.

* Some school forests even train high school students to lead field trips and teach about forest management. Other school forests plan work projects for students to learn about nature by helping to take care of it.

* Wisconsin can be proud of its school forests. In snow and rain, sunshine and cold, school forests are busy. Every day of the school year, you can be sure that somewhere in Wisconsin, students are learning in a school forest.

* Here are true stories from school forests all around Wisconsin. Words inside quotation marks were actually spoken by naturalists and teachers at school forests in Wisconsin.

Trees all Around and the Sky for a Ceiling: At School in the Forest

- * Come with us to Wisconsin's School Forests. You'll see sand dunes and ponds. You'll hike through prairie grass and pine forests. You'll have fun and adventure.
- * Let's head to Stevens Point and the Boston School Forest. Here's what Karen Dostal, the director wants us to know:
 - * "Our school forest has 80 acres of red and white pine trees. If your class visited, you'd walk on a bridge floating on the water of our pond. Blue gills and large mouth bass will swim right up to the bridge and you can feed them by hand."
 - * "A gigantic bass named Jaws lives in the pond." Kids love to joke that Jaws is really a shark. "Don't worry, our Jaws doesn't bite!"
 - * "Kids learn cross country skiing in winter. We can track animals in the snow."
 - * "Almost 70 years ago, in 1937, this land was nothing but brush and stumps and sand. School children planted more than 111,000 trees."
 - * "Foresters from DNR have been working with us. Animals and birds need many different kinds of habitat. So we've made a forest plan. We'll cut some of the pine trees. Some of the land will be returned to its original appearance as a prairie. Students will help plant prairie plants."
 - * "Some of the red and white pine trees we'll keep. Students will help plant oak, aspen, maple and dogwood trees to make homes for wildlife. Maybe even some plum trees!"
 - * "One of my favorite stories about the Boston School forest happened last year. A sixth grader came out on a field trip. He said his parent, grand parents and great-grandmother all were visitors to our school forest!"

* “My great-grandma helped plant those trees!” the boy said. Sure enough! We found out his great-grandma was still living. Her school had planted pine trees on the old cutover land. On May 10, 1937, she was a visitor on the day Governor LaFollette came out to dedicate the land as a school forest!”

* Let’s head to the Tri-County School Forest at Plainfield. Larry Mancl, the director, has great stories to tell.

* “This is a working forest. And students help take care of the land. They survey the forest looking for sick trees or spots where trees are crowded. The DNR forester helps us make a management plan to keep the forest healthy.”

* “As part of our management plan we mark some trees to harvest. When trees are cut, we sell some logs and keep some. The logs we keep have a special purpose.”

* That purpose is to make houses for bluebirds! “We cut our logs into boards. High school student counselors help elementary-age kids build bluebird houses.”

* Now let’s go to Superior. Here’s a school forest where everyone gets involved. High school students are trained to teach younger students about caring for the environment and the forest. In early winter, students of every age take part in a special project.

* Elementary school students harvest branches from balsam fir trees. Then kids, moms and dads and grandparents come out for a wreath-making celebration. Everyone goes home with a sweet-smelling wreath, and donations help pay for programs at the Superior School Forest.

* If we head toward the Lake Michigan shore, we’ll come to Manitowoc and the Rahr Memorial Forest. This school forest is unique. You can walk on sand dunes, hunt for red foxes in their dens and learn about lumberjacks!

* Sixth graders in Manitowoc spend three days camping at their school forest. They learn about astronomy first-hand with night hikes. They work and play in the forest and dunes during the day.

* Fourth graders learn about logging and lumberjacks. Want to team up to use a cross cut saw? Want to roll logs with a peavey stick? Are you hungry for a lumberjack breakfast, complete with sinkers and stove lids? Then Rahr Memorial Forest is the place for you!

* Let's hear what Environmental Education Director Patty Brodeen has to say. "A pair of barred owls has come to the forest for years. We hear them calling each other over the dunes. This year they had babies in their nest."

* "When owlets are not yet full-grown they practice flying by 'branch hopping.' One owlet fell to the ground. He wasn't hurt, but he couldn't fly. Students could see this fluffy baby owl up close."

* Students knew not to touch the owlet. Instead, they just watched. "Every day it was able to fly a little higher. It practiced branch hopping. The owlet called to the parents and the parents kept watch and fed the baby."

* "The owlet's wings got stronger. He was able to hop higher and higher in the branches." Soon, the owlet would be flying!

* "Families of red foxes build dens in the roots of juniper bushes in our sand dunes. If you're quiet – very, very quiet – and patient, you might be able to see the mother fox and the babies."

* Students at Rahr Memorial Forest are learning about change. Part of the dunes in the school forest are open sand. In other spots, beach grasses and plants are starting to take over. Some people say, "Let's pull up those grasses. Let's save the dunes." But that's not the plan at Rahr Memorial Forest.

* “ We’re studying the dunes. Waiting to see what happens,” said Patty Brodeen. “It’s natural for land to change over time. Will we pull the beach grass? Not now. We’ll watch and learn and make a plan before we do anything.”

* A little more than an hour’s drive along the lakeshore will bring us to Milwaukee. In the Milwaukee Public School’s outdoor classroom, Potter’s Forest, students really get “into” the trees.

* Dave Braby, School Forest Director, loves to talk about their school forest. “Back in 1947, Milwaukee Public Schools bought the school forest land. Tree nurseries contributed thousands of trees and children planted them. Part of our forest was an old farm field. Now it’s planted with red and white pine trees. Part of the land is old-growth forest with many different kinds of trees. Plus, we’re next to Boerner Botanical Garden.”

* Dave Braby and the Potter’s Forest staff teach students on the ground and in the air in a one-of-a-kind Wisconsin school forest.

* “Our students live in the city. Many have never been in the woods. Some have rarely been outdoors except in a city neighborhood or park. Sometimes we’re just helping students feel comfortable outside the city!”

* “A few years ago we built an addition to the forest. It’s a Challenge Ropes Course. We have a low course that’s close to the ground, a high course with belay (safety ropes) and a universal course that can be used by anyone. At Potter’s Forest visitors learn about the forest and about themselves.”

* “Jeremy, a 7th grader, is in a wheelchair. He watched his classmates on the high ropes course where you walk a single cable high above the ground. It’s safe because you’re ‘on belay’ (wearing safety equipment and hooked into safety ropes).”

* “Could Jeremy do it? We tried, but he didn’t have enough control of his legs. Then, we had an idea. He put leather gloves on and ‘walked’ the course on his hands!”

* “You should have heard the cheering. You should have seen Jeremy! It was amazing.”

* Potter’s Forest is working with Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources foresters to plan for their wooded land. The pine forest is crowded and doesn’t provide much habitat for animals. The older, mixed-tree forest is overgrown. Some trees aren’t healthy.

* Dave Braby met with foresters. They suggested cutting crowded or unhealthy trees. The idea upset some people. “In a city, trees are precious. Some people think cutting any tree is a bad idea. People came to meetings and complained.”

* “We’ve got our work cut out for us. We’re working with foresters to make good plans for the forest. We also need to educate people about managing forests. We want people to understand that caring for our school forest includes planting trees, cutting trees and creating good habitat for animals and birds. This is all part of having our forest for all the children of Milwaukee.”

* Let’s take a trip to the University of Wisconsin in Stevens Point. Jeremy Solin is Wisconsin’s School Forest Education Specialist.

* “Our school forests are so different. In Madison, the forest is used every day of the school year. Some forests are small, others are huge. And everywhere, students are learning. You can come to a school forest and learn about math, language arts, science, social studies, visual arts and history.”

* “You can dress up like lumberjacks and learn about logging or measure trees and calculate board feet. You can survey the forest so foresters will know exactly what trees, plants and animals live there. You can create habitats for animals.”

* “Would you like to travel on snowshoes? Take a cross-country ski trip? Learn fire building and safety? Sit in the quiet woods and write in your journal? Then take a trip to the school forest near you.”