

Book Review: Wisconsin Forest Tales

By Dana Westedt, fourth grade teacher-Reedsburg School District

Wisconsin Forest Tales by Julia Pferdehirt is a fabulous collection of stories revolving around Wisconsin forest history. Sterling Strathe, Program Director for LEAF, the Wisconsin K - 12 Forestry Education Program, might say it best in the book's introduction: "If only trees could talk, I bet they would have quite a story." Well, Ms. Pferdehirt must have been listening to the trees because she certainly made me feel like they have been talking. A brief introduction to each chapter is followed by a historical fiction account and then wrapped up with two or three short pages of facts. Each chapter could be a separate story in itself, but there are links that connect some of the chapters.

Johnny McDonald first appears as a boy "over 15" in Chapter 2, then we meet up with him again in Chapter 3 when he is a grown man with a family of his own. This chapter relives the horror and destruction of the Peshtigo fire in a way that children can relate to. Sadly, many of our history books, including some Wisconsin textbooks, have overlooked this national disaster. Chapters 4 and 5 also have a connecting character, Will Meyer, whom we meet as a boy of 10 when his family moves to Wisconsin to attempt farming the cutover. We then travel with Will as he joins the Civilian Conservation Corp in 1933. The journal entries in Chapter 5 are a great teaching tool to show children the importance of keeping a daily journal or diary. I also liked that Will had a dream at age 10 to become a teacher, but that dream seemed unlikely to happen until he joined the CCC. There are also links from Chapter 2 to Chapter 6 involving not a person, but a logger's mark used to identify ownership of certain trees.

Topics covered in this historical fiction book include prescribed burning, forest fire issues, sustainable forestry, tree disease, and school forests. The bold-faced words on many pages in each chapter are immediately accompanied by a concise definition. What a great way to bring in new vocabulary in an easy-to-understand way! I also appreciated the actual photographs from our state's past. Kids can achieve a greater sense of our state's history by seeing these primary sources and understanding them as factual accounts of real events. From the first chapter to the last this book grabbed my attention, and I truly could not put it down until I finished it in one Sunday afternoon. It will be an interesting and colorful asset to every 4th grade classroom as an addition to the textbooks we now use. I personally plan to keep it in my room for students to use year after year. Thank you, Julia Pferdehirt, for an accurate glimpse into Wisconsin's past.

