Fifth-grade 'diplomats' will travel to Vermont

By ANGIE FRANCALANCIA
Advocate staff writer

This trip started out as a joke," said Jason Hormoz, one of 18 Baton Rouge fifth-graders preparing for a field trip to Vermont.

"Matt said, 'Hey, let's go up there and visit them,' and now we're going."

The joke, which was the children's wish to visit their pen pals in Vermont, will become a reality Monday when Brenda Aucin's fifth-grade class boards an Amtrak train headed north.

Jason and his classmates, who are students in the gifted program at Brownfields Elementary School, talked last week about their trip as they worked on details of a program they will present for their northern pen pals.

"It's a field trip that you'll remember for life," said Amber Mizzell.

Aucin said the trip, which was the children's idea, started to take shape in the early part of the year when she started looking seriously into the possibilities.

"One of my children said, 'Let's go see them.' They kept bugging us about it, so we said we'd check into prices," Aucin said.

The class members have been pen pals with Kathy Douglass' fifth-grade class at Ferrisburg Central Elementary in Vermont. They will spend next week traveling and visiting with their pen pals.

Aucin said the children have a busy week planned, including tours in Washington and Philadelphia before they arrive in Vermont. Cross-country skiing and a visit with the Vermont's governor also are planned.

Each child had his own ideas about what would be the best part of the trip.

Kaiana Franklin said she thought skiing would be the best. Victor Pillow was looking forward to being on the train and Jason Venable was eager for the tours.

Since early October, Aucin and the children have been planning their traveling classroom, which will include spelling words from the trip and history and geography lessons.

"By October, it started coming along pretty good. By that time, the Vermont kids knew. From that point, it took until February until we got permission. It took a long time because they were trying to guarantee the safety of the children," Aucin said.

With five weeks left before the train was scheduled to depart, the children had to raise $4,000, Aucin said.

She said the $4,000 covers the price of the train tickets, the tours, meals and $20 spending money for each child, Aucin, and her classroom aide, Brigitte Paxton.

By last week, the class had raised about $3,000, Aucin said.

"The fund-raising was the work," she said. "I have some kids who wouldn't have been able to go if we hadn't raised the money."

The children will be staying with faculty members from the Vermont elementary school, Aucin said.

"I get to stay on a horse farm. I love

SEE TRIP, 3B
horses,” David Crews said.

Aucoin said others in the class will be staying on dairy farms in the rural Vermont county, 20 miles south of Burlington.

All 18 kids, having convinced their parents that the idea was worthwhile, are ready to go.

They will leave early Monday morning aboard an Amtrak train in New Orleans.

“As we go through the different cities, students will talk about them,” Aucoin said.

The students researched their cities and will give reports “to the students and whoever else shares our car. It will be like a traveling classroom,” Aucoin said.

“When we get into Washington Tuesday morning, we’re taking a tour of the Smithsonian and the White House,” she said.

Once in Burlington, Vt., on Wednesday morning, the children are scheduled to tour the city made famous by Burlington Industries.

“I understand we have an appointment with the mayor,” Aucoin said.

“Wednesday afternoon, we’re going to a maple sugar farm. We’ll see the way they collect the sap and make the sugar,” she said.

Their trip also includes a visit to a morgan horse farm — the morgan is the state horse of Vermont — and a lesson in cross-country skiing.

On the return trip, the fifth-graders will get a first-hand history lesson as they tour historic Philadelphia.

At the close of last week, the children’s final concern was how to pack into their suitcases the Acadian cottages, crawfish costumes and various other props for skits.

“The last night, they’re having a Vermont turkey dinner at the school for the host families, pen pals and us. We will be doing a program called Louisiana Lagniappe,” Aucoin said.

She said the children will take pralines, Tabasco sauce, Community Coffee and other Louisiana products to their Vermont friends.

“We will be serving as ambassadors for the state,” Aucoin said.

She said her traveling diplomats will carry official greetings to the governor of Vermont from Gov. Edwin Edwards.

The children made props, wrote poems and gathered information about their topics for the program.

“T’ll be doing a talk about the government. I’m Huey P. Long, and I get shot,” said Ankur Kamdar.

“T’ll be telling about the constitution and the Legislature, and how the government gets our money and spends it,” Ankur said.

Matt Drewery said his topic is Louisiana legends.

“I’m doing a skit about Evangeline,” Matt said. “This is my beard.”

Matt made a large, white beard to wear when he takes on the role of story teller and relates the legend of Evangeline “as told by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,” he said.

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Amber Mizell portrays a Southern belle in the children’s skits

musicians will perform jazz music airband style for their hosts.

“We’re going to have the clarinet, the piano and all the horns,” Jason said, as he practiced on a cardboard trumpet.

Aucoin admitted that weeklong field trips were, before now, unheard of in the parish, but she doesn’t think the experience is unique.

“I really don’t think it’s that unusual from a teacher’s viewpoint. But opportunities like this don’t come around that often,” she said.

“This is really one of those trips where the doors have just opened. I’m a person who believes that doors open when you’re supposed to go through them. I feel real good about this trip,” she said.