

# Travelmates: Geography for Kids (and Stuffed Pets)

*What happens when kids let their stuffed animals go traveling?  
Answer: More than you think*

BY DIANE McCARTY

The two fourth grade classes in Malcolm Price Laboratory School at the University of Northern Iowa began a multidisciplinary unit in the fall of 1991 that brought the world a little closer to home.

We're doing the unit again this year, but since we'll be fast approaching one of the unit's high points (April 15) as you read this, let me tell you about our first time around with the project during the 1991-92 school year. That way, you'll get a fuller picture of our Travelmates unit.

Before I tell you just what we did and how we did it, let me credit Judy Dollard, who teaches at the Eisenhower Middle School in

Kansas City, Kansas, for the original idea on which the Travelmates unit was based. Judy and I were trainees at National Geographic Headquarters in Washington, DC, in 1991. We were trained as Geography Consultants for our states and have since tried many projects with our classes. The Travelmates project was easily one of the best.

**Wide, wide world.** The project began in the fall with the fourth graders preparing to send their Travelmates into the wide, wide world. It ended . . . well, actually, it didn't end. At least, not by the time school was out in June. At that time, there were still a few Travelmates seeing the sights, meeting interesting people, circling the globe.

Essentially, the unit was a way of letting students travel around the world without ever leaving school. From time to time, they sharpened their research skills in the library (which is where this month's cover picture was taken), but aside from visits to the library, the children stayed put in the classroom. It was their "special friends" who did all the traveling.

Each fourth grader chose a doll or stuffed animal from home to be his or her Travelmate. A dog tag with a class picture was placed around the Travelmate's neck. On one side of the dog tag were the school's name, address and phone number; on the other side was a brief statement of what the project was all about. Included in the statement was a request that the Travelmate be returned to our school by April 15.

Once the preliminary details were taken care of, the students were ready to start sewing backpacks. This was done with the

PHOTOS, GREG BROWN



*Preparing a diary is hard work – and it gets even harder when you're about to say good-bye to a very special friend.*

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*A class picture accompanied each toy on its journey.*



*Left: Creating a farewell card is fun, but what do you say to a friend who's leaving? Right: For some kids, saying good-bye was a painful experience.*



*Each Travelmate's trip was recorded on a world map.*



*Diane McCarty, two travelers and two happy owners.*

*Left: One last piggy back ride for a departing Travelmate. Right: Bon voyage! – and a shower of confetti at the farewell party.*

assistance of the school's home economics teacher and her students, who not only developed a pattern, but also helped the children safely sew a backpack for each Travelmate.

This was a big event for some of the fourth graders who had never touched a sewing machine before, let alone produce a beautiful product that would be important to their traveling friend. Important? Perhaps "essential"

would be a better word. The backpack was where the diary was kept, and the diary was where the details of the Travelmate's journeys were recorded.

We took a lot of trouble with the diary. On the cover were the words "Passport to the World," along with these instructions: "Dear Friend: Please sign my diary. Include places I've been and sights I've seen. A souvenir, or





*A few sips just in case. Who knows when the Travelmate will eat and drink again?*



*This girl seems proud of her Travelmate. Who can blame her? Not many dolls have traveled around the world.*

*“Essentially, the unit was a way of letting students travel around the world without ever leaving school.”*

best yet, a photo of you and me together would be wonderful! My only form of transportation is from person to person, so please pass me on. Sincerely, (Travelmate’s name). P. S. Please assist me in sending home an occasional postcard!”

We decided to put a writing model on the first page of the diary so that people would have some idea of what to write. After brainstorming various models, the students settled on one that was personalized. They talked about themselves and the kind of community they lived in, including its population, local industry and type of geography. Some students added a “personal interest” sentence to complete the model.

We were now ready to say good-bye and send our Travelmates out the door. We couldn’t do this, however, without a farewell party. The students prepared for the party by creating farewell cards. (The cards must have set some kind of record for sentimental thoughts.)

The send-off party, which included music and food, was a huge success. Each student shared a moment alone with his or her Travelmate by reading the card created for the party. I saw one child pretending to feed her Travelmate as she said good-bye. The confetti thrown on the Travelmates before the students took them out of the classroom door was the last hurrah.

**Monty’s adventure.** Most of the Travelmates began their adventures sometime between Thanksgiving and the end of Christmas break. The adventures began with a trip home to the student’s family. The family’s job was to find someone traveling during this

time period – be it near or far, be it Dad, Grandma or a neighbor.

Example: Monty, Laura’s Travelmate, went along with Laura’s father on a business trip to San Diego. There, the father handed Monty to a flight attendant, and Monty was off and winging. He visited Germany, Australia and Hawaii. We know he was there because people sent us postcards.

After Monty had been gone for about two months, the class received a phone call from another flight attendant who was in Paris. She reported that Monty was fine and had traveled around the world with four major airlines. What’s more, she said that Monty’s picture would be on the cover of Southwest Airlines’ next travel brochure for being a world class traveler.

**Writing with meaning.** During the absence of our Travelmates, the students used Writers’ Workshop time to create marvelous tales about their friends. Talk about writing with meaning! When children write about what is alive and vital to them, they create wonderful stories. Some students created truly fanciful adventures – the kind of adventures they hoped would happen to their Travelmate. Others wrote about what they believed was actually happening.

Auckland, New Zealand; Surfers’ Paradise, Australia; Sitka, Alaska; Guanxi, Peoples’ Republic of China; Kingston, Jamaica; Tokyo, Japan . . . Postcards, letters, pictures, books and gifts from wonderful places such as these were some of the items the fourth graders received in the mail while the Travelmates were seeing the world.

Most of the items were sent by people we





By April 15, most Travelmates were back home. They're shown here with Diane and two owners.

didn't even know. We heard from pilots, flight attendants, parents, grandparents, managers, teachers, corporation presidents, aunts, uncles, farmers, truck drivers, buyers, retired people, children, and on and on. These people were considerate enough to pass along our Travelmates to other people and to keep the fourth graders informed about the journeys. What a great lesson in kindness.

**Incorporating literature.** The literature found and read as part of this integrated unit seemed endless. The number of books relating to cities, states, regions, countries, continents, land features, animals and/or specific events increased as the list of sites visited grew longer. Two of our favorites were *Stringbean's Trip to the Shining Sea* by Vera and Jennifer Williams (Greenwillow, 1988) and *Anno's Journey* by Mitsumasa Anno (Putnam, 1981). The project was ideal for incorporating multicultural literature in a significant way.

The use of reference materials became an important skill as we located the wonderful places our Travelmates were visiting. Example: Locating Aruba, a small island north of Venezuela, was a thrill for Adrienne. We had received a postcard from someone in Aruba, and she was eager to show the entire class just where Cherish had been.

We couldn't wait until the mail was delivered each day. Philately became a new hobby for the fourth graders as our stamp collection increased. We had on-the-spot reading, geography, historical or current events, science and math all rolled into one with each new piece of correspondence.

We learned new names and new places.

We discovered how humans interact with their environment in different cultural and geographical regions. People often included information about time zones, population count and size of a particular area. We compared this information with what we knew about ourselves and then began to apply, interpret and speculate on global connections.

**Welcome home!** By April 15, most of the Travelmates had returned from their journeys. The diaries were full of fabulous information about their worldly adventures. The backpacks were often overflowing with treasures. Foreign currency was a favorite with the children.

It seemed appropriate to have a "Welcome Home" party for the Travelmates before the school year ended. Both fourth grade classes came together for this exciting event. It was a great opportunity for students to share a favorite passage from a diary, a picture, a gift or an unusual travel story.

One Travelmate, Sylvester, held a piece of history in its paws as his owner told about Sylvester's trip to the Berlin Wall. We honored the Travelmates who had not returned yet with a Missing in Action poster, complete with pictures of the absent Travelmates and their owners.

**On the map.** Our social studies period during the last week of school was spent with the children working in teams of two or three. The teams read through the journals and recorded all locations in sequence to show each Travelmate's itinerary. A sticker was placed on a large, laminated map to mark each location that had been visited.

Addresses of new friends were also recorded by the teams. It was time to send thank-you letters – as well as updated news about the Travelmates – to the many people who had assisted us in the project.

The teams also attempted to calculate the number of miles traveled. All we can say is that each Travelmate would have earned enough frequent flyer points to go on another trip – *with its owner*.

Literature, reading, writing, math science, geography, history, current events, art, sewing, reference skills, risk-taking and higher level thinking skills were all a natural part of this multidisciplinary project.

We never dreamed that this one small idea could teach us so much about ourselves and about the world around us. ↓

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