A Sense of Place
by Michael Umphrey

What is a “place?” Is that strip of grass between the lanes on the Interstate highway a place? Is a Web site a place? Is McDonald’s a place? What about the Little Big Horn Battlefield? The campsite on Lolo Creek that Lewis and Clark called Travelers’ Rest? Your favorite summer swimming hole? Some “places” are really no place. That is, we pass them without seeing them. When we are there they have no meaning for us. We remember them when we are gone. But other places are part of the landscapes in our minds. When we are homesick, we remember them. Sometimes we feel an urge to go to them. When we think of accomplishments, full of life, we see in our minds the places where they occurred, which are inseparable from what happened.

Other places are stored with events of national significance, so the entire country remembers important events by remembering where they occurred. Gettysburg, Wounded Knee, Pearl Harbor. Thousands of people visit such places so that they can forge a personal connection with events that matter. At such places, monuments and plaques usually tell the story. Yet other places have more personal meaning. The place where a brother died, a friend shared a secret, or you thought through a hard problem and decided to change your life. In these places, no memorials make the story public, but the story is real and important, nonetheless.

Place is the setting of the experiences that matter to us most and make us human.

Education researchers, following Howard Gardner, have shown that young people have no real understanding of the decontextualized information that flows over them in conventional teaching, and without such understanding they are often unable to transfer their learning to the world beyond the classroom window. Thorough engagement in place, our abstract and conceptual understandings are rooted in reality.

Besides, place-based teaching is more engaging for students as well as for teachers, part, community members. I’ve gone with teams of students from a geography class to gather data from an abandoned cemetery they discovered in the woods, where the first fur trader in the area is buried with his Indian family, near a vanished fort. I’ve accompanied a team of English students to Lewis and Clark campsites that they located after weeks of research, using journals and GIS software, so they could document the present, comparing the flora and fauna with the 1842 journals. I’ve helped art students complete a community calendar featuring drawings inspired by research into local stories. I’ve attended plays put on by high school drama classes based on oral histories collected from local elders. I’ve camped with old people have trouble seeing that the curriculum into personal knowledge.

Without knowing a particular place, we are unlikely to know much about where we are, what is happening, or even who we are. A sense of place, after all, is a sense of orientation. It is both the beginning and the end of knowing.

Michael Umphrey, a poet and former principal, directs the Montana Heritage Project, www.edheritage.org, and frequently writes and lectures about community-centered teaching.

“By studying history, nature, and folklore in the towns and neighborhoods that surround them, young people experience the adventure of discovery, while learning the skills of documentation, analysis, synthesis, interpretation, and presentation.”

—Michael Umphrey www.edheritage.org

Collyn Bandelier of Dillon High School documents the Polaris School today as part of year-long study of one-room schools in Montana’s Beaverhead County. The end product of their history and folklore study will be an exhibit at the Beaverhead County Museum created by teacher Jerry Girard’s Montana History students.