

# Neighborhoods

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Tommy Bledsoe played the part of a swamp monster as a story was told to the group.

## Bit of Appalachia spun in Portland by road theater

By **BRIEN SHEA**  
Special Writer

Appalshop's Roadside Theater rolled into Portland last Friday and gave students from five area schools a story they could tell.

Using dramatics, storytelling and music — plus a lot of personality — the group enthralled the group of 30 students, along with teachers and workers who had gathered at the Portland Museum.

The theater group was in town for the Appalshop Festival, sponsored by the Kentucky Center for the Arts.

Six fourth-graders each from Atkinson Elementary, Community Catholic, Portland Christian, Portland Elementary and Roosevelt/Perry Elementary were chosen to attend the free show, chock-full of fun and important messages.

"We're living in a world of television and video, and we should use these tools as resources," said Appalshop's Tommy Bledsoe, who thrilled the crowd with banjo playing and dramatizations. "We shouldn't

See APPALSHOP  
Page 3, col. 1

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## Appalshop theater brings Appalachia to Portland

Continued from Page One

let them get in the way of history. We should use them to remember and participate in our history."

Bledsoe and co-star Angelyn DeBord had no trouble getting the students to participate in *their* history. From the beginning, the wide-eyed bunch hung on every movement and word of the storytellers.

"That was great! They really told some funny stories," said Portland Elementary student Deondrea Bowdre, of Wewoka Avenue, who said her grandparents have told her many stories. "I think I'm gonna try and remember my grandparents' stories so I can tell them."

The Whitesburg, Ky.-based Appalshop is celebrating its 20th anniversary of exploring Appalachian issues through drama, storytelling, music, crafts, television, radio and recordings.

The 12-member Roadside Theater tours the world, telling stories of Appalachian history and culture.

On Friday, DeBord got things off with a bang when she pulled Roosevelt/Perry student Martricia Pearson to the stage to help her act out a

story. "I was a little shy at first," said Matricia, who lives on South 21st Street.

But her shyness didn't last long.

"It was a lot of fun," said Matricia, who loosened up enough to dance to banjo music at the end. "I really liked the stories."

And as Matricia warmed up, so did the rest of the crowd.

"They were all starting to volunteer. It was a great bunch of kids," DeBord said. "There was a lot of input."

Getting children involved was the goal of Bledsoe and DeBord, along with the teachers and principals of the five schools.

The students attending were picked by teachers of their schools. Though the selection criteria varied, emphasis was placed on which students could best relate the experience to their classmates.

The educators in the audience praised the show for its entertainment and educational value.

"This goes right along with what we're doing in school," said Community Catholic teacher Joanne Ken-

yon, whose students are exploring their own histories. "Portland has a rich culture, and some of it comes from Appalachia."

Roosevelt/Perry principal Jack Back, who was pulled on stage himself during a story, said the show should benefit his school's young authors program.

"This fits in with what we're doing," Back said. "I loved it, and the kids loved it. The storytellers were

tremendous."

Bledsoe and DeBord also encouraged the students to listen to stories their own relatives tell them, maybe even add to them, and keep them in their memory, or on tape, or anywhere else that life's experiences will be remembered.

"You may have people from a different country or of a different race," Bledsoe said. "But we're all talking about the same thing."