



Pat Dotterweich (wearing top hat) and students examine the contents of the trunk. From left, Megan Clishan, Jason Fitzgerald, Clint Walker, and Bonnie Flipczak.

## What's In Mr. D's Trunk?

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What's in Mr. D's trunk? That's the question in the young minds of Patrick Dotterweich's seventh grade students at Westminster West Middle School, in Carroll County, Maryland.

"I found an old trunk at an auction," said Mr. Dotterweich, who has been teaching social studies at the middle school for nine years. "It was painted bright pink, and I bought it for \$5."

Inspired by a hands-on history exhibit at the Smithsonian, Mr. Dotterweich refinished the old piece with a purpose in mind. "History is difficult for these kids to understand. If you can show them something, that makes it more real," he explained.

The trunk now occupies a prominent spot in room 7, where the walls and shelves serve as a showcase for glimpses into history. "My stuff is a collection of over a lot of years," said Mr. Dotterweich. The bulletin board announces "Into the Future with America Past."

Old photographs, flags, money, and bottles share the shelves with baseball memorabilia, Mickey Mouse ears, and more. But, most intriguing, is the trunk.

"It looks like a pirate chest," said 12-year-old Megan Clishan.

"I thought it was a treasure chest with Fool's gold," recalled seventh grader Clint Walker.

"He keeps an old lock on it, too," observed classmate, Jason Fitzgerald, also 12.

"That adds to the mystique," said Mr. Dotterweich, with a chuckle.

The contents of the trunk have not been completely revealed to the students. "It's full of a whole bunch of neat stuff and old artifacts," said Megan. "I've got to find out what's in there," added Jason.

One piece at a time, Mr. D., as the kids affectionately call him, pulls out of the trunk, a relic of the past. It may be an authentic newspaper from 1809, or a December 8, 1941 edition of the *Baltimore News Post* whose headline declares "War Declared on Japanese." "You can talk about them 'til you're blue in the face, but how interesting is that?" he asked.

"We talk about the value of looking at different sources of history for information. Some may give an accurate account or a distorted view," he explained.

"History is a tool," he continued. "I like to emphasize that you can study all these famous people, but it really doesn't make sense until you relate it to yourself."

The cedar-lined trunk, which measures about 2½ by 3¼ feet, guards such treasures as a centennial history of the U.S., signed baseballs, old Beatles records and a piece of the Berlin Wall. As the school year progresses, Mr. Dotterweich said he "pulls stuff out," and adds other things. He may change the artifacts within the old trunk to support lessons on Native Americans, the colonial period, the Westward Movement, "and my favorite, the Civil War," he said.

"A good way to work on thinking skills is to put in things they don't know," suggested Mr. Dotterweich. One such relic is an ancient piece of Aztec hoe money. The thin piece of copper currency was used by the Aztec Indians, according to the history buff. "Some were shorter and some were longer and they can be stacked. Four slaves could be bought with this before Christopher Columbus' time. After Columbus, it would purchase one bushel of corn," he explained.

Twelve-year-old Bonnie Flipczak gave an example of her teacher's unique approach to history in the classroom. "He pulls out something outrageous from that time, but it really makes sense and is a part of our lives now."

"He was trying to make us think like an archaeologist, and realize how important and difficult that job is," added Jason.

It's the kind of lesson that Mr. Dotterweich says "helps the students put it (history) in perspective — what it is that we value in our culture."

Seventh grade social studies with Mr. Dotterweich is a popular subject with the students. "I can't wait to come here," said Clint. "It's sad when we leave."

"He teaches us and entertains at the same time," the group concurred.

And they're still dying to know what is in Mr. D's trunk!

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