

No grumps here: Kids learn from elders

By CATHERINE BAUM Staff Writer

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EASTHAMPTON – Nearly 40 first-graders imagined what life was like without Burger King, television or even a daily shower on Thursday, when a couple of "Grumpy Gramps" shared their own first-grade experiences in a basement room at Center School.

The presentation - known as "Grumpy Gramps" - was given by Frank Steplar, 72, and Robert Belliveau, 85, who are both members of the Easthampton Council on Aging Enrichment Center.

"We're the Grumpy Gramps and we're nasty," said Belliveau, who grew up in Malden.

"We're going to go way back, 75 years ago, and your ticket is your imagination," he said. "If you talk in class you'll have to stay after school and write 'I will not talk in class' 50 times on the blackboard."

"Uh-oh," some children whispered.

But this is 2008, and it wasn't too long before the students very un-quietly reacted to the men's stories and started popping out questions.

After flipping a piece of paper over the wooden easel, Belliveau pointed to a list that said, "In 1933 we did not have: TV, computers, calculators, ball-point pens, cell phones, video games, frozen food, refrigerators, money..."

"Were you bored?" one student asked.

Belliveau flipped over another piece of paper titled "Games."

Hopscotch, jump rope, hide and seek, marbles and Chinese checkers were a few after-school activities they enjoyed. Steplar, who grew up during World War II, said he loved to read comic books like Flash Gordon, Bugs Bunny and Donald Duck.

"What's your favorite game?" asked Audrey Bronson, 7.

"Baseball," replied Steplar, who grew up in Westfield. He noted that he also enjoyed using his pocket knife to make whistles out of sumac wood scrapes.

But school always came first, Belliveau said. Every weekday they walked to the neighborhood schoolhouse, a wood building that served grades 1 through 3.

They left school for an hour during the day to go home, where their mothers made them lunches like macaroni, jam sandwiches and tomato soup. At the end of the day they had to change out of their school shoes and clothes, which were washed once a week.

Many students said "ewww" when Belliveau said there were no showers.

"We took baths once a week," Belliveau said.

Following the "Grumpy Gramps" self-described "history lesson," Center students lined up for their autographs.

"It must be a generational thing," Steplar said as the children were dismissed.

Catherine Baum can be reached at cbaum@gazettenet.com.