William Shakespeare was born in April 1564, and even now, 450 years later, his plays, including “Romeo and Juliet” and “Hamlet,” are the most admired literature in the world. He is also known for his sonnets (SAHN-its), a special type of poem.

The Mini Page talked with the head of reference at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., about Shakespeare’s childhood.

**Homeschooling**

William grew up with five siblings and many cousins. William’s mother and grandmother probably taught the kids to read at home. When they were about 4 or 5, children learned to read with a **hornbook**, or a little wooden tablet with a piece of paper or **parchment** glued to it. It was covered with a thin, protective piece of animal horn.

*Parchment is material made from animal skin.*

Not all kids learned how to write, although kids attending grammar school usually learned both reading and writing. There were no set rules for how to spell words at that time, so nobody had spelling tests.

**A Genius Grows Up**

This stained glass shows how a wealthy schoolboy would have dressed at the time Shakespeare was in school. These clothes were probably way too fancy for Shakespeare. He would have worn white or beige stockings with brown, black or gray short trousers and a jacket.

Experts think Shakespeare was probably born on April 23, 1564. He died exactly 52 years later, on April 23, 1616. This portrait of him was on a sign that may have hung outside a publishing house.

**Will’s home**

William was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. His father, John Shakespeare, was wealthy. He gained much of his money from his wife, Mary Arden. A woman’s property went to her husband at that time.

William’s dad made leather goods such as gloves. He was also a top official in Stratford. He was chief **alderman**, or an elected official similar to a city councilman. At times, he served as deputy **bailiff** (BAY-lif), or sheriff.
Elementary school

Boys from middle-class families usually started attending elementary school when they were between 7 and 11 years old. William was one of those lucky kids. Girls that age may have continued to learn at home, but many stopped going to any type of school.

When he was 7, William began attending the Stratford Grammar School, an excellent school founded in 1295. It was in a large hall above a meeting room. The building is still standing.

School was hard. The school day started at 6 a.m. in the summer and 7:00 a.m. in the winter. It lasted from eight to 12 hours, six days a week. Kids had to bring their own candles to study in the dark.

The school day began with prayers, followed by lessons in Latin, Greek, math, religion and writing. Students learned how to give a speech and how to debate.

Subjects

The boys studied plays and literature by ancient Romans and Greeks. Students learned by reciting or writing things over and over. They had to memorize a lot.

They also had to learn how to compose their own works. They often wrote in one language and then translated it to another.

Students also learned penmanship, which was a complicated process. They wrote by dipping a goosefeather into a pot of ink. They had to learn to sharpen the feather with a knife.

Paper was not as easy to get as it is today; it was valuable. Students had to learn how to write without blotting the ink or wrecking the paper.

Ready Resources

The Mini Page provides ideas for websites, books or other resources that will help you learn more about this week’s topics.

On the Web:
• www.folger.edu/kids

At the library:
• “Shakespeare (Eyewitness)” by Peter Chrisp
• “King of Shadows” by Susan Cooper
• “Shakespeare’s Globe: An Interactive Pop-up Theatre” by Toby Forward
• “Bard of Avon: The Story of William Shakespeare” by Diane Stanley and Peter Vennema

Shakespeare
Meet Idina Menzel

Idina Menzel is a singer, actress and songwriter. She was the voice of Elsa and the singer of “Let It Go” in the Disney movie “Frozen.” That song recently won the Academy Award for Best Original Song.

Idina is best known for her roles in Broadway plays and musicals. She won the top award for plays, the Tony Award, for playing the Oz witch Elphaba in the musical “Wicked.” She has acted in several movies, including “Enchanted,” and TV shows such as “Glee.”

She started acting in school plays in elementary school. She played the role of Dorothy in her fifth-grade show of “Wizard of Oz.” She sang at weddings and other special occasions when she was in high school. She earned her college degree in drama.

Idina, 42, was born in Syosset, N.Y. She has one younger sister. She co-founded the charity “A BroaderWay Foundation,” which helps young people in the arts.

Rookie Cookie’s Recipe

Mango-Honey Sherbet With Lime

You’ll need:

- 2 cups chopped mango
- 3 tablespoons honey
- 1 cup low-fat (1 percent) milk
- Juice and zest of 1 lime
- 1/2 cup orange juice

What to do:

1. In a food processor or blender, combine mango, milk, orange juice, honey, 1 tablespoon of the lime juice and 1/2 teaspoon of lime zest. Puree until smooth.
2. Transfer the mixture to a bowl or airtight container and freeze until firm, about 1 hour.

Serves 4.

You will need an adult’s help with this recipe.

Adapted from “The Robin Takes 5 Cookbook for Busy Families” with permission from Andrews McMeel Publishing (andrewsmcmeel.com).

Mini Spy

Mini Spy and Basset Brown are acting in “Romeo and Juliet.” See if you can find:

- bell
- key
- cat
- number 2
- fish hook
- dragon
- tooth
- crown
- pie
- frog
- shield
- letter B
- ear of corn
- kite
- ladder
- book
- number 3
- pencil
- letter V

Meet Mikaela Shiffrin

To get to the top of her sport, slalom skier Mikaela Shiffrin races to the bottom. And she is fast! Slalom is an alpine skiing event in which competitors must maneuver between different poles, called “gates,” as they move down the mountain.

Mikaela began competing in slalom when she was 6 years old. At 16, she debuted on the World Cup circuit — the highest level of international competition — with a third-place finish.

After winning her first World Championship in 2013, Mikaela set her sights on the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. On Feb. 21, she became the youngest slalom gold medalist in Olympic history at 18 years, 345 days.

Just two weeks later, Mikaela captured her eighth World Cup victory and a second-straight season title in the slalom.

Mini Jokes

All the following jokes have something in common. Can you guess the common theme or category?

**Sarah:** Why would Shakespeare have been rejected for military service?

**Stephen:** His spear would have been too shaky!

**Susan:** What did the bald man ponder?

**Sidney:** “Toupee or not toupee, that is the question!”

**Simon:** If Shakespeare had been a reptile, what would be a better name for him?

**Sonya:** Snakespeare!
Drama comes to town

About once a year, groups of traveling players, or actors, came to Stratford. From the time he was about 8, William was able to watch plays with the rest of the townspeople.

Players would perform in front of town officials, in the square or in an inn, or hotel, yard. People would watch from balconies around the inn.

There were no women players. Young men acted the women’s parts.

William also might have seen religious plays called mystery plays or miracle plays. Women did act in those. Traveling players may have performed in churches or on temporary stages built in the town.

Growing up

When William was about 15, his father lost much of his money. He also lost his job as alderman. He was in danger of losing his property.

William left school around that time. No one knows what he did for the next few years. He may have become a schoolmaster in a household in northern England, or he may have become an actor.

He returned to Stratford when he was 18 and married a neighborhood girl, Anne Hathaway. They had a daughter, Susanna, and twins, Hamnet and Judith. Hamnet died when he was 11.

The wonderful plays

We don’t know how Shakespeare got started in theater, but experts know he was in London acting and writing plays by the 1590s.

His playwriting career was very successful. He bought a house in Stratford for his family. It was the second-largest house in town, with 10 fireplaces, two orchards, two barns and two gardens.

He became part owner of a very successful playing, or acting, company, The King’s Men. It was probably sponsored, or supported, by King James. Shakespeare also owned property in London.

Going to the theater

When Shakespeare’s theater career began, there was little entertainment. People could go to bear baitings, or dogs attacking captive bears, to church or to plays. Plays were so popular that one-quarter of London’s population might see a play.