

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Crossing the Colorado Rockies, 1864

by
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Book Information

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The Hitchcocks venture west to Pikes Peak to find gold.

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American Sisters

Main Characters

Edith LaRue a former actress and tightrope walker known as Ella LaRue, who lives in the Colorado wilderness with her family

Hannah Lucille Hitchcock (Lucy) Eda's complaining older sister, who is physically disabled

Harriet Adelle Hitchcock (Eda) a thirteen-year-old girl who keeps a journal while traveling with her family to Colorado

Ma Hitchcock Eda's snobbish mother, who comes from an aristocratic family out East

Pa Hitchcock Eda's father, who is moving his family West to search for gold after losing his dry-goods business in Pennsylvania

Sarah Belle Hitchcock Eda's seventeen-year-old sister, who accepts a temporary teaching job in the tiny Colorado town of Cache Creek

Ulysses Edith's companion and a former photographer; he makes metal whirlabouts

Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska, California, and Kansas the children of Edith and Ulysses

Vocabulary

barbarian a person lacking refinement, learning, or culture

chaperone an adult escort for an unmarried young person whose duty is to guide the person in matters of propriety in public situations

guerrilla a person of an independent warfare unit usually engaging in harassment and sabotage

melodeon a small reed organ which operates by pumping air with a pedal

valise a suitcase

Synopsis

Thirteen-year-old Eda Hitchcock wants to be back in Pennsylvania rather than traveling with her family and two hired men to Colorado, Pa's destination for prospecting. Being the youngest, no one wants to tell her anything or answer her questions, so Eda depends on her journal, which she writes in code. Eda's oldest sister, Lucy, is critical, and Ma is too concerned with keeping up societal appearances to notice Eda's loneliness. Only Belle, Eda's seventeen-year-old sister, takes Eda into her confidence about her secret job as a reporter for a newspaper back East. Ma does not approve of writing or Eda's dream of college as proper ambitions for young ladies.

Arriving at Young America Gulch, the family realizes how different their lives will be, and society around the mining town of Fairplay does not meet with Ma's approval. News of Indian attacks, Confederate guerrillas, and wild animals worry the women, but Pa assures them he will soon be striking it rich. They will then enjoy the luxuries back East again. Before leaving for the mining camp, Pa uses the last of the money to buy a pony, much to Ma's disapproval. As Pa and the two hired men, Harry and Dick, leave for the camp, the women adjust to the shack that is now home. A few fancy dresses and Ma's melodeon are the only reminders of their previous life. Constant quarreling among the girls along with Ma's nerves and headaches make the next few days unbearable for Eda. The girls attempt to cook without guidance, but the canned food is running out so they must find another food supply. While attempting to catch fish, Eda sees a young boy and realizes there must be neighbors close by.

On Sunday, while her sisters and mother observe the day in Bible reading, Eda slips out hoping to meet the young boy. Finding a crude trail through

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the woods, Eda happens upon the house of Edith LaRue and Ulysses while their five children are performing on a homemade stage. Eda is astounded by the appearance of Edith, a former actress and tightrope walker, as well as by her strange and unruly family. But she finds herself caught up in the friendliness of Edith and the children and spends the entire day pretending and talking until dark. At home, Ma insists on knowing everything about the LaRue family and informs Eda she may not go again unless chaperoned. The next day, Mr. Dowdy from Cache Creek arrives wanting to hire a teacher for his town. Eda desperately wants to go, but Belle agrees and leaves the next day. Eda, left behind with her whining sister, Lucy, and her unrealistic mother, needs to find a way to visit the LaRues. A few days later, while Ma is asleep, Eda persuades Lucy to ride the pony to gather raspberries. While together, Eda sees a better side of Lucy. When they return to the house, Ma explains that Mr. Dowdy visited with news of Belle, and Harry reports that the Indians have been murdering white settlers. Suddenly, Edith and her band of children emerge from the woods, invade the Hitchcock shack, eat marmalade, and play Ma's melodeon. They only leave when Ma agrees to let Eda and Lucy go fishing with them. During the next few weeks, Eda and Lucy enjoy the company of the performing family, who answer questions for Eda that her own family avoids discussing.

As winter approaches, Belle returns from teaching, and Pa arrives and announces the family is broke, forcing them to head back to Pennsylvania immediately. Two weeks later they arrive in Denver where Pa sells the melodeon to pay for food and rooms. Naively, Pa leaves the wagon unattended overnight and everything, including Eda's journal, is stolen. With the money gone, the family is forced to live in the charity-run tent city until the snow subsides. Eda earns enough gold dust by washing a store's floor to allow Pa to send a telegram back East. Pa intends to ask Uncle Peter to send a loan to help them get back to Pennsylvania, but the plan fails since Indians cut the telegraph lines surrounding Denver. With tensions mounting between the Indians and settlers, Colonel

Chivington's volunteer army massacres over 500 Cheyenne.

On Christmas the family attends services in Denver and Eda is allowed to choose a present from the charity tree. She selects a small notebook and pencil, much to the chagrin of her sisters. After services, an older boy tosses the notebook onto the church roof. Miserable, Eda decides to retrieve the notebook late that night. While on the roof, she sees Reverend Day sneak some Cheyenne people into the church below her. Fearing the Indians will harm Reverend Day, Eda persuades her sisters to accompany her to the church the next morning. Miss Lambert, a church member, welcomes the girls, cautiously assuming they have come to help. She takes them to a small inner room where some Cheyenne ladies and children huddle and explains that these are survivors of the massacre. As her sisters assist in making clothing, a young Indian girl intently watches Eda write in her notebook. When Eda allows the girl to draw pictures in the notebook about the massacre, she realizes how much the girl is like her. Before leaving, Eda gives the notebook to the girl. Eda and her sisters return to their tent where they alter Belle's remaining silk dress. Returning to the church just as the group and Miss Lambert are leaving, Lucy gives the dress to the girl, and the three sisters go back to the tent with a new feeling of gratitude for their family. Soon afterward, the family makes their way across the plains to Des Moines, where they board a train heading back to Pennsylvania.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

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Initial Understanding

What does Eda find strange about the LaRue family?

Edith has on tights and a short skirt, which the Hitchcock women would never wear. Also, the children are named after places rather than given "Christian" names. She is astounded that Edith and Ulysses are not married and yet have children. Edith never yells at the children or complains about their actions the way Eda's mother does.

Literary Analysis

What causes the tensions between the settlers and the Indians?

The settlers are building mines all over the land used by the Indians. When the Indians fight back, many settlers and Indians are killed. The Indians then cut the telegraph lines, preventing the people in Denver from sending or receiving any messages, thus escalating the hostilities even further.

Inferential Comprehension

Why are Pa and Ma so sure it will take almost no time for him to strike it rich in prospecting?

Coming from out East, they probably had only read stories of people who became prospectors and discovered huge gold deposits after a short time. The stories of people who had failed were probably not as widespread. Both parents seem very naive about life in the West, and neither is prepared for the hardships they face.

Constructing Meaning

Eda refers to her notebook and pencils as her instruments of salvation. What does she mean?

The notebook allows her to put down all her thoughts and feelings when everyone around her ignores her or refuses to answer her questions. Having a place to write down how she feels helps her from becoming dejected, lonely, and miserable. The notebook and pencil give her hope.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Pa

Pa attempts to prospect for gold in the Colorado Territory as did many men during this period of history. Thinking it would be easy to pan for gold and become rich in a short amount of time, these prospectors set up flumes and riffles and directed streams down the mountains. Using Eda's explanation in chapter nine, have students research and then draw a picture of a typical gold prospector's equipment, labeling all the parts to show how to pan for gold.

Extending Meaning The Sand Creek Massacre was an event that actually occurred. Have students research Colonel J.J. Chivington and the Sand Creek Massacre and write a short report as to what happened and how it might have contributed to the negative feelings between the Native Americans and the settlers.

Recognizing Details Eda wrote her journal in code so that her parents and sisters could not read it. Have students develop their own secret code and then write a journal entry using the code. Then allow students to exchange papers and attempt to decipher the codes.

Responding to Literature Edith, Ulysses, and their children put on shows to amuse themselves in the wild. Traveling shows which featured music, dancing, and short plays helped many of the Western towns to enjoy performing arts. Have students write a short play similar to what Edith's family would act out. Similarly, use old sheets for the curtains and have students find creative ways to costume themselves and to create scenery. Put the show on for younger children, or invite parents for a fun end-of-the-day activity.

Teachable Skills