

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Dear Levi: Letters from the Overland Trail

by  
Elvira Woodruff

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### Book Information

Elvira Woodruff, Dear Levi: Letters from the Overland Trail

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119 Pages

Book Level: 5.3

Interest Level: MG

A historical novel about life on the rugged Overland Trail in 1851 on the way to Oregon.

**Topics:** Adventure, Travel; History, Frontier/Pioneer Life; People, Pioneers/Settlers; U.S. States/Regions, Oregon; U.S. States/Regions, Pennsylvania

### Main Characters

Austin Ives the main character, a twelve-year-old boy who is traveling to Oregon to visit his pa's claims

Frank Hickman a boy on the journey who becomes friends with Austin

Hiram Buckner another boy who becomes friends with Austin

Mr. & Mrs. Morrison the parents Austin travels with on his journey

Mr. Hickman Frank's dad, a cruel man who beats his son

Reuben McAlister Rice a kind, rather eccentric man who befriends Austin

### Vocabulary

**cholera** disease marked by severe vomiting and dysentery

**concoction** a preparation or mixture

**infernal** of or like hell, often used as an expression of disapproval

**militia** civilian soldiers

**rheumatism** disorder marked by inflammation or pain in muscles or joints

**ruckus** disturbance or uproar

**stronghold** a structure or place offering resistance to a hostile force

### Synopsis

Austin Ives is a twelve-year-old boy from Pennsylvania. His father has died of the fever, after claiming some land near the Columbia River in Oregon. Young Austin travels west with a wagon caravan to investigate his pa's claim. His mother is dead also, and all that remain are his brother, Levi, and his pa's land. The story is told through letters written faithfully to his brother back home.

He joins up with the Morrison family on the Overland Trail. They already have three little girls and it seems they are grateful for a young man to be along.

Austin befriends two boys, Frank Hickman and Hiram Buckner. Frank is a quiet boy who is frequently abused by his father, Mr. Hickman; Hiram often tells ridiculous tall tales. The three boys become very close and even become blood brothers before they must part ways on the Trail.

Reuben McAlister Rice is a good man who becomes friends with the boys. He has bright red hair and would probably be considered eccentric because he collects buttons with which has made a button coat, he collects herbs for medicinal purposes, and he has a stuffed cat, Old Bill, where he has hidden his gold nuggets.

Mr. Hickman is a cruel man, and he confesses at campfire one night, how much he wants to shoot an Injun'. Most everyone laughs, but Mr. Morrison tells him he has no right to kill anyone. The next day, Mr. Hickman gets his wish--he shoots an innocent Indian woman who had been carrying a tiny baby. Mr. Hickman shows no remorse and instead looks for someone to blame for his actions. The Indian tribe, however, is greatly offended and intent on seeking revenge. And they find it. They kill Mr. Morrison as retribution for having one of their own killed.

Mrs. Morrison is heartbroken, and she is expecting another child. The girls are deeply hurt as well, and Austin gives them as much comfort and support as

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he can. Unfortunately, Mrs. Morrison and the new baby die shortly after birth. Austin has faced much death: his parents, the Morrises, and all of the graves that litter the Overland Trail.

After Mrs. Morrison's death, Mr. Hickman offers to take Austin. Reuben, sensing Mr. Hickman would surely beat the boy, offers to take him, saying he needs someone to wash the pots. Together they make it to Oregon and find Pa's claim, only to learn it has been stolen by Mr. Zikes. All seems lost, until Reuben buys the land back with the nuggets kept stashed in Old Bill. Soon, Levi will come out and join them and they will all live together on the land.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

What did Reuben mean by this quote: "They (white men) can be more savage than the Indians."?

*Answer should show how white men will kill another for no other reason than to murder. Also, a father's cruelty to his own son is another answer.*

#### Literary Analysis

How does Austin change during the story?

*He learns to persevere and not to give up hope. He betters himself by learning new things.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

How do the white men justify killing the Indians?

*They seem to view Indians on an animal or sub-human level. They see the differences in their skin color and ways as reason to murder.*

#### Constructing Meaning

How do you know Mr. Hickman was a mean person?

*He killed an Indian woman with no remorse. Also, he beat his son.*

### Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** This story takes place along the Overland Trail during the 1850s. It took Austin nearly five months to reach his destination. It would have been thousands of miles from Pennsylvania to the Iveses' claim in Oregon. Wagons could only travel ten or twenty miles a day. More than 34,000 people died on the Westward trails during the 1840s and 1850s--usually from accidents or sickness and disease, such as cholera. It is said that one grave could be found every one hundred yards. Have students research diseases that plagued the pioneers--cholera, rheumatism, pneumonia. Discover which diseases have been eradicated and when. Reuben used herbs to heal. Let students study how illness was treated then, and compare it to how we treat illness today.

**Understanding Literary Features** One of the themes of this story is man's cruelty toward people of different races. In this book, man's fears and prejudices toward Native Americans are explored. Have students ponder why white Americans may have feared the Indians, but also show that it was wrong to act out on those fears. Students could research different peoples that have been oppressed through the ages. Such groups to study might include Jews, Asians, African Americans and Native Americans. Study the extreme actions that have been taken against them and what minorities have done to combat them.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Mr. Hickman had a very negative image of the Indians of his time, even though the book mentions that many Indians were helpful and peaceful. For a project, have students research famous Indians who have been important in the history of this country. One example might be Sacajawea, who helped lead Lewis and Clark. Another example might be Louise Erdrich, an award winning Native American author. Other examples to research might be Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, White Cloud and Pocahontas.

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**Understanding the Author's Craft** The characters in this story are developed only through letters Austin writes home to his brother, Levi. Instead of the usual character development we get through dialogue and action, we only know characters through Austin's recollections. This might seem to limit descriptive abilities, yet Austin does a superb job showing his brother, and the reader, his life on the trail. For a written project, have students write several letters, perhaps over a period of several days, to a friend or relative describing their day, from school to home. Challenge them to be descriptive, but only allow a page or two per letter.