

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Wagon Train 911 by Jamie Gilson

Book Information

Jamie Gilson, Wagon Train 911

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Book Level: 3.3

Interest Level: MG

As a school project, fifth graders recreate a westward trek to Oregon with all the perils that faced real pioneers.

Topics: Adventure, Travel; Community Life, School; People, Pioneers/Settlers; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 1-3

Main Characters

Clyde a fifth-grade boy who makes trouble for Wagon Train Seven

Dinah Barnes the principal character in the story, a fifth grader who doesn't know how to handle her tall body and makes fun of herself in the process

Kaat Jackson Dinah's best friend

Marilou and Michael fifth-grade students traveling with Wagon Train Seven

Meg a drama student from the university who helps with the WOW project

Mr. Marconi the fifth-grade teacher, who does the WOW project every year

Orin Philpot the fifth-grade boy who is Dinah's "husband" for the Wagons Out West (WOW) project

Vocabulary

charter rules

dysentery an infection of the lower intestines

elixir a sweet-tasting medicine

excrement waste matter that passes from the body

scrumptious very tasty

stampede a sudden, violent rush of startled animals

Synopsis

Every year, Mr. Marconi and his fifth-grade class do a Wagon's Out West (WOW) project, in which students pretend as if they are traveling west from Missouri to Oregon in 1846.

Dinah Barnes finds herself partnered with fellow fifth-grader Orin Philpot as husband and wife during the project. It doesn't please either of them, considering Dinah is ten inches taller than Orin. The stage is set from the moment Orin eats the piece of paper identifying Dinah as his wife. "Dr. and Lydia Jones" form an uneasy partnership with six other classmates, and Wagon Train Seven heads West for the next two weeks of class.

Once they elect a leader, the group makes rules for their wagon train to follow as they travel, but their leader resigns after shooting a Shawnee Indian. The group is off to a rocky start. One member of the group, Clyde, seems to be especially contrary. He accuses "Marty and Lydia" of stealing his animals. Two people in their party come down with dysentery, and it's up to "Marty" to save their lives. The day the wagon train is supposed to cross the North Platte River, "Lydia" gives birth to a baby girl!

While at home, Dinah accidentally dyes her hair green, which makes her stand out more than ever. The project continues, and Wagon Train Seven loses valuable points for arguing and disorganization. They discover that they must play a game of chance to get over a dangerous mountain pass. The new leader, "Lydia," rolls the die that determines their fate: death. Clearly upset at the outcome, wagon train members make excuses and place blame for their fate. It seems these students have taken the project more seriously than they expected.

When the WOW project is winding up with a breakfast, Dinah begins to revert back to her old joke-cracking, face-making D-Rex personality. Orin refuses to acknowledge her and extracts a promise from her to stop "the dumb walks and the stupid faces." They lead a dance and when it is finished,

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Orin reveals a head of just-dyed purple hair.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Dinah and Orin were described as physical opposites, but what might they have in common?

Both want to be accepted by classmates, but don't know the best way to fit in. Both behave in strange ways so they have some control over the attention they receive. Both are intelligent, funny, and can stick up for themselves.

Literary Analysis

Why do you think the author didn't have a happy ending for Wagon Train Seven?

She wanted to make readers aware of the very real fact many wagon trains didn't survive the harsh journey to Oregon.

Inferential Comprehension

Which pioneer character is your favorite? Which would you most like to be? Which are you most like?

Dinah was smart and funny, but put herself down to make others laugh. Orin was smart but insecure because of his height. He seemed to need to remind others he was intelligent. Marilou was somewhat shallow, but showed she was smarter than she outwardly appeared to be. Clyde was negative, jealous, lazy, and contrary.

Constructing Meaning

What might have happened to Wagon Train Seven if Clyde had been their leader?

Answers should be based on Clyde's negative and controlling attitude: no majority decision making, unfair leadership, his way or no way. Wagon Train Seven may have died sooner.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story's imaginary setting takes place along the Oregon Trail, which ran from Missouri to Oregon. Wagon Train Seven is traveling the trail in 1846. Have students map out the Oregon Trail, including important markers and stops along the way. They should include as many geographical elements as possible (i.e. rivers, mountains, plains) and plan carefully what they will take on the journey. Tell students to carefully choose supplies based on money and the number of people in the party. What items can be taken from home? What decisions need to be made?

Understanding Literary Features Throughout the story, the reader gets the feeling that Dinah and Orin are sort of outcasts in their fifth grade class. In Dinah's case, she seems perfectly content to make her tallness part of her daily routine by emphasizing it. She pretends to be D-Rex, makes funny faces and walks in strange ways. Orin notices the way she acts and tells her straight out to stop it. There is a point where Orin tells Dinah she and Lydia are the same person, only Dinah helps others make fun of her. Both friendship and survival are themes of this story. Have the class create two skits. In one skit, students should act out friendship and survival on the Oregon Trail and in the other, role-play friendship and survival as young people in modern times. Possible resources include scenes from the book, headlines from the news, or other historical pieces of information.

Understanding Characterization Wagon Train Seven includes eight students. The group has a varied outlook on the journey. Dinah and Orin seem to be misfits as husband and wife, Clyde is very negative about the entire project and causes trouble. Marilou is upset she isn't in the same group as her friends, Tiffani and Brandi. Michael takes the role as leader, but feels stupid. Allow students to choose one of the pioneer characters in Wagon Train Seven and keep a journal of their feelings along the way. The story shows several

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journal entries, but not one for each month of the trip. Students' journals should include an entry for each month the group travels. Have them include such things as personal emotions, activities along the way, weather patterns, and dangers. How would the character chosen react to each of the above items?

Understanding the Author's Craft Wagon Train Seven has no choice but to roll the die three times as they cross the dangerous mountain pass at the end of the story. Unfortunately, on the third roll, Dinah throws a six, which means they inevitably die. Have students rewrite an ending to the story in which a six was not rolled. Wagon Train Seven crosses the mountain pass safely and continues on the journey to Oregon. What might still be in their path? Will all eight members survive? What will each family do upon reaching Oregon? What might happen to Clyde?