

Covered Wagon Racing

A Bit of History, A Bit of Fun



Covered Wagon Racing: A Bit of History, A Bit of Fun
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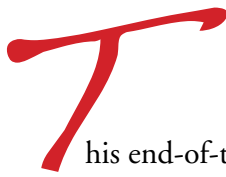
*Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything
as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency comes from God.*
—II Corinthians 3:5

*Education is not filling a bucket,
but lighting a fire.*

— William Butler Yeats

Wagon Racing

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his end-of-the-year event is a real student favorite and one they'll talk about for years and years. The entire activity—outlined below—can be completed in three weeks at a somewhat leisurely pace. If you're pressed for time, you could do the book portion as a read-aloud and pull off the whole thing in a week.

The Basics

Although the race itself (and the prep that goes into it) is the big thing for the students, the literacy/US history aspect makes this project somewhat easier to justify.

What your students will do:

- 1) Read the book *Cassie's Journey*. (Since the book is out-of-print, I've created a PDF version you can use. This falls under the *Fair Use* exception for copyrighted educational media.)
- 2) Complete five activity sheets for the five parts of the book. (The five blackline masters can be found in the appendix of this eBook.)
- 3) Complete one word study sheet for each activity sheet. (The blackline master is in the Appendix. You could also use regular lined paper or have them complete the vocabulary work on the back of the activity sheet.)
- 4) Create and decorate a cardboard covered wagon. (The template for making the wagon can be found in the Appendix.)
- 5) Create a wagon trail in your classroom. (Instructions and photos are included in this eBook.)
- 6) Learn how to race. (Although this is easier than it may sound, it does require a few days to practice to become proficient.)
- 7) Participate in the actual wagon race. (Students race head-to-head with the winner of each heat advancing to the next round. Way fun.)

That's the big picture. Here come the details.

Book Work

Make a copy of the book and a set of activity sheets for each student. Run off a bunch of copies of the word study blackline master. You'll need five for each student. While you're at it, you might as well run some additional copies. It's always helpful to have extras on hand in case a student—or twelve—needs to redo some of the work.

As you read[†], encourage your students to write in their booklets. Their notes, based on your class discussion of the selection, will make the activity sheets easier to complete. Have them highlight the vocabulary words as you come to them. If your students don't have highlighters, yellow crayons work great.

Although you could complete the five parts of the book in a week's time, it's a bit more relaxing and enjoyable to allow your students two days for each part. It just depends upon your time constraints and the abilities of your students.

You might want to have students mark sections of the text that refer to the conditions of the trail. You'll be able to add these features later on when you work on the race track.

Building the Wagons

There's a bit of work for you to do and some work for your students to do. If you have the time and your district allows you to schedule art activities, let your students do the wagon construction in class. Otherwise, most of this part can be completed at home.

Your part:

1. Make an extra copy of the wagon pattern and set it aside just to be safe. (You can always download another one from www.newmanagement.com)
2. Cut out your pattern and then trace it onto a sheet of cardboard. Cut out the cardboard wagon and set it aside. (Your students will use this pattern to trace their own patterns, so make a nice one. I cut mine out of 1/8" masonite with a scroll saw, but that's probably a bit of overkill.)

Their part:

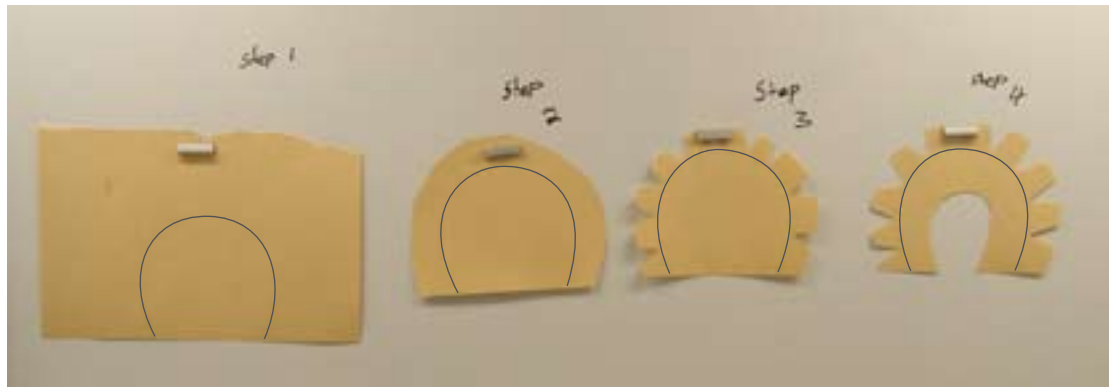
1. Ask the students to bring in a sheet of cardboard. Let them know that the quality of their wagons, and the wagons' racing abilities, is somewhat dependent upon the type of cardboard they bring. A clean, empty box from the grocery store with uncreased sides is good. Last night's pizza box, not so good.

[†] To help students differentiate the five book parts, suggest that they create some type of text feature as a reading aide. For instance, they could draw a line across a page and label the beginning of a new part. Another suggestion would be to add a suffix to the page number. Thus, 11/3 would be page 11, part 3.

Suggestion: If a student is going to bring in just one sheet of cardboard, it will need to be at least 9 X 12 inches. It's actually easier if they bring in a whole box. This will allow them to choose the best side and also provide extra cardboard for the students who either weren't able to bring in a piece or just forgot to do so.

2. Have the students trace the pattern onto their cardboard.
3. HAVE THEM TAKE THE CARDBOARD HOME TO DO THE ACTUAL CUTTING. Trying to do it in class with those anemic student scissors is not my idea of an enjoyable way to spend an afternoon.
4. Cover the wagon with paper to look like canvas on the top. The easiest way to do this is make "paper doll clothes" with tabs that can be wrapped around to the backside and glued down.

I've found that putting the steps on the board makes it easier for the students to complete the task.



- Step 1) Trace the top of the wagon onto a piece of manila drawing paper or white construction paper.
- Step 2) Leaving a 2-inch margin, cut around the trace line.
- Step 3) Cut out triangles from the edge of the paper to the trace line.
- Step 4) Cut an opening.
- Step 5) Attach it to the cardboard wagon.

Although a glue stick works great for getting the paper to adhere to the front side of the wagon, the tabs need the added strength of white glue.

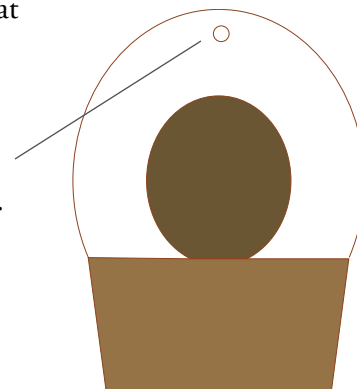


5. Trace and cut a piece of brown construction paper to represent the wagon box.
6. After gluing down the brown paper, have your students add wood grain lines with a pen or pencil. Also, since the wagon in the story has a name painted on the box, you might want to have your students create a name for their wagons and write the names on the wagon box portion.

Bonus: Students can fill the opening in the canvas with a different color of paper or create a drawing to represent what would be inside of the wagon.

Back to you:

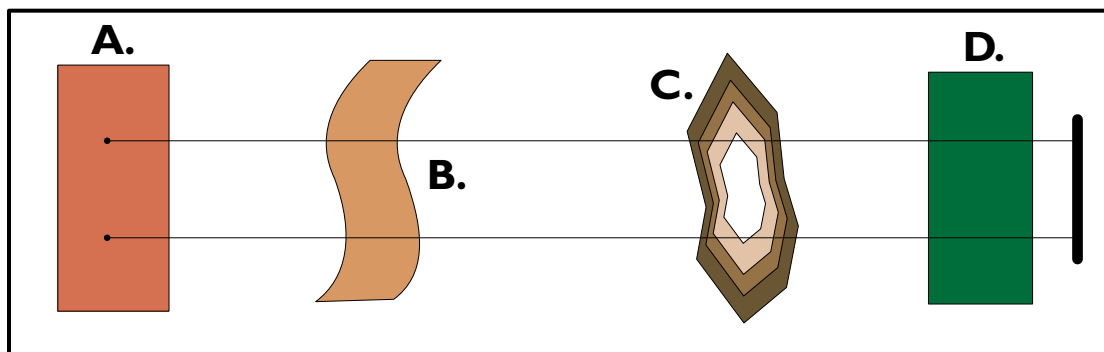
1. Allow the glue to dry and then, using a hole punch, create a hole at the top of the wagon. The string for racing will pass through this opening.



Creating a Wagon Trail

The wagon trail is best constructed on a carpeted area. The carpet will provide the traction the wagons need in order to race properly. One year, I borrowed a roll of carpet from one of the parents who was a carpet layer and returned it, along with thank you notes, when we were finished.

Here's the basic wagon trail layout. It's about 15 to 20 feet long and about 6 feet wide.



A. Starting Point

We used a piece of masonite to simulate the soil conditions which prompted Cassie's family to leave their farm. The somewhat slick surface made for an interesting start.

B. The Platte River

I took two sheets of light brown construction paper—the river in the story

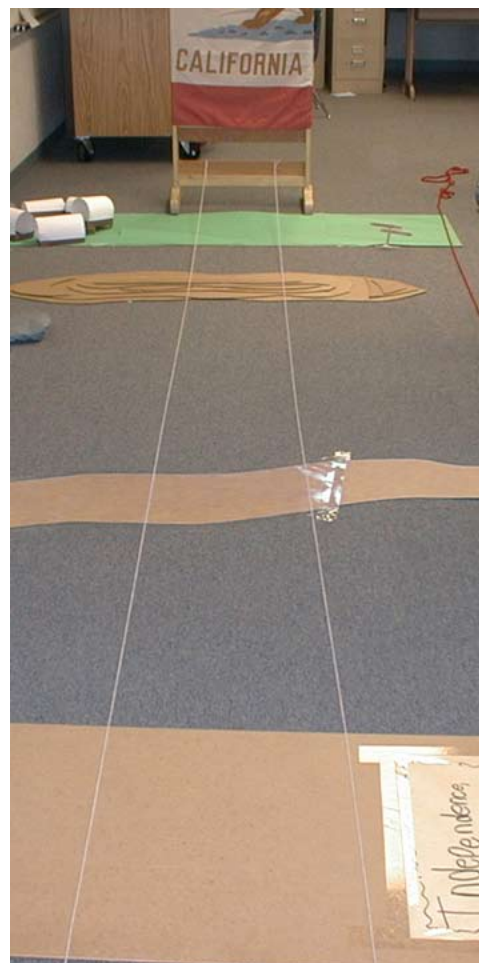
is muddy—and joined them with tape. I then cut out a reasonable looking river and laminated the whole thing. The river is then taped down to the carpet. Crossing the river is not that difficult but it does add a nice element to the trail.

C. The Rocky Mountains

I made this obstacle by hot gluing 4 sheets of cardboard on top of each other. Like a topographic map, the layers get smaller as the elevation increases. I capped it all with small pieces cut from a white cardboard box to give the feel of snow on the top of the mountains.

D. California

I taped some green construction paper at the end of the trail to act as a finish line. The racing strings were tied to an old easel and covered with a California flag.



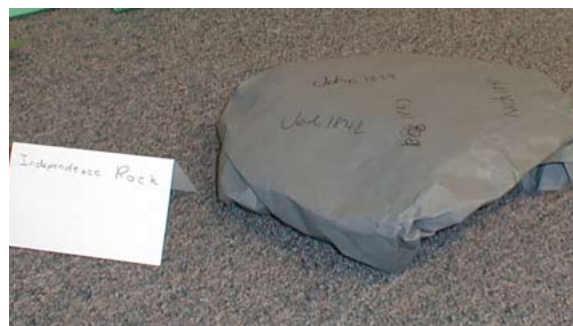
Bonus Trail Features

There are a number of references in Cassie's Journey that students can recreate and add to the trail to enhance the realism and authenticity. Here are just a few examples.



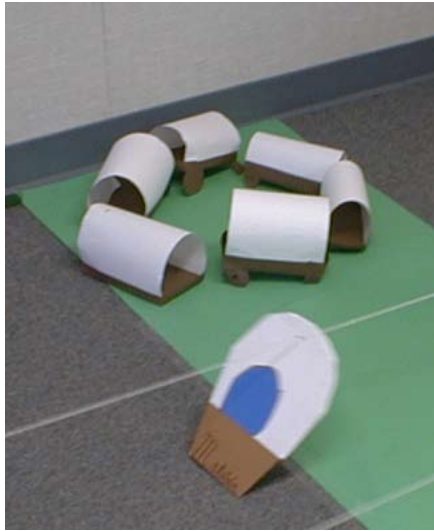
Prairie Grass

*strips of green construction paper;
folded lengthwise and cut to the fold;
refolded at a right angle and stood along
the far side of the trail area*



Independence Rock

*gray construction paper
decorated with "carvings";
edges curled under to make it round*



Circle of Wagons
*simple construction paper;
wagons placed near
the finish line*



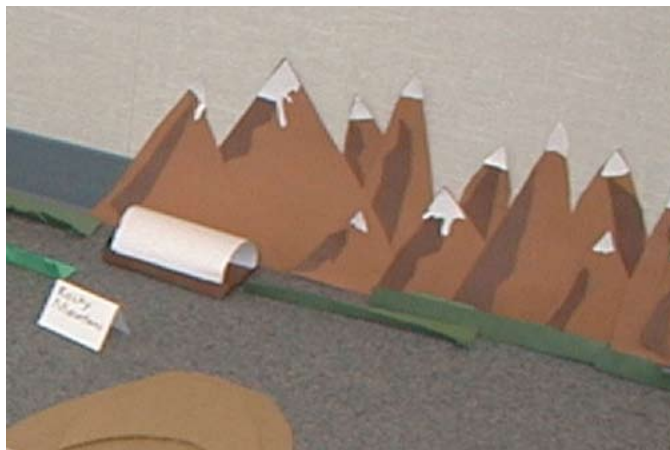
Starting Sign
*a sheet of drawing paper taped to
the masonite starting point;
Independence, Missouri
Pop. 1,245*



Trail Sign
*popsicle sticks;
"California...Oregon"*



Platte River Warning Sign
*tent sign;
"Platte River Don't drink."*



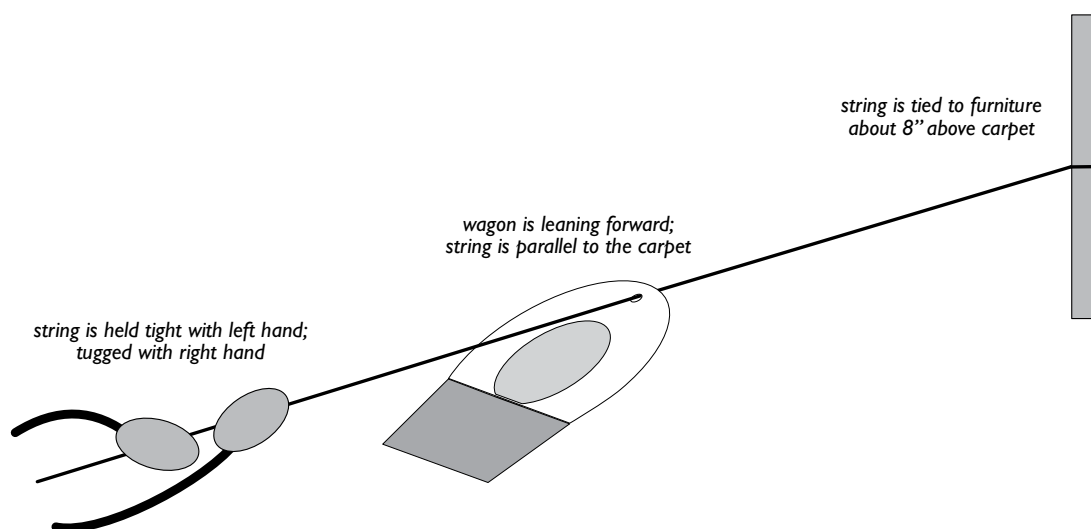
Other Suggestions
*tombstones, grave sites,
broken-down wagons,
buffalo, camp fires, an
Indian camp, etc., etc.*

Mountains
*construction paper mountains;
taped to back wall*

Learning How to Race a Wagon

Tie a strong piece of twine, 10 to 12 feet in length, to the leg of a chair or piece of furniture. The tying point should be about 8 inches above the carpet. Next, run the string down the length of the practice course. Thread the string through the opening in your wagon. Make sure you thread it from the back or your wagon will be upside down when you race.

Sit comfortably with your legs crossed and your elbows resting on your knees. Take out the slack by pulling the string toward you. As you keep the string somewhat tight and parallel to the carpet, check to make sure that your wagon is leaning forward.



Now, with your other hand, give the string a series of little tugs. Experiment to see what works best for you: quick tugs, slow tugs, or a twitching kind of motion.

At this point, you are thinking one of two things.

1. Wow! My wagon is actually moving down the trail! How cool is that?
2. Hey! This thing's not going anywhere. What gives?

The reality of the situation is that it's not uncommon, at first, to find your wagon doing not much of anything as you sit there and tug, tug, tug. And for those of you who have not witnessed the miracle of the covered wagon racing along the string, here is what you should see happening.

As you tug on the string, it gets tighter. This causes the wagon to stand a bit taller. Then, after the tug when the string becomes a bit slack, the top of the wagon falls towards the carpet.

When the string is once again tightened with the next tug, a short length of the string passes through the hole at the top of the wagon. As it rises, the bottom of the wagon scoots forward an inch or so. This slow crawl, which with a bit of practice becomes a fast inching forward movement, is what enables the wagon to move down the trail to the finish line.

With just a bit of practice you'll be a wagon racing pro.

Practice sessions

Even though the basic technique for racing is rather simple, you'll need to allow your students a couple of days to practice.

Set up two racing strings approximately 10 feet in length and spaced about 3 feet apart. This "short course" will be easier to learn on than the longer wagon trail course. Allow students to take turns racing. A sign-up sheet or some type of system for rotating the racers will help to keep the peace.

Suggestion: We've found that it's best if only the racers are in the practice area. Spectators have a tendency to make noise either by cheering or offering their own unsolicited advice. The racers, on the other hand, are usually so intent on racing that they make very little noise. After three or four practice runs, the two racers notify the next two students on the list that it's their turn to "hit the trail." (For the truly hardcore competition junkies in my room, I provide some string and casually suggest that they set up a practice course at home.)

Before we begin the practice sessions, I share the 5 Secrets to Successful Wagon Racing.

1. Sit in a relaxed fashion.

Although I recommend tailor-style—legs crossed and elbows resting on knees—a lot of students prefer to kneel. Either way works.

2. Keep tension on the string.

A loose, slack string will cause the wagon to drift off-course or get sideways. (See photo at right.)

This is especially true as the wagon gets farther away from the student racer.

A wagon gettin' squirrely as it gets near the Rocky Mountains.



3. Keep the string parallel to the carpet.

This goes along with the previous tip. It also reinforces the idea that, during a race, students' hands are not allowed to be higher than their shoulders.

4. Use small tugging motions.

We've tried lots of variations and have found that it's actually easiest to maintain tension on the string by holding it with one hand and to make the tugs with the other. This will keep the string tight and parallel while providing strong forward motion for the wagon.

5. Keep your wagon leaning forward.

A slight forward angle will help to keep your wagon moving along. Every now and then, a wagon will stand straight up and tip back. When this happens, tighten the string and lift it a bit. The wagon base will come off of the carpet and swing back toward you. When you then release a bit of tension on the string, the wagon will once again settle into its forward lean.

Important Reminder: As your wagon moves away from you and down the course, it will get more difficult to control. It is critical at this point that you maintain tension on the string. In fact, the farther away it is, the more tension you'll need.

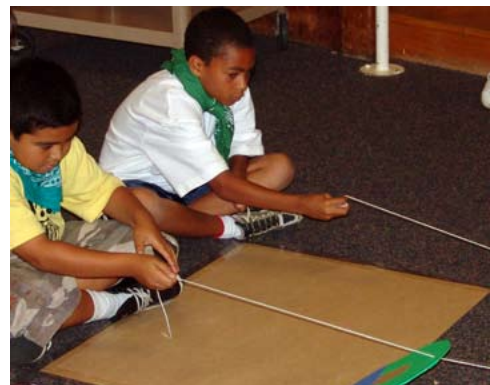
The Wagon Race

After everyone has had a chance to practice, set up your wagon trail. If you have time, provide one more day of practice so that they can find out what it's like starting from masonite, crossing the river, and getting over the mountain range. They also need to experience the fact that the winner isn't declared until you can see green construction paper of the finish area showing beneath the wagon box.

Provide some kind of a simple race registration card. (Not everyone is required to race although most will.) Name of driver and name of wagon are starters. You could also ask for family members who will be in the wagon, which animals they're going to drag along for the journey, and what they plan to do in California once they arrive. Whatever.

Drop the registration cards into a container and then pull out two cards. Announce the wagons and have the drivers bring their wagons to the starting line.

As you can see in the photo to the right, we require that the racers sit or kneel. Also, wagons start flat on the masonite with the top of the wagon even with the front edge.



After asking if the drivers are ready, I give it a hearty, “Wagons Ho!” and the race is on.

The wagons move off of the masonite and down the trail. The laminated river is usually not tough to get across and the going is actually easy. Then they hit the Rocky Mountains. This can be a race breaker for some students.

Going through the mountains, as it was in the book, is the hardest part of the journey. You’ll see some floppin’ and flailin’ as they attempt to negotiate the layers of cardboard. A few racers, though, will skip right across.

After the mountains is another short bit of flatland and then the “velvety green valley of California.” Once a wagon has crossed onto the green paper, the winner is declared. The registration card is set aside for the next round and another pair of racers is called to the starting line. After everyone has raced once, the first round is over.

You can do it all in one day or, as I prefer, have a round a day for three or four days. However you do it, I recommend a slight variation for the final four racers. In the semi-final races—when it’s down to just four students—a racer has to win twice to advance to the finals. Thus, at the conclusion of the first race, the winner is given a point and the wagons are returned to the finish line. The same two wagons race again. The first wagon to win two races is declared the winner. For the finals, you need three points to be declared the wagon racing champion.



Racing Reality

Experience, which is a wonderful but sometimes harsh instructor, has taught me that you can expect a number of things to occur during the actual racing.

- One of the two wagons will get off to a quick start. Once this happens, the race has just about been decided. The reason for this is that the racer who is struggling to get his wagon going begins to overcompensate. Any techniques that may have been honed during practice go out the window. It is sometimes painful to watch but over quickly.
- One or two of the losing racers will cry. They get so amped up for the actual race after practicing for a couple of days that the finality of not moving on to the next round of racing produces a quivering lip and a brief shedding of tears. Recovery time is approximately 15 seconds.
- At least one of the races will be neck-and-neck from start to finish. Wow is that fun to watch.
- You will have one or two “ringers” in your classroom. These will be the students who set up a practice course at home and have the racing down cold. As your tournament progresses through the rounds, you’ll hear a soft shudder of dread from the participants as you pull a ringer’s registration card from the container. (I remember one year when nobody wanted to face Michael Murphy and his unbelievably fast wagon, *The Murphinator*.)
- It will be loud. There will be screaming and yelling and cheering and chanting as they root on the racers. (“Sar - ah! Sar - ah! Sar - ah!”) Not at first, mind you, when they’re just fascinated by the whole spectacle. But within a race or two they’ll be lifting the roof off of your classroom. In fact, you might want to warn your neighboring teachers. Better yet, invite them to visit your room and watch a race or two.
- Everyone will have a great time and remember it fondly for years to come. Which is, in a sense, how school should be.

I wish you the best of luck with this playful end-of-the-year activity and hope that you and your students have as much fun as we’ve had over the years.

—Rick Morris
San Diego, CA

PS If you come up with any clever variations or add-ons, please let me know. I’ll add them to this eBook and pass your idea along to other teachers.

Wagon Racing

Appendix of Blackline Masters

Cassie's Journey Activity Sheets

Part 1

Part 2

Part 3

Part 4

Part 5

Word Study Sheet

Wagon Template

VOCABULARY: Find these words in the book. Write each one on a word study sheet. Write the page number where you found the word or phrase. Write a simple definition that matches the meaning of the text.

a snake in the dust, Illinois, drought, canvas, wagon box, regular schooling, caravan

DOUBLE-ENTRY JOURNAL: Find these words in the book. In your own words, write what you think the author is trying to say.

Now this wagon is our home.

DIRECTIONS: Using complete sentences, answer the questions below. Please write in cursive and use small, legible letters. Try to use part of the question to begin your answer.

What did Papa say to convince Mama that they should go to California?

Cassie said that the grown-ups kept talking about “seeing the elephant.” What does this expression mean?

VOCABULARY: Find these words in the book. Write each one on a word study sheet. Write the page number where you found the word or phrase. Write a simple definition that matches the meaning of the text.

buffalo chips, prairie, sunbonnet, wagon master, piles out, swaying, drilling

DOUBLE-ENTRY JOURNAL: Find these words in the book. In your own words, write what you think the author is trying to say.

...a carpet of flowers

DIRECTIONS: Using complete sentences, answer the questions below. Please write in cursive and use small, legible letters. Try to use part of the question to begin your answer.

Why wasn't Cassie able to run around and play when they arrived at their camping place?

Even though she was thirsty, Cassie was not allowed to drink water from the Platte River. Why not?

VOCABULARY: Find these words in the book. Write each one on a word study sheet. Write the page number where you found the word or phrase. Write a simple definition that matches the meaning of the text.

temples, rumble, stampede, onlee, made our preparations, livestock, current

DOUBLE-ENTRY JOURNAL: Find these words in the book. In your own words, write what you think the author is trying to say.

We looked up to see a low, black mountain approaching us at top speed.

DIRECTIONS: Using complete sentences, answer the questions below. Please write in cursive and use small, legible letters. Try to use part of the question to begin your answer.

At the beginning of Part 3, Papa is not driving the wagon. Where is he, and why is he there?

Why do you think Cassie saw so many graves along the trail?

VOCABULARY: Find these words in the book. Write each one on a word study sheet. Write the page number where you found the word or phrase. Write a simple definition that matches the meaning of the text.

banks, honor, celebrate, bonfire, jig, chewy, minister

DOUBLE-ENTRY JOURNAL: Find these words in the book. In your own words, write what you think the author is trying to say.

Tomorrow is the Sabbath...

DIRECTIONS: Using complete sentences, answer the questions below. Please write in cursive and use small, legible letters. Try to use part of the question to begin your answer.

How did Cassie's family celebrate the Fourth of July?

In Part 4, Cassie saw her first Indians. Describe her experience.

VOCABULARY: Find these words in the book. Write each one on a word study sheet. Write the page number where you found the word or phrase. Write a simple definition that matches the meaning of the text.

shower, axle, at a boil, alkali dust, no fuel, huddled up together, 'round

DOUBLE-ENTRY JOURNAL: Find these words in the book. In your own words, write what you think the author is trying to say.

...a little house with windows and doors that sits still on the ground and doesn't go anywhere.

DIRECTIONS: Using complete sentences, answer the questions below. Please write in cursive and use small, legible letters. Try to use part of the question to begin your answer.

Traveling through the mountains was very difficult. Why?

Why did Cassie have to say good-bye to her friend, Alice?

1. _____ page _____

2. _____ page _____

3. _____ page _____

4. _____ page _____

5. _____ page _____

6. _____ page _____

7. _____ page _____

