

Wagon Wheels

by Barbara Brenner

Teacher's Guide

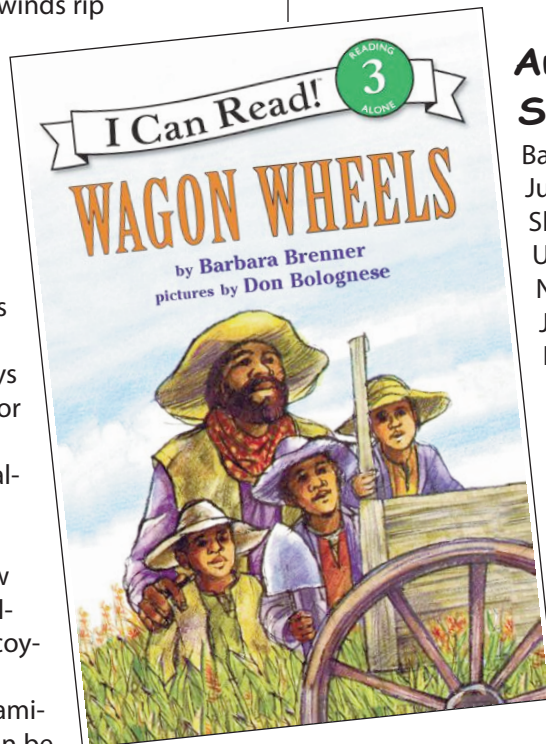
Written By Jennifer Lee Richards

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Synopsis

Shortly after the Civil War, the Muldies, a black family, travel by Conestoga wagon to the West in order to take advantage of the free land offered through the Homestead Act. Mama dies during the trip but Daddy and the three Muldie boys, ages eleven, eight and three, make it to Nicodemus, Kansas, with just enough time to make a dugout before cold winter winds rip through the prairie. The family is snug in their dugout, but soon the town's food and wood supplies run out. Surprisingly it is the Osage Indians who save the townspeople by unexpectedly dropping off life-saving provisions. Once winter is over, Mr. Muldie leaves the three boys in Nicodemus so he can build a home on land with trees and hills. He tells the boys he will send for them later and so for nearly three months the boys take care of themselves. But the real challenge comes when Daddy sends directions for the boys to follow in order to come find him at their new home. For twenty-two days the children follow Daddy's map, braving coyotes, wolves, panthers and rattlesnakes. But, once reunited, the family is sure their cries of happiness can be heard all the way back in Nicodemus.



Later In July

A prairie fire rages through Nicodemus. The boys receive a letter from Daddy telling them he has found good land and giving them directions.

The next day After 22 days

The boys pack and leave Nicodemus. The boys arrive in their new home and are reunited with Daddy.

Author/Illustrator Sketch

Barbara (Johnes) Brenner was born June 26, 1925, in Brooklyn, New York. She attended Seton Hall College (now University) and Rutgers, and attended New School for Social Research. She is Jewish and is married to illustrator Fred Brenner. She lives in Pennsylvania.

Brenner has worked as a copywriter, a free-lance artist's agent, a free-lance writer, as a writer-consultant for the Publications Division of Bank Street College of Education, as an instructor at the Parson's School of Design, as the county chairman for the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy and is an

Associate Editor for Bank Street College Media Group.

Brenner is a member of the Author's Guild, P.E.N., and the National Audubon Society.

Brenner's mother died when she a year old so she was brought up in Brooklyn in a household of loving aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins. Brenner states, Brooklyn "still has a special quality for me."

However, Brenner explains, "In 1977, my husband and I moved to a wonderful house that overlooks a wild lake in Pennsylvania. He is an artist-illustrator and both of us have found a great deal of satisfaction in our work in this lovely spot. It's wildflower walks and blueberry-picking, swimming, canoeing, tennis. Lovely."

Timeline

- 1878** Ed Muldie, his wife, and his three boys, leave Kentucky for Kansas to claim free land under the Homestead Act. Mama dies on the trip.
- In the fall** The family arrives in Nicodemus, Kansas. They build a dugout house.
- In winter** The settlers run out of food. The local Osage Indians, in an act of great mercy, come to town and leave food for the winter so the settlers can survive.
- In the spring** Daddy goes ahead to scout out better land for the family, leaving the boys in Nicodemus.

Brenner's hobbies and other interests include: Organic gardening, yoga, sports, travel, fossil hunting, bird-watching, and animal behavior. She states, "I play the recorder (badly), enjoy cooking, hate housework, adore my husband and family, and write because there's nothing that gives me more satisfaction. My problem is that I enjoy everything. And there's not time for it all!"

Brenner shares the childhood influences that helped her develop into an author. "When I was a little girl I had four books--*The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter; *When We Were Very Young* by A.A. Milne; *Pinocchio* by Collodi; and *Blackie's Children's Annual*, an anthology by Blackie & Sons. I still remember those books vividly. I wish I still had them. They taught me how wonderful books can be. I think they may have been somewhat responsible for my becoming a writer of children's books. Anyway, I know that books can make a difference in your life."

Brenner says, "I have always been interested in the aura of places. As I grew older and moved around, first to New Jersey, then, when I was married, to New York City and its suburbs, I was still affected, eye and mind, by where I was. I think this shows clearly in my work." A teacher in grade school was the first person who encouraged Brenner to write stories. "I have been interested in writing since I was nine years old," says Brenner, "[Though] I took almost every detour one could imagine before I got to doing what I wanted to do."

"I guess you finally write because you can't help it, and I started working at it seriously when I was about twenty-five. I write for young people because I feel a special sense of communication with them. What I hope I'm saying in all my books, beneath the obvious theme or plot, is that the world is a vastly interesting and exciting place, that it is good to be curious, that biologically we are part of a vast and remarkable chain of life."

Brenner's ideas for books come from many sources, including "my own reading and my hobbies and interests. I read a couple of books a week. My children's interests very often spark an idea, and I also have a group of young friends who can usually be depended upon to contribute ideas."

"I consider writing books for children a very difficult and challenging art form," Brenner explains, "Because writing has been such a tremendous 'kick' for me, I spend a great deal of time helping teachers to help children to express themselves through writing."

"I also enjoy very much talking with children about their own writing. I'm really happy to see that more and more schools are focusing on children's writing and that kids are beginning to make their own books, with illustrations. Fred [Brenner's husband] and I love to go to schools. and share with young people our common experiences in doing a book. We find that the process is very much the same - that is, amateur or professional, you're still faced with that blank page and the need to put your thoughts and ideas in order. Children should be comforted by the fact that we writers and illustrators struggle with the same things they struggle with," says Brenner.

Don (ald Alan) Bolognese (pronounced Bo-lo-nay-see) was born January 6, 1934, in New York City. He is married to Elaine Raphael Chinochio (a writer and illustrator) and has two daughters. He graduated from Cooper Union Art School in 1954. He has homes in New York and Vermont.

Bolognese's been a free-lance illustrator since 1954. He is an instructor in lettering and calligraphy at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. He has also taught at Cooper Union Art School, New York University, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art's medieval museum.

Bolognese is both an author and illustrator of books for youngsters and has illustrated over 150 books for adults and children. He is also well known as a painter, graphic designer, and calligrapher. He developed a course on the art of book illustrating which he taught at Cooper Union Art School, Pratt Institute, and New York University.

Critic's Corner

Brenner has written over seventy books, both fiction and nonfiction, both for children and adults, many of them critically acclaimed. She has won many awards, including American Library Association Notable Book Awards for *Wagon Wheels* and *A Snake-Lover's Diary*. Other awards include best book awards from the New York Times and School Library Journal, and several Outstanding Science Book awards from the National Science Teacher's Association. She lives with her husband, the illustrator Fred Benner, in Pennsylvania.

Illustrator and calligrapher Don Bolognese has illustrated more than ninety books, many of which he wrote himself. He is well-known for illustrating historical fic-

tion. Books he illustrated include *Plays and How to Put Them On*, by Moyne Rice Smith; *All Upon a Stone*, by Jean Craighead George; and *Me, Myself and I*, by Gladys Cretan. Some books he's written and illustrated himself include *Drawing Horses and Foals* (1977), and *Drawing Spaceships and Other Spacecraft* (1981).

Selected Other Works by Barbara Brenner

Annie's Pet, 1989.
Beaver's Beware, 1992.
Beef Stew, 1990.
Color Wizard, 1989.
Magic Box, 1990.
Moon Boy, 1990.
Mystery of the Plumed Serpent, 1981.
Noah and the Flood, 1991.
Ups and Downs with Lion and Lamb, 1991.
Good News, 1991.
Rosa and Marco and the Three Wishes, 1992.
Too Many Mice, 1992
If You Were There in 1776, 1994.
If You Were There in 1492, 1998.
The Earth is Painted Green (with S.D. Schindler), 2000.
A Pod Called Sam, 2005

Bibliography

"Bolognese, Donald Alan." *Something About the Author*. Vol. 71. Detroit: Gale, 1992.
 "Brenner, Barbara." *Something About the Author*. Vol. 42. Detroit, Gale, 1986.
 "Barbara Brenner Teacher Resources,"
 <http://litplans.com/authors/Barbara_Brenner.html>
 "Barbara Brenner,"
 <http://www.boydsmillspress.com/contributors/contributors/brenner_barbara.html>
 "Don Bolognese,"
 <<http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/contributor.jsp?id=1301>>

Related Reading

Note: Only a small selection of books is listed as the themes under which *Wagon Wheels* could be placed are so varied. *Wagon Wheels* is an "I Can Read Book" and will probably be for students' independent reading. Some of the titles listed below could be used for student or teacher research, for read alouds or just for supplementary reading materials.

Anderson, Joan, photographs by George Ancona.
Joshua's Westward Journal. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987.

Baylor, Byrd, illustrated by Ronald Himler. *Moon Song*. New York: Macmillan, 1982.
 Bryan, Ashley. *Walk Together Children*. New York: Macmillan, 1974. (A collection of 24 African American spirituals.)
 Carrick, Carol, illustrated by Donald Carrick. *Two Coyotes*. New York: Houghton, 1982.
 Cherry, Lynne. *A River Ran Wild*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.
 Crosby, Alexander L., illustrated by Glen Rounds. *Go Find Hanka!* San Carlos, CA: Golden Gate Junior Books, 1970.
 Fradin, Dennis B. *Pioneers*. New York: Children's Press, 1984.
 Freedman, Russell. *Children of the Wild West*. New York: Ticknor. (The life of children on the frontier told in text and reproductions of old photos.)
 Harvey, Brett, illustrated by Deborah Kogan Ray. *Cassie's Journey: Going West in the 1860s*. New York: Holiday, 1988.
 Laycock, George and Ellen Laycock, illustrated by Alexander Farquharson. *How the Settlers Lived*. New York: McKay, 1980.
 Lester, Julius, illustrated by Ralph Pinto. *The Knee-High Man and Other Tales*. New York: Dial, 1972. (Six black American folktales concerned with animals.)
 Levenson, Dorothy, illustrated by Leonard Everett Fisher. *The First Book of the Civil War*. New York: Watts, 1977.
 Little, Lessie Jones, illustrated by Jan Spivey Gilchrist. *Children of Long Ago*. New York: Putnam, 1988. (Seventeen poems that tell of a rural black community at the turn of the century.)
 Sanders, Scott R., illustrated by Ponder Goembel. *Hear the Wind Blow: American Folk Songs Retold*. New York: Bradbury, 1985.
 Sebestyen, Ouida. *Words' by Heart*. New York: Little, Brown, 1979. (Race relations are explored when a black family moves to an all-white community during the Reconstruction Era.)
 Seeger, Ruth C. *American Folk Songs for Children*. New York: Doubleday, 1948.
 Shoemaker, Kathryn. *Children, Go Where I Send Thee: An American Spiritual*. New York: Harper, 1980.
 Stein, R. Conrad, illustrated by Cathy Koenig. *The Story of the Homestead Act*. New York: Children's Press, 1978.
 Strait, Treva Adams. *The Price of Free Land*. New York: Harper, 1979.
 Talbot, Charlene Joy. *An Orphan for Nebraska*. New York: Macmillan, 1979. (An orphaned Irish immigrant boy is sent west in the 1870s.)
 Tunis, Edwin. *Frontier Living*. New York: Harper, 1976.
 Tunis, Edwin. *Wheels: A Pictorial History*. New York: Harper, 1977.
 Watson, Clyde, illustrated by Wendy Watson. *Father Fox's*

Penny rhymes. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1971.

Goals and Objectives

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To learn about the late 1800s including the ending of the Civil War, the Reconstruction period, and the Homestead Act
2. To learn about slavery and freedom
3. To learn about frontier and pioneer life
4. To discuss the past vs. the present in relation to clothing, shelter, food and lifestyle differences
5. To learn about Conestoga wagon travel

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to track the Muldies' travels with a map of the U.S. showing land as it was during the time period in which the story is set
2. To discuss the fine character traits of the Muldie boys, such as their bravery and persistence.

Meaning Study

Have students research about the famous former black slave after whom Nicodemus, Kansas, was named. The town still exists in Graham County, Kansas, and is a National Park Service National Historic Site. For more information, go to <http://www.nps.gov/nico/>.

THEMATIC TEACHING IDEAS

The book *Wagon Wheels* could be incorporated into a variety of units of study. It could be included in author or illustrator units, or within broader studies with themes like: "The Wild West"; "Pioneer Life"; "Freedom from Slavery"; "Black American Pioneers"; "Bravery"; or many more. Activities listed below pertain to none of these themes in particular, but could be included within several of them. Also, many of the activities could fall under more than one category. Teachers are encouraged to mix and match their choices of activities and are invited to extend, elaborate and adapt any ideas listed below.

Language Arts Activities:

These activities include student involvement in reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities.

- Ask relatives for stories about your family's heritage and write fictionalized stories similar to the form used in

Wagon Wheels.

- Notice the use of italics and words written in all capital letters in the story, such as on page 12, "And winter in Kansas is *mean*," or on page 22, "We were so scared,"

and on page 26, "It was FOOD!" Learn how to use these techniques to add more expression to your own reading aloud of and writing of stories.

- Have a naming contest to name Little Brother.
- Have a storytelling time or contest.
- Make lists of what items would be taken during a trip across the country. Remember, space in the wagon would be limited.
- Create letters or diary entries as they might have been written by relatives corresponding with one another or recording daily life.
- Write a story about the westward expansion as it would be told by a Native American. Retell the encounter between the Osage Indians and the townspeople of Nicodemus through the perspective of one of the Indians, maybe the tribe's chief.

Comprehension Study

In order to assess various levels of students' comprehension of the reading, select and ask them a few of the following questions:

Literal:

1. What happened to the Muldie boys' mother?
(*She died during the trip from Kentucky to Kansas. p. 8*)
2. Why did the Muldies have to build a dugout right away instead of building a wooden house like Daddy wanted?
(*Winter was coming soon and there wouldn't be enough time to build a wooden house. A dugout could provide shelter and warmth and was able to be easily and quickly made. pp. 12-13*)
3. Why does Daddy leave the boys in Nicodemus while he goes off to find new land?
(*Daddy says he wants the boys to stay in Nicodemus where they have shelter and friends. p. 30*)

Interpretive

(Students' answers may vary.)

4. Why do you think the Indians brought the settlers food?
(*Maybe the Indians wanted to develop a friendship with the settlers.*)
5. What do you think happened to the dugouts during the prairie fire?
6. Who could be reading Daddy's letter to the boys on page 47?
7. How do you think Johnny felt when Daddy left to find new land?
(*On page 32 it says he was scared, but since he was the oldest and was now "in charge" he probably felt very responsible also.*)
8. On page 52, it says, "I didn't move, I didn't breathe, for

fear it would bite me." Did Johnny move or breathe really? What is meant by this? (Certainly Johnny breathed and his eyes blinked, but he probably just made himself do these things very slowly.)

Critical:

(Students' answers may vary.)

9. What would you have done when the Indians rode into camp that day? If you were Johnny, would you have used your gun if the Indians had attacked instead of being friendly?
10. If you were Johnny and Daddy told you he was going to leave you in charge of your two little brothers, what would you have said to him?

Creative:

(Students' answers may vary.)

11. What types of activities could the family have done while waiting out the winter weather in their dugout?
12. What other kinds of perils could the boys have braved during their twenty-two day journey?
13. What could the boys do to keep their spirits up as they walked all day looking for the new home Daddy had built?

Across the Curriculum

These activities are separated by subject but may be integrated into the general studies of the classroom so that together with the Language Arts Activities, a comprehensive study of the book or a chosen thematic unit can be made.

History/Social Studies

- Read the memoirs of the late Lulu Sadler Craig.
- Research and write about: the 1800s, the Civil War, slavery, the Homestead Act, Conestoga wagon travel, the Osage Indians, guns, the Pony Express, railroad building and train travel, Kentucky, Kansas and the Jayhawkers (people who wanted Kansas to be a free state), and the true story from which *Wagon Wheels* is taken.
- Learn what sections of the U.S. were and are now considered "the West."
- Find Nicodemus and Solomon City on a U.S. map.
- Find out what river the Muldies had to cross to get to Nicodemus.
- Create the map that Daddy sent in his letter to the boys.
- Make maps of the U.S. as it was during the 1800s. Note

the natural geographic obstacles pioneers had to encounter.

- Make a timeline showing what events affected history during the entire 19th century.
- Make sketch-like illustrations like Bolognese's.
- Find out what monuments or museums honor the westward settlers. Visit an old west exhibit at a historical museum or art gallery. Visit a historic or recreated pioneer home or village.
- Examine the roles of women, men and children in the old west.
- Research about the westward movement from diverse cultural perspectives: Native American, Hispanic, black, white, and immigrants from other countries.
- Try to catch fresh fish with resources which were available in the late 1800s.

Mathematics

- Make a calendar charting the events of the story.
- Figure the measurements needed for making a quilt.
- Calculate how many miles a day the boys had to walk in order to travel one hundred and fifty miles over twenty-two days; deciding averages of about how many hours a day the boys walked and at what speed.
- Measure the distance in miles between Kentucky and Nicodemus, Kansas (generally).
- Make graphs depicting favorite books read in relation to *Wagon' Wheels*, or to show class favorites of pioneer activities or foods.

Science

- Research about: coyotes, wolves, panthers, and rattlesnakes.
- Learn to identify animal tracks.
- Grow com and beans from seeds.
- Do some pioneer cooking and tasting of foods such as: rabbit stew, pan fried fish, cornmeal mush, deer meat, squash, molasses, and dried beans. Try canning fruits and vegetables, churn butter, pop popcorn over an open fire, pull taffy, pound dried com into cornmeal, bake cornbread, and make apple cider, apple butter, or applesauce. Discuss the property changes which occur.
- Research about how food was preserved and try the methods.
- Dip candles and/or make soap. Discuss the property changes which occur.
- Research about medical practices of pioneer days. Create some of the folk remedies and test them.
- Research prairie fires.
- Research to learn how the boys started their fire each evening during their journey and possibly have students try this method.

(Possible answer: Flint.)

Art

- Make sketch-like illustrations like Bolognese's.
- Build small models of a Conestoga wagon, a dugout or a log home.
- Make a wagon like the Muldie boys had.
- Learn a pioneer craft such as: braiding rag rugs, weaving blankets, stenciling, embroidery~ quilting, making birch brooms, creating silhouettes, basket weaving, weaving cloth, knotting a potholder, clothes sewing, furniture making or whittling.
- Go to a graveyard where there are gravestones showing the people buried there died during this time period and do gravestone rubbings of the markers.
- Make a scarecrow.
- Make a pioneer toy such as: a corn husk or rag doll, a slingshot, a willow whistle or a top.
- Make hornbooks.
- Write with quill pens or on slates.
- Make a board game version of the Muldies' story and travels.
- Create costumes for dressing up in- the clothing of the period. Clothing for pioneer men, women, and children as well as Indian apparel could be made.

Music

- Sing songs from this time period such as "Oh, Susannah," "Skip to My Lou," "There's a Hole in the Bucket," "Turkey in the Straw," and "Bingo."
- Learn how to play the spoons, a banjo, fiddle or harmonica.

Drama

- Act out parts of or the whole story.
- Play charades.
- Dramatize the challenges and hardships of a westward journey.

Health

- Learn some of the dances of the time period such as square dancing and the Virginia reel.
- Play some pioneer games such as: hopscotch, jumping rope, Simon Says, Hide the Thimble, hoop rolling (use hula hoops), horseshoes, sack races, egg and spoon race, and skipping rocks.

Vocabulary Study

Have the students write or verbally explain or give a synonym to explain the meaning of the words or expressions underlined in the following sentences taken from the story. You may choose to have students refer

back to the page in the book listed in order to see the full context of the passage. (Answers may vary.)

1. "There is free land for everyone here in the West." (p.7)
(Meaning that the land will cost no money to people who are willing to settle there and make it their home.)
2. "Why thank you, Brother." (p. 10)
(Brother is used like a form of the word friend. It is also used to show connection between members of a group.)
3. "I'm a carpenter." (p. 11)
(A person who builds with wood.)
4. "There was not a lick of food in the whole town of Nicodemus." (p.20)
(There was no food.)
5. "There was a feast in Nicodemus that night." (p.28)
(A meal with lots of food.)
6. "You have shelter and friends here." (p. 30)
(A safe place to live. A dwelling or home.)
7. "That Ed Muldie must be off his head to leave you poor babies all alone." (p.34)
(“Off his head” means crazy, insane, or foolish.)

Alternate Assessment

Listed are forms of assessment which are based upon Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive thinking skills and should provide teachers with evidence of a child's understanding of the story and themes dealt with in the book.

Application:

- Have students create a mobile, mural, shadow box, or other visual representation of events which took place in the story.
- Have students pretend they are reporters preparing to interview the Muldie family. Have them create questions they will ask them and then create a newspaper article based upon the information they would have gotten. The article could include invented quotes from the boys and their daddy.

Analysis:

- Have students create a survey in which they find out the opinions of the students in the classroom concerning Mr. Muldie's decision to leave his boys behind in Nicodemus and then allowing them to travel by themselves to find him. Are the students in favor of this decision or against it? Why?
- Give students a long list of items they could take on a westward journey and make them choose only ten of them. Have them give reasons for their choices.

Synthesis:

- Have students predict what could happen next in the

story. (Have them write a fifth chapter.)

- Have students imagine they have been walking for ten days straight. What would they wish for at this point? Have the students dramatize what the Muldie boys would have talked about during their evenings around the fire.

Evaluation:

- Have students create a book talk to recommend this book to another person.

Vocabulary Test

(10 points)

For each word listed below, write the letter next to the correct meaning.

- | | | | |
|-----------------|-------------|------------|----------|
| a. Solomon City | d. Prairie | g. Dugout | j. Osage |
| b. Nicodemus | e. Kentucky | h. Mush | |
| c. Kansas | f. Banjo | i. Rattler | |

- _____ 1. Flat, empty land where settlers could build homes.
- _____ 2. A kind of poisonous snake.
- _____ 3. Place near where Daddy built a new home for the family.
- _____ 4. Town the family moved to from Kentucky.
- _____ 5. Place where winter is *mean*.
- _____ 6. A kind of house built in the earth.
- _____ 7. Made a *plink-a-plunk* sound.
- _____ 8. Where the Muldies came from.
- _____ 9. Indian tribe that gave the settlers food.
- _____ 10. Food made of cornmeal.

Comprehension Test

Part I: True/False (20 points)

For each item, write T if a statement is true, and F if any part is false.

- _____ 1. Mama helped build the dugout.
- _____ 2. The settlers invited the Indians to dinner.
- _____ 3. The boys carried some of their things in a wagon.
- _____ 4. Daddy never left the boys alone.
- _____ 5. Daddy decided they didn't need to build a house, since they had the dugout.
- _____ 6. The other settlers felt sorry for the Muldie boys.
- _____ 7. The boys had to travel a long way alone to find their Daddy.
- _____ 8. Daddy died before they got there.
- _____ 9. There was a prairie fire.
- _____ 10. Little Brother was bitten by a rattlesnake.

Part II: Fill-In (20 points)

Write the word or words in the blanks that make the statement true.

1. It had been a hard trip and a _____ one. Mama died on the way.
2. Johnny was _____, Willie was eight, and Little Brother was three.
3. Daddy was a _____ by trade.
4. The _____ saved the lives of the settlers during a hard winter when there was no food.
5. During the prairie fire, the settlers saved their lives by running toward the _____.
6. A _____ brought a letter from Daddy.
7. The dugout's walls and floors were made of _____.
8. Daddy drew a _____ so the boys could find him.
9. The boys walked all the way from the town of _____.
10. The boys followed the _____ River to get to their new home.

Answer Key

VOCABULARY TEST

1. d
2. i
3. a
4. b
5. c
6. g
7. f
8. e
9. j
10. h

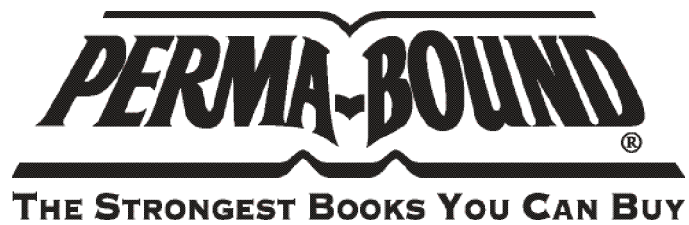
COMPREHENSION TEST

Part I: True/False (20 points)

1. F
2. F
3. T
4. F
5. F
6. T
7. T
8. F
9. T
10. F

Part II: Fill-In (20 points)

1. sad
2. eleven
3. carpenter
4. Osage Indians
5. river
6. Post rider
7. dirt
8. map
9. Nicodemus
10. Solomon



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