

## GETTING STARTED

Ask the students to share stories of heroism, either from personal knowledge or from reading. Ask them what qualities a person needs to perform heroic deeds.

## INTO *Child Pioneer*

This story falls somewhere between history and fiction. Although the characters and events are real, they have been shaped into a narrative that does not strictly adhere to the sequence or time frame in which they occurred. The style in which the story is written is very suited to the telling of a true story. Somewhat conversational (“Let me tell you the epic story of thirteen-year-old John Sager”), somewhat businesslike (“The Sager orphans stayed with the caravan until it reached Fort Hall...”), and, sometimes, in spite of itself, waxing poetic (“Stumbling, rising, panting, but in a silence more tragic than weeping...”) the writing style conforms to its subject as the story unfolds. The fluctuating style mirrors the events that move from interesting to painful to awe-inspiring. The general impression given is that everything has been understated, to allow the reader emotional “room” to react to what is being described.

## FOCUS

*Child Pioneer* is a study of the human spirit. A very interesting and relevant question to ask your class is: where did young John get his inner strength? Certainly, his generation had to be strong to survive, especially if they chose the pioneering life, so one could say that John was a product of his environment. The author of the story, though, suggests a more immediate source of John’s strength: “His grief for his father and mother had merged into one immense desire... John determined to go on to the Columbia, to complete his father’s life for him.” Much of today’s culture promotes the idea that, if one is to achieve independence, one must rebel against one’s parents, at least to some degree. The story of John Sager indicates that the reverse is true: a profound love and respect for one’s parents will result in a strong, independent young adult.

Discuss with your class goals, motivation, persistence, and single-mindedness. Our children are bombarded with so many stimuli and demands upon their time, that the idea of having one solid ambition and focusing on it may be foreign to them. Bring examples of people who were so focused on reaching their personal goal that they succeeded in spite of the many obstacles they encountered.

## WORKBOOK TIE-IN

**Student Edition:** Pages 134-139

**Teacher’s Answer Guide:** Page 8

## ● Blueprint FOR READING

### Into • *Child Pioneer*

*In the fall of 1844, John appeared at the gate of Dr. Whitman’s medical mission...carrying a starving five-month-old baby sister...*

Seven children had traveled 500 miles over the Oregon Trail, fighting hunger, thirst, Indians, heat, cold, and a host of other problems. Honoré Willis Morrow recorded their story in a style that reads more like a history report than a short story. But the tale itself is so gripping, and the character of John Sager, so powerful, that the writer wisely lets the plain facts speak for themselves.

### Focus

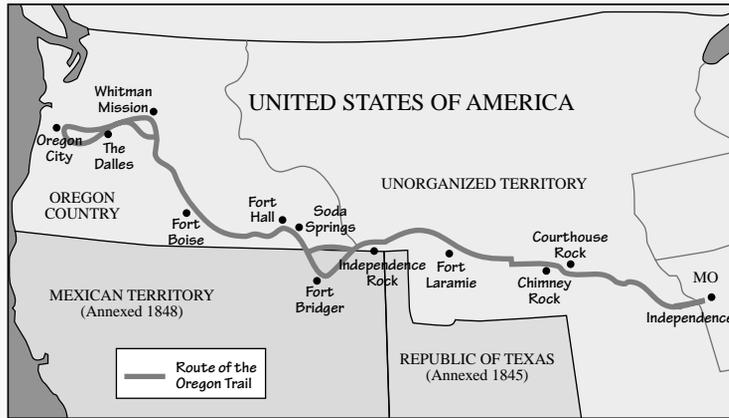
This is the story of one family, and of one member of that family in particular—John Sager. It is also the story of a certain breed of person, the tough, determined pioneer who conquered the wilderness and settled the vast, wild country that was the American frontier. The story’s style is the reverse of dramatic: it is understated. This style mirrors the spirit of the pioneers. Facing danger and deprivation at every turn, they had to be calm and matter-of-fact. Their tone, expression, and language tended to minimize rather than to dramatize the obstacles they faced. As you read the story, ask yourself where John Sager got the strength and purpose that so characterize him. Do you know anyone whom you could call “single-minded”? Do you admire this trait?

### About the Author

American novelist **HONORÉ WILLIS MORROW** was born in 1880. She wrote many works of historical fiction set in the American past. These novels include *With Malice Towards None*, *Mary Todd Lincoln*, *Yonder Sails the Mayflower*, and *We Must March*. The story, *Child Pioneer*, was first published in 1926. It describes the ordeals suffered by the pioneers on the Oregon Trail—a well-known chapter in American history. In her simple and forceful style, Honoré Willis Morrow brings these historical events to life. Morrow died in 1940 in Connecticut.

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- The narrator has reconstructed the story of John Sager's travels from the letters and diaries of Oregon pioneers.
- John Sager, age 13, and six of his younger siblings, travel 500 miles alone over the Oregon Trail in 1844.
- The trail is very difficult; most people turn back or die en route.
- The children are first noticed by Kit Carson who rides into their camp and sends them fleeing from Indians on the warpath.



## Child Pioneer

Honoré Willis Morrow

Let me tell you the epic story of thirteen-year-old John Sager, as I gleaned it from letters and diaries of Oregon pioneers.

In the fall of 1844, John appeared at the gate of Dr. Whitman's medical mission, in what is now the state

of Washington, carrying a starving five-month-old baby sister. He was staggering before an emaciated cow on whose back were perched a sister aged eight, with a broken leg, and a sister of five who helped support the leg. A sister of three and one of seven walked beside his eleven-year-old brother, Francis.

Unaccompanied, John Sager and his five sisters and a brother, all younger than himself, had made their way from Fort Hall, 500 miles to the east, over the Oregon Trail, which was then little more than a horse track.

The trail was visited by unfriendly Indians and was so difficult that the migration of 1844, which John's parents had joined, went to pieces. Some died



en route; others turned southwest into California. But John came through.

The record of this strange children's expedition starts in early July, when Kit Carson came across the Sager's camping place near the Green

River Rendezvous in what is today eastern Idaho.

He rode at a gallop into the camp, two fresh scalps hanging at his belt, flung himself from his horse and told John to put out the fire—a band of Sioux was on the warpath. John sent his brother and little sisters scurrying into the Conestoga wagon, kicked out the tiny blaze of buffalo chips, then looked to Carson for further orders.

### Word Bank

**epic** (EH pick) *adj.*: heroic; extending beyond the usual in size or scope

**gleaned** (GLEEND) *v.*: gathered information bit by bit

**staggering** (STAG er ing) *v.*: having difficulty standing; reeling from side to side

## LITERARY COMPONENTS

1. **Characterization:** We see from the narrative that John moves quickly and can manage the younger children. He seems mature beyond his years. We also see that the setting is dangerous and primitive.

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- Carson describes John; John tells him both his parents are sick, and the people they are traveling with have moved on.
- Carson tells John to move his family forward all night and to go as far the next day as John's strength will allow.
- The family is next written about when they approach a camp of six families; one of the men is a veterinarian.
- John asks for a doctor who can help with the five-month-old baby. His mother is too sick to nurse the baby, and he can't make it drink cow's milk.
- Upon checking, the doctor says that both parents are dead; John doesn't believe him.
- The children stay with the caravan until it reaches Fort Hall. The man in charge convinces the others to go to California rather than Oregon.
- The factor tells them the trail to Oregon is impassable.
- After listening to the adults, John is determined to go on to Oregon, to complete his father's dream.
- Leaving a false note, John leaves the caravan early, heading toward Oregon.

## LITERARY COMPONENTS

2. **Plot: Conflict:** John cannot accept his parents' death. Now he feels he has to decide what to do with his siblings.
3. **Plot: Conflict:** Political considerations—the British desire to limit the number of Americans in the Columbia Valley—causes the factor to talk the caravan out of going to Oregon. The caravan members are easily persuaded to go to California instead. This causes John to set out with his siblings for the Columbia Valley, the place where his father had always dreamed of settling.
4. **Theme:** The undertaking of a perilous mission is a classic theme in literature. Usually the purpose is to prove that one is worthy of something. In this case the reason is to complete the dream of another.
5. **Characterization:** John shows resourcefulness and creativity in devising a plan to prevent the family from being followed and sent back. Whether it shows good judgment to undertake such a journey with so many small children is a question to be discussed in class.

Carson described John as a sandy-haired, freckle-faced boy, clad in a hunter's red flannel shirt which came to his knees. His snakeskin belt carried a knife and powder horn. In reply to Carson's questions, he said his father and mother were in the wagon, both sick. The remnant of the caravan to which they had attached themselves was two days' travel ahead. Carson told John to hitch the oxen at once and move forward all night and as far the next day as his strength would permit.

We next pick up the Sagers approaching Soda Springs on the Bear River. There were a half-dozen families in this camp, and one of the men was a veterinarian. On the edge of the camp John halted the oxen and asked for a doctor. He said that for two days his mother had been too sick to nurse the baby and that he couldn't make the infant drink cow's milk. The veterinary climbed into the wagon. He was out in a few moments. **Both the Sagers were dead, he told the waiting crowd.** John called the doctor a liar and tried to climb into the wagon, but was held back by a dozen pitying hands.

The Sager orphans stayed with the caravan until it reached Fort Hall, a British trading post owned by the Hudson's Bay Company. **The factor<sup>1</sup> in charge of the post was trying to prevent American emigrants from entering the Columbia Valley by deflecting them into California.** (Great Britain was then beginning her final struggle to retain her hold on Oregon Territory.) He told them that the wagon trail to Oregon, made the year before by Marcus Whitman, the missionary doctor, was impassable. The members of the caravan, already worn and discouraged and terribly afraid of Indian massacre, decided to go down into California.

John Sager, squatting by the campfire, listened without a word to the council of elders. His grief for his father



Fort Hall

and mother had merged into one immense desire. Ever since he could remember, he had heard his father talk of making a great farm in the valley of the Columbia, of helping to keep Oregon Territory for America. **John determined to go on to the Columbia, to complete his father's life for him.**

He would abandon the wagon; the oxen and cow could carry the packs of food and bedding. He had learned from an old woman in the camp how to feed the baby. The next morning he was gone, leaving this note: "I have taken the family back to the States with Kit Carson. He is in a hurry. John Sager." **By this false information he made sure he would not be followed and prevented from pushing westward.**

Here there is a break of several weeks in the story while John and the rest of the children crept along the valley of the Snake River to Fort Boise<sup>2</sup> nearly 300 miles beyond. The Snake writhes through a tremendous canyon that slashes Idaho from east to west. Barren plains, brutal mountains, scorch-

1. A *factor* is an agent.

2. *Boise* (BOY zee) is now the capital of Idaho.

### Word Bank

**writhes** (RYTHES) *v.*: twists; turns

**barren** (BAHR in) *adj.*: not bearing fruit or seed; desolate

**brutal** (BROO til) *adj.*: cruel; harsh

## GUIDING THE READING

### Literal

**Q. Where is John determined to go?**

- A. John is determined to go to the Oregon Territory.

### Analytical

**Q. Why is he determined to go there?**

- A. He wants to fulfill his father's dream.

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- By September John and the children arrive in Fort Boise, after going through barren plains, brutal mountains, and undergoing harsh conditions.
- The factor suggests John leave the baby and the next two young girls, but John thinks the baby's only chance is to get to Dr. Whitman's mission.
- The Scottish factor records his feelings about John's responsibilities in a letter to his mother.
- He sends two Indians and two horses with John and the children, but later the Indians desert them and take the horses.



Snake River Falls

ing heat by day and chill by night, a pestilence of mosquitoes and fleas—a heartbreaking test even for seasoned adults. Yet, one September afternoon there crept up to the gates of Fort Boise a boy holding a baby in his arms. The boy was dressed in ragged buckskin pants and still more ragged moccasins. His sun-faded hair fell to his shoulders in tangled profusion.

The factor in this one-man post was accustomed to all kinds of hardships, but when he saw John he uttered an oath of shocked surprise. John asked with fierce eagerness if there was a white woman in the fort. Something had to be done for the baby: she vomited everything she ate. The factor, with increasing horror in his eyes, looked down on the unsavory atom<sup>3</sup> in the boy's arms. There was no white woman, and the factor suggested an Indian mother. John declared that nothing could induce him to allow a squaw to touch the baby. Someone had warned him of the diseases a child would contract through such measures.

At this point Francis came up with the pack-train, and there disembarked such a rabble of wild little girls as the Scotsman had never seen even among Indians. He ordered his cook to feed the youngsters and watched while they devoured the venison<sup>4</sup> stew, gobbling and fighting like puppies. John stood aloof and chewed down a hunk of venison which he held in one hand, support-

ing the baby with the other.

The factor suggested that John leave the baby and the two next sisters at the fort. John shook his head. The baby's one chance, he decided, was to get through to Dr. Whitman's mission with all speed. The factor warned the lad that the baby looked ready to die any minute, anyhow. John's face flamed; he cursed the factor and began to sob.

The Scottish factor afterward set down his feelings in a letter to his mother.

*My letters to you have contained many strange tales, but none that twisted me like this. They were a scourge to have about, I assure you, but nothing could lessen the pathos of them. That lad John! How moving was this lad's vicarious<sup>5</sup> fatherhood. Not that he was a gentle guardian! He took no nonsense from any of them. When the girl of eight protested against holding the baby, he jerked the sister across his knees and clouted her until she begged to take the baby. The strain had told on him. He was all nerves and unable to throw off the torture of responsibility. By Jove, he ruled me too, for I sent them on, after a night's sleep, under the care of a pair of good Indians and fresh horses.*

3. Here, an *atom* is a very small creature.

4. *Venison* (VEN ih sun) is deer meat.

5. *Vicarious* (VY KARE ee uss) means serving instead of someone else.

### Word Bank

**pestilence** (PES tih lintz) *n.*: a natural population suddenly and greatly enlarged; epidemic

**seasoned** (SEE zuhnd) *adj.*:

experienced

**profusion** (PRO FYOO zhun) *n.*: a great supply; superabundance

**aloof** (uh LOOF) *adj.*: reserved; withdrawn

**pathos** (PATH ose) *n.*: feelings of pity

**clouted** (CLOW tid) *v.*: struck forcefully, especially with the hand or fist

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- The few details of the Blue Mountain crossing include the oldest sister breaking her leg and the baby being very sick.
- The starving oxen are abandoned, but the cow is needed for milk and transportation.
- The children are filthy, emaciated, and ill, but they trudge on at John's insistence.
- The narrator imagines their appearances and feelings when they cross the last mountain and view the valley to the west.
- At last the children stand before the Whitman mission.
- Narcissa Whitman takes the bundle and groans when she looks beneath the wolfskin blanket and sees the baby. Narcissa's only

child, a two-year-old girl had drowned a few years before.

- Narcissa puts the baby in a warm bath; her husband begins to clean and treat the others, except John who refuses

treatment. He follows Mrs. Whitman into the house.

- The baby shows no sign of life until some hot, diluted drops of milk are dropped between her lips.

## LITERARY COMPONENTS

6. **Plot: Rising Action:** The desertion of the Indian guides with the two horses is just one more hardship in the children's journey.
7. **Point of View:** The first-person narrator, who has been telling the story from a distance, here makes her presence known and sympathizes with the children, adding some sentiment to an otherwise unembellished account.
8. **Climax:** The narrator describes the children's last few steps to draw the reader into the scene and arouse the reader's emotions.

6 They may have been good Indians once, but evidently they regarded the job of guiding white papooses across the difficult Blue Mountains as beneath their dignity. A few days out they disappeared, accompanied by the horses.

We have few details of the crossing of the Blue Mountains. The oldest sister slipped under a ponderously moving ox and broke her leg. John used hard-packed snowballs to keep down the swelling. The baby was very low, and John was sometimes not sure she was breathing at all. He had to abandon the starving oxen. The cow, which still yielded a small quantity of milk for the baby and transportation for the oldest sister, must come along. With frosted feet, with festering sores due to dirt and emaciation, the children began the last lap of the journey. They made five or six miles a day, huddling together at night like stricken lambs under the shelter of a rock or backed against a fallen tree, warmed by huge fires. A thousand times during the trip the younger children shrieked that they would go no farther. John forced them to go on.

7 It would have wrung my heart, but I wish I might have witnessed the last lap of that immortal journey, though after many days with the diaries I can see it as clearly as if I had actually come upon them in those mountain fastnesses.<sup>6</sup>

Now they have topped the last crest, and as they stand gazing into the vast valley to the west, the snow is blood-stained beneath their feet. Behind them is a chaos of range and canyon over which they have crept like snails. Before them, a wide, undulating plain cut by the black and silver ribbon of the Columbia River. A moment to gaze, to shiver, then John moves with fumbling feet down the mountain. His legs are tied in strips of buffalo hide. His long hair is bound back from his eyes by a

twist of leather around his forehead. On his back is the three-year-old sister. In his arms the baby, wrapped in a wolfskin, lies motionless as death.

Staggering back of John moans the cow, her hoofs split to the quick. On her back the eight-year-old girl huddles under a bit of blanket which she shares with the five-year-old. Francis, his gray eyes dull with hunger and exertion, buckskin pants reduced to a mere patch of leather, and flannel shirt only a fluttering decoration across his chest, brings up the rear with the others.

8 Stumbling, rising, panting, but in a silence more tragic than weeping, they move down into the valley and stand at last before the Whitman mission. Narcissa Whitman gave a little cry when she saw them and held out her arms toward the bundle in John's arms. Her only child, a little girl of two, had been drowned a few years before. She groaned as she turned back the wolfskin and saw what lay beneath.

Dr. Whitman looked with her while the six young derelicts waited in breathless silence. The doctor thought that perhaps the baby was still alive, and Narcissa took her into the house and laid her in a warm bath while her husband herded the others into an outbuilding and began the unsavory job of turning them into human children. All but John. He shook his head on hearing the doctor's order and followed Mrs. Whitman into the house. Bathed, rubbed with warm oil, wrapped in soft wool, the baby showed no sign of life until Narcissa began to drop hot, diluted milk

6. *Fastnesses* are objects which are firmly fixed and stable.

### Word Bank

**derelicts** (DEHR uh LIKTS) *n.*: persons abandoned or forgotten

## GUIDING THE READING

### Literal

**Q. What kind of a guardian is John to the children?**

A. He is a harsh one. He spans them if necessary, and he forces them to go on.

**Q. What does Dr. Whitman do to the children?**

A. He bathes them and turns them into "human children" again.

### Analytical

**Q. Why is John such a harsh guardian?**

A. He is under pressure; he is too young for so much responsibility. However, again the reader sees that John is mature beyond his years.

**Q. Why does John refuse to join Dr. Whitman and the other children?**

A. He wants to know about the baby's condition first.

## SUMMING UP THE PLOT

- The baby makes a very small cry, more like a mouse squeak.
- John drops to the floor and thankfully hugs Narcissa's knees, overcome with emotion. He then limps from the room.
- Narcissa sits up with the baby all night, and by morning tells her husband she wants to keep the children at the mission.

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between the blue lips. After several moments of this, the little throat contracted and a whimper, something less than a mouse squeak, came forth. At this sound John dropped to the floor, wrapped his arms around Narcissa's knees, laughed, groaned, and then limped from the room.

All that night Narcissa sat with the baby on her lap. John, washed and in decent garments, slept on a blanket on the floor beside her. The doctor dozed on a cot nearby. What thoughts passed through Narcissa Whitman's mind that night we cannot know. We do know that she was already worn with anxiety and

overwork, and the prospect of adding seven more to her household must have been staggering. Toward dawn she roused the doctor and told him that she wanted to keep the children at the mission. The next morning they invited the little orphans to become their adopted children.

And so the heroic odyssey<sup>7</sup> came to an end. Little John Sager had fulfilled his father's dream of making a home for the Sager family in the Columbia Valley, and of helping save Oregon for America.

7. An *odyssey* (AHD ih see) is a long wandering.



Columbia River

## LITERARY COMPONENTS

9. **Characterization:** Only when he sees signs that the baby has survived, can John relax his hold on himself and begin to express emotions. Only then does he know he has successfully completed the journey his parents had begun.

## RECALLING

1. John's legs were tied in strips of buffalo hide. His long hair was bound back from his eyes by a twist of leather around his forehead. On his back was his three-year-old sister. In his arms, he carried a five-month-old baby—motionless as death—wrapped in a wolfskin. The eight-year-old sister had a broken leg. There were an eleven-year-old brother and two sisters, ages five and seven. All were dirty, emaciated, and clothed in rags.
2. His parents had died en route. The adults accompanying them went to California, but he wanted to go to Oregon.
3. He was fulfilling his parents' dream of settling in the Columbia Valley in the Oregon Territory.
4. The oldest sister slipped and broke her leg. They abandoned the starving oxen, and the baby became very sick.

## INTERPRETING

5. He is a determined person. He doesn't know his limitations, and he takes his responsibilities very seriously.
6. It is not appropriate for our times. Perhaps it was necessary under those unique circumstances. John was little more than a child himself, yet he needed to control the younger children. He had to do what was necessary.

## CONCLUDING

7. He must have had the physical strength and stamina to survive such harsh conditions. He had a strong sense of family, as he insisted they all stay together. He was devoted to his parents' ideals, as he undertook this trip to fulfill their dream. He was determined to complete his journey. He was mature beyond his years.

## Studying THE SELECTION

### Recalling

1. How did the Sager family appear at the beginning of the story? Describe their appearance, using details given by the author.
2. Why did John need to take his siblings to the Oregon Territory all alone?
3. What did John feel he was accomplishing, by leading his family to Columbia?
4. What happened as the family crossed the Blue Mountains?

### Interpreting

5. What does John's decision, to take the family on a difficult journey, show about his character?
6. The Scottish factor said that John was not a gentle guardian. Do you think the harsh manner in which John behaved was appropriate? Explain.

### Concluding

7. Which character traits did John possess that allowed him to complete his journey with all his siblings?

## EXAMINING FICTION

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1. Answers should resemble this one: "The oldest sister slipped under a ponderously moving ox and broke her leg." She cried in pain and frustration. How would she walk? She was frightened she would be left behind.

This would be an appropriate representation of a painful or frightening situation.

2. The deadpan tone is powerful because it allows the reader to react on his own. The harsh tone of the writing reflects the harsh life the children lead and the suppression of emotions that helped them to survive.

## THINKING ABOUT FICTION

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1. Answers will vary.
2. Answers will vary, although mention should be made of the fact that Narcissa had lost her only child just a few years earlier. This probably influenced her decision to adopt the Sagers.

## CREATING AND WRITING

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Answers will vary.

### Examining Fiction

The story, *Child Pioneer*, is written in a natural, matter-of-fact style. Even though the events are dreadful and grim, the author relates them with little emotion. The overall effect is one of harsh realism.

1. The author's plain, factual telling of the story reflects the plain, matter-of-fact way the characters face hardship. Choose three places in the story where some difficulty is described. Copy out the descriptive sentence, then add one or two sentences of your own, that tell about the character's emotions.
2. Is the simple, deadpan tone more powerful than a voice charged with drama? Explain your answer.

### Thinking About Fiction

1. Suppose that you were facing the same circumstances as John Sager. Would you continue your journey on the Oregon Trail? Explain your decision.
2. Many thoughts went through Narcissa Whitman's mind the night before she decided to adopt the children. Reconstruct the events of that evening, and explain how Narcissa arrived at her decision.

### Creating and Writing

The settling of the western territories of the United States required strength and courage. Thousands of Americans made this treacherous journey, yet little is known about their lives. Write a paragraph in which you discuss the bravery of families such as the Sagers whose persistence transformed the history of the United States, particularly regions west of the Mississippi River.