

Interdisciplinary Ideas

LANGUAGE ARTS

1. Find examples in the story of foreign or unfamiliar words whose meaning is clear from the context of the sentence. Make a glossary of these words.
2. Write a response to literature comparing *Coolies* to *The Memory Coat* by Elvira Woodruff.
3. Read Laurence Yep's *Dragon's Gate*, an award-winning fictional chapter book about Chinese immigrants working on the railroad.

SOCIAL STUDIES

1. With a partner, research and compare immigrant experiences of Chinese Americans with those of Irish Americans who worked on the Transcontinental Railroad. Write a paper comparing and contrasting working conditions. (Keywords: Transcontinental Railroad, Chinese railroad workers, Irish railroad workers)
2. Research reasons for Chinese emigration to America during the mid-1800's. (Keyword: Taiping Rebellion)
3. Read about the Ching Ming Festival in the Author's Note. Find out more about this Chinese holiday honoring ancestors, including the burning of imitation paper money. Report findings to the class.

ART

With a partner, find math facts about building the first Transcontinental Railroad (e.g., miles built per day, miles covered, number of rails and ties, elevations, amounts of explosives). Make word problems for your class to solve.

Coolies

Yin
2001
New York: Philomel Books

LOYALTY
USA/China
Historical Fiction
Reading Time: 11 minutes

CONCEPTS

Loyalty
Sacrifice
Courage
Respect

SUMMARY

This tale of two Chinese brothers reveals the harsh and unjust conditions suffered by Chinese immigrants who came to America to build the Transcontinental Railroad during the mid-nineteenth century. Yin transforms the ethnic slur "coolies" into a badge of honor as she portrays the loyalty and love between Shek and Wong and their courage to endure. Soentpiet's bold watercolors depict realities of historical events while celebrating the brothers' devotion to one another.

OBJECTIVE

The student will be able to define and discuss loyalty, love, courage and respect as they apply to the story. The student will learn about the contributions of Chinese immigrants to building the Transcontinental Railroad and the discrimination they suffered.

After the Story

Coolies

DISCUSSION

1. Why do Shek and Wong have to leave their home in China? What promise does Shek make to his mother? How does he honor that promise on the voyage? How would you feel if you had to leave your family and country?
2. What dangers do the brothers face? How are Shek and Wong loyal to each other? Give examples.
3. How are Shek, Wong and other Chinese immigrants treated by the railroad bosses? What injustices do they suffer? How do they respond?
4. Why does Shek encourage the other workers to call off the strike? What does he mean when he says, "We must not forget why we came here.?" What do you think you would have done in that situation?
5. Why do you think the author uses the word "coolies" for a title? Would you change the title? Explain.

ACTIVITIES

1. Locate China, California and Utah on a world map and place story pins.
2. With a partner, make two lists: examples of loyalty in the story and examples of loyalty in your life. Share with the class.
3. In small groups, write examples of Heartwood attributes shown in the story (color code index cards and write one example per card, red for courage, orange for loyalty, etc.). A representative from each group may read examples to the class. Create a Heartwood story bulletin board by posting the title of the story, large attribute words and note card examples under each attribute.

HOME CONNECTION

1. Retell the story at home. Talk about ways you are and can be loyal to each other.
2. Ask if anyone knows a family story about ancestors coming to America. Ask permission to share with the class.

JOURNAL

1. Write a letter Shek might have sent to his mother. Include ways you are helping your brother.
2. Write about character traits you think Shek and Wong possess. Give examples.

VOCABULARY

rebellion
kowtow
incense
queues

frail
trestle
avalanche