

A teaching guide for

A Pioneer Story: The Daily Life of a Canadian Family in 1840

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Meet the Robertsons

What was it like to be a child in pioneer times? Meet the Robertsons, a family living on a backwoods farm in 1840. Through the eyes of the six children, particularly those of ten-year-old Sarah and nine-year-old Willy, the reader lives vicariously through one cycle of the seasons, getting a feel for the work of the time: maple sugaring, planting, sheep tending, milking, harvesting and storing food for the winter. During this memorable year in the life of Scottish immigrants, the Robertsons finally manage to move from their tiny, cramped log cabin to the new, large frame house they have built up on the hill. Although each story is complete in itself (making it possible for you to choose only the pioneer activities that fit your themes), the action of the subplot, building the new house, gathers momentum through the stories until the climactic moment on New Year's Eve when Granny sweeps their old life out the back door, and Willy opens the front door to welcome their new life.

The nineteen stories and their accompanying information spreads provide a wealth of pleasure and background about pioneer life. Heather Collins' evocative illustrations complement the text perfectly, acting as an additional source of information about the clothing, architecture, tools and machinery of the times.

The Robertson farm, although not pinpointed exactly, is located in what is now southern Ontario, somewhere in the fertile farmland that lies north of Toronto and west of Peterborough. This area represented the new frontier of the 1830s. Settlers were moving west from the Maritimes and from Quebec (called Lower Canada until 1841, when it became Canada East) and north from the settled areas on Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. By 1840 the frontier was about to move west again, beyond the Huron Tract on the shores of Lake Huron and out to the new territories that would become the prairie provinces and British

Columbia. Life on any frontier is rough and basic. Although this story is told from the perspective of a Scottish family in the backwoods of Upper Canada, it represents the typical daily life of settlers in any 19th-century frontier community.

Why 1840? A brief historical note

The year 1840 marks the beginning of a transitional period in 19th-century life: from a primitive pioneer experience to the possibility of an easier existence. While the Robertsons were struggling to clear their land, the world at large was hovering on the brink of revolutionary change. We see the beginnings of that change at an individual level when a new sawmill in the neighborhood provides the Robertsons with lumber to build a frame house and the easier availability of iron stoves provides them with a convenient way to heat the new house's extra rooms.

In the larger world, inventions, political events and new attitudes are about to revolutionize the Robertsons' way of life. Already invented but not yet generally available are matches that light when struck, the automatic reaper-binder, vulcanized rubber, Daguerre's process for making photographs (silver images on copperplate) and the steam engine. In the next ten years transportation will be revolutionized with the laying of rail lines (May 16, 1853, first regular train service in Canada West begins its run from Toronto to Aurora), communication with the telegraph and underwater cable (first message between P.E.I. and New Brunswick sent January 20, 1853), lighting when Alexander Gesner distills kerosene from petroleum (patented in 1854), and domestic hand sewing with the advent of the Singer sewing machine in 1846.

Attitudes are changing, too. Many revolutionary ideas are beginning to ferment: in British North America, as a result of the Durham Report of 1839, Upper and Lower Canada are joined to form the united province of Canada in 1841 and a limited version of responsible government is established; also in 1841 an act is passed to establish and maintain public schools. Farther afield, the transportation of criminals to the penal colonies in New South Wales ends in 1940, Charles Darwin is organizing his notes and working out his theory of evolution, and John James Audubon is protesting the “holocaust of seabirds underway through egging.”

Using *A Pioneer Story* in the classroom

You can use this book with any grade from three to eight as the basis for projects varying in length from yearlong, across-the-curriculum studies to short activities linked to social studies or language arts themes. If you decide to base a whole unit on the themes in this book, you might want to start in the fall when material such as apples, corn, hay, etc., are more readily available.

A long-term project could be set up in this way: start in September and work toward a date in December (perhaps as part of the school’s seasonal concert) when your classroom can be turned into the interior of a pioneer cabin. As you introduce the stories and augment your social studies, language arts, mathematics and science programs with the factual material, your students can also be working on individual projects to transform your classroom in the last week before the concert or Pioneer Days Festival. You might want to write out the possibilities and post a sign-up list or make a pick-one-make-one basket so that your students will know early on what their pioneer “chores” will be. You could ask older students to create the list of necessary artifacts themselves. You might also want to explain to older students that the warnings in this book to ask for adult help are aimed at younger children using the book at home.

The pick-one-make-one basket could include the activities found in the book augmented by such suggestions as

making samplers, candles, candle holders, calico curtains, corn husk decorations, applesauce (or dried apples), corncob checkers with painted board, pioneer toys such as Jacob’s ladder or cup and ball game, cradles with dressed dolls, sand clocks, sun dials and clothing (shawl, apron, cap).

As well as making an individual artifact, each student could be part of group projects such as making the instruments for and creating a jug band; learning songs from the period; making a recipe book of pioneer food, then making (and freezing for the presentation day) pans of Johnny cake; growing and harvesting a crop (beans can be grown indoors); writing articles for a pioneer newspaper; braiding a rug (discarded pantyhose work well); creating a series of letters between the Robertsons and families living in other parts of the country to highlight different ways of life (e.g., in big cities such as Toronto or Montreal, at a Hudson’s Bay post, in the Red River Colony, at a gold camp in British Columbia, getting ready for the Franklin Arctic Expedition of 1845).

The class as a whole could create a quilt (each person cuts out and sews two squares). The class might also be able to tap some local maple trees and make syrup. To help the students learn pioneer skills you might canvass your neighborhood for adults with hobbies such as spinning, weaving, carving, carpentry and tinsmithing. Parents might be willing to teach both boys and girls how to sew, knot, embroider, chop kindling and saw wood.



If you are looking for a less time-consuming approach, you can still make use of many of the topics mentioned. You might want to choose a focus (pioneer science, letters from around the country) and display the “artifacts” in a hallway display case or a “museum” created in a spare corner.

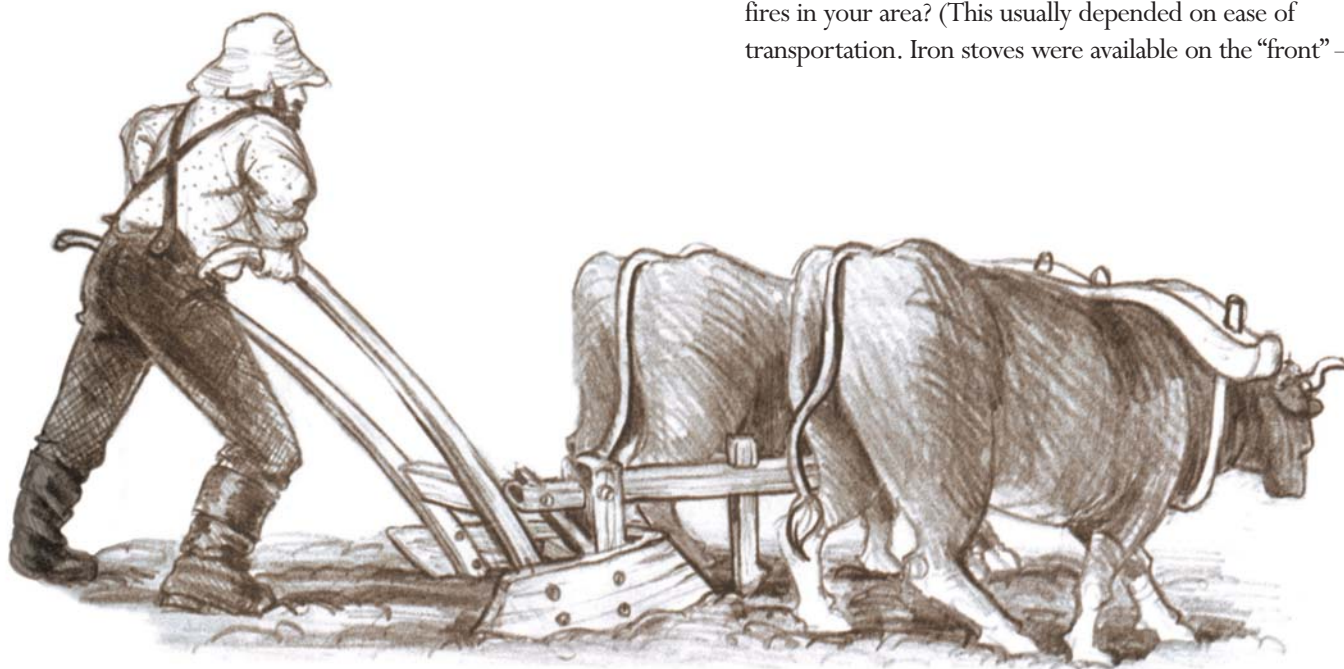
You might want to begin or end your pioneer project with a visit to your local pioneer village, museum or house. Suggest students choose ways to contrast life then with life now (e.g., pictures, lists, stories). They might pick a focus, such as what types of inventions have made life easier, or create charts showing the evolution of one area (e.g., keeping food cool: from stone floor to freezer).

Projects

Aspects of pioneer life can lead to projects that span the curriculum. These can be expanded or simplified depending on the grade level.

Language Arts

- Many of the stories hint at further possibilities. For example, Granny muses about her own funeral, Meg is almost old enough to be courted, Willy may be in trouble with Frank O'Flynn. Some students may want to speculate about later or side developments and expand part of the story.
- A group of students might hold a spelling bee. Each proposes a word (must be able to spell it before proposing it). A contestant draws for a word. If the contestant fails, the one who proposed it spells it. Student with dictionary referees.
- Students could add to a bulletin board list of spelling rules and mnemonics suggestions that they've gleaned from parents.
- Proverbs, sayings, maxims and aphorisms are examples of pithy writing — a few well-chosen words summing up a complex idea. Students could collect and add to the saying found in *A Pioneer Story*, then explain in words or pictures what the metaphor or image helps us to understand.



- Storytelling: invite a storyteller to the classroom. Afterwards students could prepare and tell (or tape record) traditional stories. Some might prefer to prepare a story in place of a speech. This activity can be used to enhance listening skills.
- In chapter 15 Granny tells an “if only ...” story. Collect other variations of this type of tale (e.g., *The Fisherman’s Wife*).
- Some students might want to interview recent immigrants and compare their “coming to Canada” stories with Granny’s story. (Ch. 6)
- Students with relatives who grew up on farms could interview them and compare their experiences with the Robertsons’.

Social Studies

- You might arrange a field trip to look for evidence of early settlements in your community: stones piled along fence lines, old apple trees, rhubarb plants, lines of trees used as wind breaks. What else might give evidence of early homesteads or early manufacturing?
- Students who have visited modern farms could contrast tools and equipment today with pioneer tools and equipment and discover how modern machinery has transformed the life of a farmer.
- From open fire to microwave — research the development of domestic cooking. When did iron stoves replace open fires in your area? (This usually depended on ease of transportation. Iron stoves were available on the “front” —

lake or riverside settlements — before backwoods areas. In Ontario, they were becoming available to backwoods settlements by the late 1830s.)

- Granny's behavior was sometimes guided by superstitions (sweeping out the old year, first footer). Some students might want to research other superstitions. Why, for example, was Granny so determined to bring a rowan tree to her new home? (It was believed that the red berries protected the household from the evil eye. Rowan branches were nailed over doorways and woven through the horns of the cow.) Look for superstitions linked to planting and harvesting. Do any have a basis in science?
- Research the history of our Christmas traditions. For example, where and when did Santa Claus, as we picture him, acquire his appearance and appurtenances (named reindeer, etc.)?
- Learn more about early transportation by road and by water.
- "The Robertsons' festive day was New Year's Eve." What is your family's festive day? (Christmas, Rosh Hashanah, Diwali, Chinese New Year, etc.) Research other traditions (e.g., mummering) that occur in the Christmas/New Year's season. A good resource for this is *Let's Celebrate* (see bibliography).
- Immigrant ships disembarked at Grosse Île, Lower Canada (Quebec), where immigrants were checked medically and kept in quarantine if they showed any signs of cholera or other infectious diseases. Find out more about a) the life of immigrants aboard ship and b) infectious diseases and their effect on early pioneer communities.

Mathematics

- Hold a times tables bee.
- A keen math student might want to use modular math to create a quilt pattern. A chart could be created to show relationships among sequence length, line length and the complexity of the overall design.
- Early surveyors used simple geometry to lay out the new settlement area. Some students might want to research early surveying, then make surveyors' chains from chain link and lay out a model neighborhood in the schoolyard. A local parent may be able to demonstrate surveying equipment to the class.



Science

- Compare the Robertsons' diet to today's Food Guide.
- Many chapters have examples of simple machines (crane, Ch.1; rollers, runners, levers, ramps, Ch.13). Look for more examples. Create pictures or models to explain how they work.
- Learn more about the properties of salt. (Its use as brine in preserving food is an example of diffusion.)
- Learn more about the properties of yeast. (Can be used to teach change of state.)
- Learn more about the science of soap making. What is the basic difference between soap and detergent?
- Orienteering: research today's methods for finding one's way through the woods. Compare them to pioneer methods.



Art

- Calligraphy: pioneer students practiced writing by making exquisite copies of sayings and proverbs, then framing them with decorative borders. Use some of the sayings in the book to create hand-lettered posters.
- Analyze the picture on page 190 then create a similar picture showing how your family spends a typical winter's evening. (This could also be a discussion or essay topic).
- Research tartans, then use graph paper to design a personal tartan. Some students may be able to use a simple loom to weave the tartan they have designed.
- Use graph paper to design a quilt. Blocks of the repeating pattern could be used for stenciling. (Ch. 17)
- Art by painters such as Cornelius Krieghoff, Paul Kane and W.H. Bartlett tells us much about life in pioneer times. Look for reprints (often found on postcards and Christmas cards) to make a picture gallery of their art. (See bibliography for collection of prints.)
- Extending the experience — for discussion, debate or expository essay.
- As well as taking the reader inside pioneer life, the stories in *A Pioneer Story* are built around universal moral experiences that can lead to discussion or debate.
- In pioneer times every pair of hands was needed if the family was to survive. Is a child's contribution needed by a family today? Is it important for a person to feel he/she has a unique contribution to make?
- Compare discipline in school today and in pioneer times. Is one method more effective than the other? Why do you think so? (Ch. 3)
- What are the pros and cons of admitting that you have done something wrong? (Ch. 3)
- Do you have the right to say no? In a general context or specifically in the context of boy/girl relationships, Ch. 14 could lead to a discussion about how and when to say no.
- Are children too protected today? Are they capable of doing more than adults allow them to do? Compare what pioneer children did (chopping firewood, milking cows, etc.) to the types of jobs children do today. Conduct a survey: how many can cook, sew, use power tools, etc.?
- Television is today's storyteller. Agree or disagree? Discuss the pros and cons of face-to-face storytelling with the distanced, impersonal experience of the television story. (Ch. 15)
- Compare the skills the Robertson children need to survive in the woods with the street-proofing skills you learn. (Ch. 16) What different circumstances make the two kinds of skills necessary?
- Many of the stories show examples of the "pioneer spirit" of cooperation and community caring at work. Does this happen today? For a month, clip stories from newspapers, magazines, etc., that prove and/or disprove that a spirit of community caring is still in effect.

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Parry, Caroline, *Let's Celebrate*, Kids Can Press.

Language Arts

Stories and novels are powerful tools for creating empathy with people who lived in times or places remote from our own. These books explore the pioneer experience further.

Picture books for all ages

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Hall, Donald, *The Ox-Cart Man*, Viking/Puffin.

Kurelek, William, *A Prairies Boy's Winter/Summer*, Tundra.

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Lunn, Janet, *One Hundred Shining Candles*, Lester and Orpen Dennys.

Manson, Ainslie, *A Dog Came, Too*, Greenwood.

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Barkhouse, Joyce, *Pit Pony*, Gage.

Bellingham, Brenda, *Storm Child*, Lorimer.

Bilson, Geoffrey, *Death Over Montreal*, Kids Can Press.

German, Tony, *Tom Penny*, Scholastic.

Godfrey, Martyn, *Mystery in the Frozen Lands*, Lorimer.

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