Learning about the Land Run and Pioneer Life through Primary Sources

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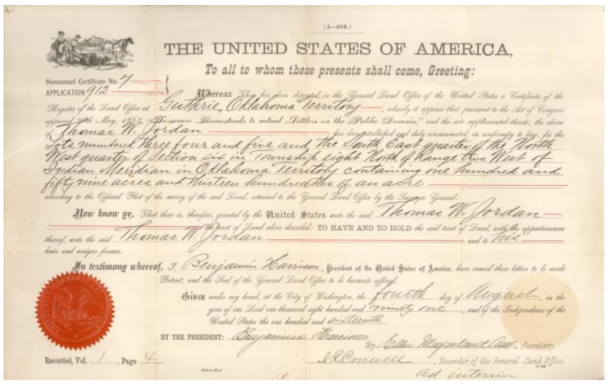
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
To all to whom these presents shall come, Greeting:

The best way to understand history is to examine primary sources – the materials created by those who experienced historical events. Examples of primary sources include journals, photographs, and news articles from the relevant time period. Even household objects and textiles, such as samplers and quilts, can serve as primary sources. Teaching with primary sources encourages critical thinking and analysis among students. It also lets them examine history in the open rather than through the lens of a secondary source, such as a textbook or classroom lecture.

Oklahoma's C3 academic standards for Social Studies require educators to teach history by using primary sources. This guide has information for teaching with primary sources along with examples and discussion questions related to the Oklahoma land runs and pioneer life.

Using Sources Wisely

First, you must select good primary sources that are age-appropriate for your students and relevant to your social studies lessons. You may want to choose sources that are good for compare and contrast exercises. Next, you

will need to create questions that invite students to examine the sources closely and think critically about the subject matter. Finally, you should present the materials and the questions to the students in an engaging manner and help them understand the lessons. Ask them to back up any comments or assumptions they make with evidence from the primary sources, and help them find ways to answer any additional questions they have by doing research.

Where to Find Primary Sources

Primary sources are everywhere. The Library of Congress and the Smithsonian have millions of photographs, first-hand accounts, and other materials related to United States history for use in the classroom. The Oklahoma Historical Society's research division is an excellent source of material related to Oklahoma history. You may also find valuable resources at your local library or historical society. Even one of your family heirlooms, such as a journal, a photograph, or a quilt, can serve as a primary source. Your students will appreciate your personal link to history.

Primary Source: Preparing for the Land Run

The photo above is from April 19, 1889. It shows three people who are ready to make the first land run in Oklahoma.

1. Name three things that stand out to you in the photograph.

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2. What mode of transportation are these people using for the land run? Is this a good choice for the land run? Why or why not?

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3. What kind of clothing are they wearing? Is this a good choice for the land run? Why or why not? _____

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4. Do these people look like they want to stake claims for farming? Why or why not?

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5. Look at the lumber piles in the background. There are no trees or tree stumps in the area. Where do you think they got the lumber? Why do people need so much lumber on hand before a land run?

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Primary Source: Preparing for the Land Run – Teacher Guide

1. Students may notice any of the major details in the photograph, such as the women's hats and dresses, the man's hat and suit, the horses, the piles of lumber, and the tent in the background.
2. These people are making the land run on horseback instead of a wagon. Horseback is an excellent mode of transportation because it is much faster than making the run on foot or in a wagon. Wagons moved more slowly and had a tendency to tip over or get stuck in holes or ditches.
3. The three people are very well-dressed for the occasion. The women are wearing fancy hats and dresses, and the man has a nice hat and a suit. The hectic race for a claim would damage this type of clothing. The dresses could catch on bushes or passing wagons and horses. The wind would shred the feathers and ribbons or blow the hats off while their horses are running at top speed. The clothing is also unsuited for the hard work needed to build a house and plant crops.
4. It is safe to assume that they are not farmers because of their clothing. It is possible that they are looking for farming lots as investment opportunities or town lots. They may also be making the run simply for the adventure of it.
5. Lumber was necessary for building houses, schools, churches, and stores after staking claims. There were very few trees in Oklahoma at the time but many people needed to build things, so lumber companies brought lumber into the area on trains. Selling lumber could be very profitable due to the low supply and high demand.

Primary Source: Making the Land Run

This is part of a news article printed in the *New York Herald* on September 17, 1893. It describes two different starting points in the Cherokee Strip Land Run.

> A puff of smoke was seen at last out on the plains to the north [near Orlando], and soon the dull report of the cannon was heard. A dozen carbines [guns] along the line were fired in response to the signal, and the line was broken. Darting out at breakneck speed the racers [on horseback] soon dotted the plains in every direction. Following them came light vehicles driven with a madness that disregarded every obstruction, the drivers yelling and urging their horses with whip as well as voice. Then followed heavy wagons, enveloped in clouds of dust, the noise made by their wheels resembling long continued rolls of thunder. Behind these came anxious footmen carrying blankets, water and stakes, regardless of heat and dust.
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> ...
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> When the signal was given [near Arkansas City] away they all went... There was a jam at Chilocco Creek, which, owing to the steep north bank, was passable at only a few points. In many instances men leaped their horses down the eighteen-foot embankment, landing in the water and hastily scrambling out again. Others were so unfortunate as to cripple their horses and, abandoning them, started on foot.

Just east of the school a heavy wagon loaded with six men was driven over the bank, which was concealed by clouds of dust that came up from the burned prairie. As the horses went over the men jumped and all escaped unhurt except one, who had his leg broken.

1. Who was the intended audience of this newspaper article? What was the purpose of the article?

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2. Why did the people in the land run hear the sound of the cannon a few seconds after seeing a puff of smoke?

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3. Who took the lead in the land run? Who was next? Who was last?

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4. Why did everyone want to move as quickly as possible in the land run?

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5. What hazards did people face in the land run?

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6. The article describes the scenes at two different starting points of the land run. How are they alike? How are they different?

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7. Would you want to participate in a land run? Why or why not?

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Primary Source: Making the Land Run – Teacher Guide

1. The reporter for the *New York Herald* wrote this article to inform newspaper readers in New York and the surrounding areas about the Cherokee Outlet Land Run. These people were not present at the land run, so the reporter tried to describe the event in great detail.
2. People heard the sound of the cannon a few seconds later because light (the sight of the smoke) travels faster than sound (the boom).
3. People on horseback were the fastest, so they were first. Light vehicles (such as buggies and carts) were next, followed by heavy wagons. Wagons were slower because the horses had to pull the weight of the wagons, the contents, and the passengers. People on foot were the slowest and left the line last.
4. Everyone moved quickly because they needed to get to the best claims first.
5. Hazards included dust (which made it difficult to breathe and see), heat, falling into a creek or a ditch, injuries to people and horses, and overturning a wagon.
6. The similarities between the two scenes include: people, horses, and wagons moving very quickly; people using wagons and horses at both starting points; clouds of dust; the use of a starting signal. Differences include: one began on flat terrain and the other began near a creek with a steep bank; the reporter says that people and horses were injured at the Arkansas City starting point; people fired guns along the line at the Orlando starting point.
7. Answers will vary. Some students may be wary of the risks, while others might think it sounds fun.

Primary Source: Holding a Claim

This photograph shows a woman who has staked a town lot in Guthrie after the 1889 Land Run.

1. Name three things that stand out to you in the photograph.

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2. What is this woman's house made of? Why was it made that way?

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3. Do you think the woman built the house herself or did someone build it for her? Be sure to explain your answer.

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4. Do you think she will live in this house for a short time or a long time? Why?

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5. How would you feel about living in a house like this?

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Primary Source: Holding a Claim – Teacher Guide

1. Students may notice any of the major details in the photograph, such as the tent structure, the lumber structure, the woman's dress, her barrel and crate, her neighbors' tents, and the two men with a horsedrawn cart in the background.
2. This woman's house consists of a tent with an adjoining shelter made of lumber scraps. The tent structure came first, probably as soon as she staked the claim, and she added the adjoining structure later so that she would have more room. It's possible that the tent is a private room for sleeping and dressing, and the lumber structure would be for visitors or meals. People could make these kinds of structures very quickly. They needed shelter immediately, and it would take too long to buy lumber and build a full-sized house.
3. We don't know if the woman built the structure herself. She may have had a neighbor or a family member build it for her. Many pioneer women were very resourceful and self-sufficient, but it is unlikely that the woman built this without some kind of help.
4. This is a kind of temporary shelter used by many settlers after the land run. People only lived in these structures until they could construct real houses.
5. Answers will vary. Some students will know that being in a tent can be very difficult, especially during rainstorms and windy weather. Others might think it sounds fun.

Primary Source: Living in a Sod House (Photograph)

A family poses outside their sod house near Taloga in Oklahoma Territory.

1. Name three things that stand out to you in the photograph.

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2. What kind of clothing are these people wearing? Do you think they dressed this way every day?

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3. What are the little girls holding in their arms? Why did they want to have these items in the photograph?

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4. What animals can you find? Why did the family include them in the photograph?

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5. How is this sod house different from houses today? How is it the same?

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Primary Source: Living in a Sod House (Photograph) – Teacher Guide

1. Students may notice any of the major details in the photograph, including the structure of the house, the family's clothing, their livestock, and the grass around the house.
2. The family is most likely wearing their best clothes for the photograph. Their clothes are very neat and clean instead of worn and dirty. The girls have dresses with ruffles and they are wearing bows and ribbons in their hair. They would have dressed like this only on special occasions, such as the very rare opportunity to pose for a photograph.
3. Two of the girls are holding books, and one is holding a very simple (and probably homemade) doll. These items must be very important to the girls because they wanted to include them in the picture. Pioneers did not have very many books because they were expensive and the family needed to spend what little money they had on necessities. Children did not have very many toys, and what they had was typically homemade.
4. The family has some chickens and a milk cow. They probably wanted to include them in the photo to show how much they owned on their claim at the time.
5. This house is different from houses today because it is made of sod. It does not have plumbing, air conditioning, drywall, or flooring. Yet it is similar to houses today because it has walls, glass windows, a doorway, a roof, and a chimney (which looks like a metal tube).

Primary Source: A Girl's Pioneer Life (Oral History)

The following is part of a story from Mrs. J. L. Ealum about her childhood in Oklahoma Territory during the 1890s. Before she was married, her last name was Walker, so this story is about the Walker family. You can find Mrs. Ealum's full story in the Indian-Pioneer Papers, a series of interviews with people who settled in Oklahoma before it became a state. Historians transcribed these stories so that we can read them. Mrs. Ealum did not give her first name in the interview, but according to the 1940 Federal Census, her first name was Cudia.

> Yes, I guess you would call me a pioneer, as I came here in 1885... We came from Grayson County, Texas, in a covered wagon. There were three families: my parents, my mother's parents...and my uncle and family. My father and mother had heard about the wonderful opportunities that were here for any one who wanted to take up the land and make a home, and as the land in Texas, where we lived, was so high, they had given up the hope of ever owning a home there.
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> [I] wore three petticoats that were tucked and pleated to the bottom. I remember one outfit that my mother had bought me, after I was grown, or thought I was grown. The whole outfit cost only $2.50, and she bought me [a] hat, shoes, gloves, cotton hose and the dress, which she made by hand. My, but I can look back now and say that I was the happiest girl in all of that County.
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> ...

I was never a strong child but I hauled water, and my sister and I plowed a four team outfit, and used a gang plow. We had to cut the thistles out of the wheat with a sharp hoe.

...

We had a lot of mesquite wood for fuel, and we drank any water that we could get out of buffalo wallows, puddle holes, but later dug cisterns. We had a sod house [dugout], with dirt floor and dirt walls, but at first we just had a tent that was stretched out until the dugout was built. This was a hole about 12' x 16' and about 6' deep, dirt floors and walls. The top was made of heavy cottonwood logs laid across with grass, with dirt thrown on top. This made a nice snug house, but the bark on the logs was a good housing place for the centipedes. Often when lying awake we would see one crawl out and drop down on the bed, then how we would scramble to get out of bed. We would often see a rattlesnake coiled up on the ledge but we always were lucky in killing all we found. The bull and chicken snakes were very bad about getting our eggs and young chickens.

...

Sometimes when we ran out of provisions we had to eat beans for bread, but we didn't often do this as we knew what to depend in laying in our supplies. We got dry goods once or twice a year. We bought honest "stick to the rib" grub, bacon and beans, and we paid five cents per pound for the bacon, when we had to buy it.

We raised sorghum cane, and had it made into syrup. We had our own corn, and had it ground into meal. We made our own soap with lye made from wood ashes and we called it ashe hopper lye. We came here to get a home, and after farming the land we found that it was very productive and would grow almost anything we planted. The soil was very rich, and we made plenty to keep us.

1. What did Cudia wear? How much did it cost? How much do your clothes cost today?

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2. How is the dugout house different from houses today?

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3. What animals did they find in their house?

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4. What food did the Walker family eat? Do you eat the same kinds of food?

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5. How did the family get their food and water? How do you get your food and water today?

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6. What chores did Cudia have to do?

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7. How much did the Walker family pay for a pound of bacon? How much does a pound of bacon cost today?

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8. How did the family get soap?

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9. Why did the Walker family come to Oklahoma Territory? Do you think they had a good life? Why or why not?

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Primary Source: A Girl's Pioneer Life (Oral History) – Teacher Guide

1. Cudia wore three petticoats, a hat, shoes, gloves, cotton hose, and a homemade dress. It all cost $2.50. Students should research the costs of clothing today and compare the differences.
2. The house has dirt walls and dirt floors instead of drywall and flooring. The roof consists of logs, grass, and dirt. It does not have plumbing. It has only one room, and the entire family ate meals and slept in the same small room. The house is only 12 feet by 16 feet and it is 6 feet deep. For in-depth study, students can find out how big their own homes are. Some will find that this house is close to the size of their bedroom.
3. Snakes and centipedes get inside the house very often.
4. The family ate corn and they probably made the cornmeal into cornbread. They also ate bacon, beans, sorghum molasses, and eggs. Students' answers about their food today will vary.
5. The family grew most of their own food and purchased certain items from a store. Today, many people buy most or all of their food from grocery stores, and a few of them grow vegetables or fruit at home. The family got their water from buffalo wallows and puddles at first, and later dug their own cistern (well). Today, our water comes from public water systems or rural wells with modern pumps and pipes.
6. Cudia carried water, helped plow the fields, and cut thistles out of the wheat with a hoe.
7. Bacon was five cents a pound. Students should do some research to discover how much bacon costs today and compare the difference in prices.
8. The family made their own soap with lye that came from wood ashes. They most likely combined animal fat with the lye to make the soap.
9. They came here to acquire a home and a farm because land and houses were too expensive in Texas. Students' answers about the family's quality of

life will vary. The family lived in harsh conditions, but they had everything they needed and seemed to be happy.

Primary Source: A Boy's Pioneer Life (Oral History)

The following is part of a story from Charlie Allen about his childhood in Oklahoma Territory during the 1890s. You can find his full story in the Indian-Pioneer Papers, a series of interviews with people who settled in Oklahoma before it became a state. Historians transcribed these stories so that we can read them.

> We had one-hundred and sixty acres of land and the sage grass was higher than a man's head. It took lots of hard work to get through the first few years. We broke the land with oxen the first year. We built a dugout to live in; this was about thirty feet long and twenty feet wide and we left a space in the end of the dugout for a cook stove. The cook stove did not have any legs and we just set it upon the bare ground...
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> We had a corded bed; this bed was made out of ropes running both lengthwise and crosswise [in a frame]; these ropes were used in place of springs. Our furniture was made from cottonwood blocks and our tables and chairs were homemade.
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> For fuel we burned corn which we could buy for fifteen cents a bushel, cotton seed, and cow chips. My father made my sister and me take a cotton sack and go out on the prairie and gather chips every morning.
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> ...

We did not have any water for a long time; we dug a well but the water was very bad and hard and we hauled water from the creek for the stock.

...

I never saw any white sugar until I was about fifteen years old. We did not have much sugar then and what we did have was brown sugar.

We had a sorghum mill and made sorghum for our family use and also for our neighbors. We had to use the molasses to sweeten our fruit, that is, if we were able to get any fruit. We raised lots of vegetables in the early times but we did not have much fruit.

We had cows and chickens that furnished plenty of milk, butter and eggs.

The first school that I ever went to was held in a two room sod house. The seats were stools made from cottonwood stumps or blocks. We had school in one of the rooms and the neighbors kept hogs in the other room. There were about twenty children who went to this school. We had double slates to write on. I did not get much education because I had to work in the field most all of the time.

Everyone, young and old, went barefooted at that time. I would take my girl friend to church on Sunday mornings and we would go barefooted until we got nearly there and then we would stop and put on our shoes and stockings.

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We had lots of prairie fires in the early days. The prairie would get on fire and everyone would come out to help fight the fire. Sometimes the farmers would have to plow around their houses, barns, and haystacks; these fires burned for a month sometimes.

Cattlemen at that time would slip around at night and set the prairie on fire; they wanted to drive out the farmers or "nesters" as they called us.

1. How is the dugout house different from houses today?

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2. What was their furniture like? How is it like the furniture you have at home? How is it different?

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3. What chores did Charlie have?

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4. What did Charlie's family use as fuel? Why did they need fuel?

5. What food did Charlie's family eat? Do you eat the same kinds of food?

6. How did the family get their food and water? How do you get your food and water today?

7. How is Charlie's school different from yours? How is it the same?

8. Grass fires were a problem for Charlie's family. How did they fight the fires? How is it different from the way we fight fires today?

9. Why did the cattlemen want to drive out the settlers? Who do you think had a right to use that land?

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Primary Source: A Boy's Pioneer Life (Oral History) – Teacher Guide

1. The house has dirt walls and dirt floors instead of drywall and flooring. It does not have plumbing. The stove sits on the ground. Charlie's dugout is 20 feet by 30 feet. For in-depth study, students can find out how big their own homes are and compare the difference.
2. The family had homemade furniture and they used whatever they could find. Most people today have furniture that comes from stores. However, Charlie's family needed the same types of furniture that many people need today: chairs, beds, and tables.
3. Charlie had to gather cow chips as fuel, carry water, and help in the fields.
4. They used corn – most likely the leftover cobs and husks and not the part they could eat. They also burned cow chips. They needed fuel for cooking and warmth. Today, people need fuel for the same reasons, but electricity and natural gas serve as heat sources for homes.
5. Charlie's family had brown sugar, sorghum molasses, vegetables, eggs, butter, and milk. They did not have much fruit. Students' answers about their food today will vary.
6. Charlie's family grew most of their own food. Today, many people buy most or all of their food from grocery stores, and a few of them grow vegetables or fruit at home. The family dug a well, but the water was bad, so they had to haul water from a creek. Today, our water comes from public water systems or rural wells with modern pumps and pipes.
7. Charlie's school was in a two-room sod house. One room was for the students, and the other was for pigs, which most likely made the classroom smell bad. The students wrote on slates and sat on stumps and wooden blocks. Charlie did not spend much time in school because he had to help his family with the farm. Students today attend schools that are very different.

They sit in desks and use paper or computers. The law requires children to attend school regularly for most of the year or year-round. Students may notice that Charlie's class is roughly the same size as theirs, though his class would have had children of different ages.

8. In Charlie's time, his family and their neighbors would work together to fight fires. They did not have professional or volunteer fire departments like we do today. They also did not have running water or fire hoses, so they dug trenches to keep the grass from burning up to their homes. Fires burned for a much longer time back then. Today, firefighters can extinguish fires very quickly.

9. Cattlemen wanted to let their cattle graze on the land. Native Americans lived on the land first, then cattlemen started letting their cattle roam there, and finally the United States government took the land and allowed settlers to move in. Students' answers will vary regarding who had a right to the land.

Comparing and Contrasting Primary Sources: A Girl's Pioneer Life and a Boy's Pioneer Life

Compare and contrast the oral histories from Cudia Walker (Mrs. J. L. Ealum) and Charlie Allen and answer the following questions.

1. Compare the homes of the pioneer girl and the pioneer boy. How are they the same? How are they different?

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2. How did they get water? How is it the same? How is it different?

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3. Did the two families use the same types of fuel? What did they use?

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4. Look at the kinds of food that they ate. What foods do they have in common?

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5. What kinds of problems did they have? Which ones are the same? Which ones are different?

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6. What chores do they have in common?

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Comparing and Contrasting Primary Sources: A Girl's Pioneer Life and a Boy's Pioneer Life – Teacher Guide

This compare and contrast exercise will help students understand the similarities and differences in the experiences of pioneers.

1. Both families live in dugouts with dirt walls and dirt floors. Neither one has plumbing. Charlie's dugout is bigger than the one in which the Walker family lived.
2. The Walker family took water from buffalo wallows and puddles before they were able to dig their own cisterns (wells). Charlie's family had to haul water from a creek. Both families dug wells, but only the Walkers found water that was safe to drink.
3. Both families needed fuel, but they used different types. The Walker family used mesquite wood. Charlie's family used corn, cottonseed, and cow chips.
4. Both families had sorghum molasses, corn, and eggs.
5. Both families had to work very hard to find water, food, and fuel. The Walker family encountered snakes and centipedes, and snakes sometimes ate their chickens and eggs. Charlie's family had to fight grass fires.
6. Both Charlie and Cudia had to carry water and help in the fields.

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