

Lesson Ideas for Use With the Picture Book Coolies, by Yin

Fourth Grade

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By Janae Oveson

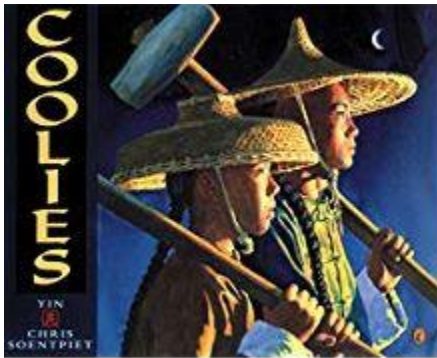
Summary

These lesson ideas were compiled to coordinate with the use of the 2001 award-winning picture book entitled Coolies, by Yin, with illustrations by Chris Soentpiet.

The provocative title is a reference to the perjorative term used to refer to low-wage workers, primarily but not exclusively of Asian descent. As Lakshmi Gandhi has noted “Although the word ‘coolie’ is primarily associated today with the histories of the Caribbean and South America, indentured labor was a widespread reality in mid-19th century America. Companies like the Central Pacific Railroad Company signed laborers to five-year contracts (these laborers, among other things, were instrumental in building the transcontinental railroad and other projects in the Western United States). Due to the fact that the laborers were Asian — 9 out of 10 workers on the railroad were Chinese and the remainder were Irish — and because the workers would labor for low wages and live in substandard living conditions, the word ‘coolie’ became a derogatory code for ‘Asian’ (both East and South) in the United States. The workers were a prime target for criticism by labor leaders, politicians and ordinary citizens, who believed the foreign laborers were depressing wages and unfairly taking jobs.”

Using the term in the title allows the protagonists to reclaim and in some ways neutralize the term while showing that there was nothing “lowly” about their heroic efforts in helping build the transcontinental railroad.

About the book: Shek marvels at the new world as he and his brother, Little Wong, arrive in California. Along with hundreds of other workers, the brothers are going to build a great railroad across the West. They plan to save enough money so that their mother and little brothers can join them in America. But as days grow into months, they endure many hardships-exhausting work, discrimination, and treacherous avalanches. Inspired by actual events, this story reveals the harsh truth about life for the Chinese railroad workers in 1865, while celebrating their perseverance and bravery.



Digital Reading available at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TysRAiuEn_k&t=524s

Main Curriculum Tie

Grade 4 - Utah Studies	
Standard 1 Objective 2.d	Students will understand the relationship between the physical geography in Utah and human life. Analyze how physical geography affects human life in Utah. Make inferences about the relationships between the physical geography of Utah and the states communication and transportation systems.

Standard 2 Objective 2.a	Students will understand how Utah's history has been shaped by many diverse people, events, and ideas. Describe the historical and current impact of various cultural groups on Utah. Chart the routes that diverse cultural groups took from their places of origin to Utah, using maps and other resources.
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ELA Core Standards:

Literacy:

ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.1

Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text

Craft and Structure:

ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including those that allude to significant characters found in mythology (e.g., Herculean).

Language:

ELA-LITERACY.L.4.4

Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 4 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

ELA-LITERACY.L.4.4.A

Use context (e.g., definitions, examples, or restatements in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

ELA-LITERACY.L.4.4.C

Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases.

Time Frame

This will vary depending on the instructional choices made.

Group Size

This will vary depending on the activities selected.

Life Skills

- X Aesthetics X Character _ Communication X Employability
- X Social & Civic Responsibility X Systems Thinking X Thinking & Reasoning

Bibliography

Libresco, Balantic, and Kipling. *Every Book is a Social Studies Book*, Libraries Unlimited, 2011.
 Yin, Author, Chris K. Soentpiet, Illustrator. *Coolies*. Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers, 2001.

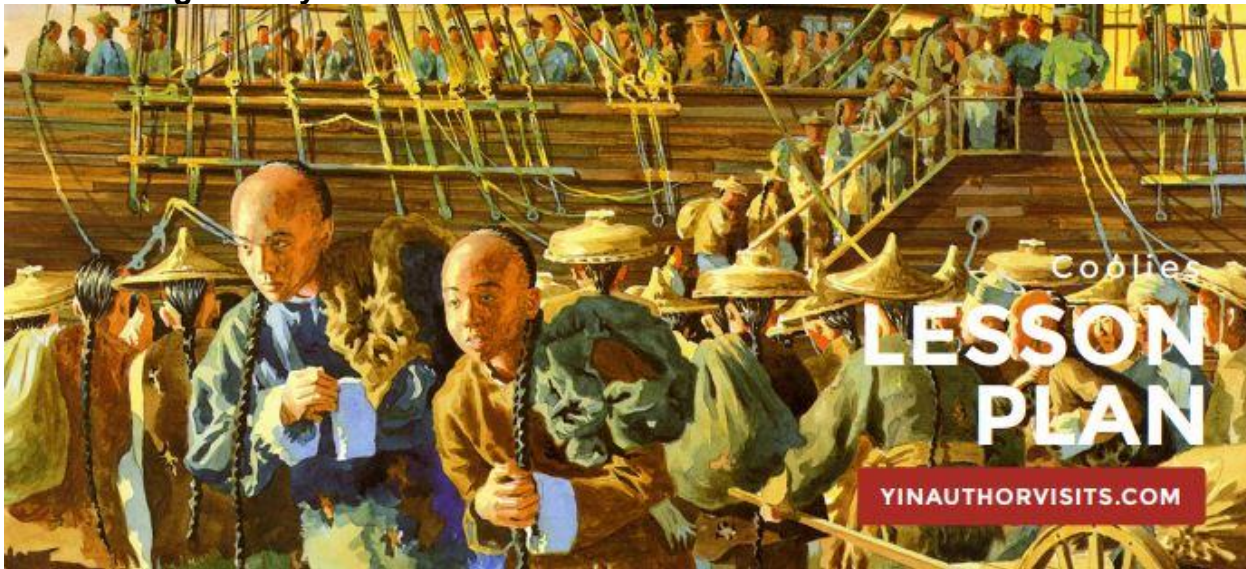
Social Studies concepts taught in this book:	Questions that could be discussed based on the text:
Cultural Traditions	What is the purpose of the Ching Ming festival celebrated by the Chinese people? How is this similar to other cultural traditions?
Equality	Why were Shek and Wong and the other Chinese workers left out of the celebration when the two railroads finally met? Explain how the Chinese workers were treated unfairly compared to others doing the same type of work.
Perseverance	What is the best example of perseverance by a character in <u>Coolies</u> ? Share a time when you have had to persevere through something that was hard for you.
Bravery	What does it mean to be brave? Is there more than one way to be brave? Identify something a character in <u>Coolies</u> did that was brave. Share a time when you did something brave.
Immigration	Why were Shek and Wong willing to leave China? Do you know anyone who has left their home country to live in a different country? What are some of the reasons people might do this?

Adapted from: Every Book is a Social Studies Book, Libresco, Balantic, & Kipling, 2011

NOTE: Although there are many social studies issues that can be taught in conjunction with this book, the main lesson shared here focuses on equality and how the Chinese workers were treated differently than the white workers.

Pre-Reading Activity: Use the attached activity sheet to have students mark their opinion of the following statements below in pairs or individually. Then, start with small group discussions of each statement or use as a springboard for a whole class discussion.

Pre-Reading Activity



	No Way!	I don't think so	Probably I would	Yes, for certain
I would leave my whole family to live and work in another country.				
I could work 12 hours a day, outside, in all kinds of weather.				
I could take complete care of my little siblings.				
I would do anything to keep my family from going hungry.				

Activity taken from http://www.soentpiet.com/Coolies_Lesson_Guide.pdf

Listening Focus: After discussing student answers on the pre-reading activity chart, explain that you are going to share a story about two brothers who agreed to do all the things listed on that chart. Ask them to listen for how those characters are treated in the story.

Share book: Read or play the digital reading of *Coolies*.

Instructional Activity: Remind the students you asked them to listen for how Shek and Wong were treated in the story. Have 4 poster papers put up on the walls of your room and ask students to move to one of the poster papers and “graffiti your wall” with a picture or a sentence or a couple of words or anything that represents how the brothers were treated. (Students should spread out amongst all posters – use more than 4 if desired - and all can be adding their “graffiti” at the same time. Give a 2-3 minute time limit. After they return to their seats, quickly ‘read’ their responses aloud. (They will most likely focus on the fact that the Chinese workers were not paid the same wages for the same work, or that they were called names or that they were given the more dangerous jobs). After sharing their responses aloud, move into the following activity:

Divide students into two groups by the month they were born or first letters of first names. (e.g. January-June and July-December or A-M, N-Z). Then do the following:

- Divide students into two groups (without explaining why they are being separated) and direct students in each group to sit in different areas of the room.
- Take a moment to decide which group will be the “favored group.” Then without explaining why, give each student in the favored group a new pencil or sticker or small treat or _____. Begin handing out the chosen reward to only the favored group. After giving everyone in that group their reward, explain that this group will be getting other special privileges (such as extra recess time, no homework, being first in line, etc.) Students in the other group likely will protest.
- After a few minutes (or until someone in the other group says, “That’s not fair!”) stop the exercise.
- Explain the exercise to students. Ask: Which group were you in, the favored group or the non-favored group? How do you know? Encourage and discuss all responses.
- Talk about how the groups were chosen – emphasizing that each group was organized solely on factors they could not control.

Ask students to turn to a partner and count the number of connections they can make between this activity and the things that happened to Shek and Wong in the story. After a minute or two, bring that discussion to the entire group and let groups share 1 connection at a time.

Share one final clip about the building of the railroad told from a daughter’s point of view. Ask students to listen for any additional ways the Chinese workers were treated unfairly. Tell them they will have the opportunity to add anything new to the “graffiti wall”.

Building the Transcontinental Railroad video clip: (3 min.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4YgEMykqAQ>

Closure: Allow 1 -2 min. for students to add any new information to the graffiti wall, then bring it to discussion. Wind things up by talking about the relevance of how we treat people now. Have they ever seen someone be treated unfairly based on factors they could not control? Allow discussion without using names. Wrap up with their final thoughts about how people in the class felt when they were in the “unfavored” group. What can they do to not treat people unfairly based on factors they cannot control?

ADDITIONAL INTEGRATED IDEAS FOR EXPLORING THE BOOK FURTHER:

(All activities taken from http://www.soentpiet.com/Coolies_Lesson_Guide.pdf)

Research Project

In pairs, assign students one of the following topics from the story. Then give them time (using school appropriate search engines) to find out what they can and take notes on the topic using the graphic organizer below.

Topic ideas:

Ching Ming Festival

Canton, China

1850's sea voyages

San Francisco, 1850

Central Pacific Railroad Company Union Pacific Railroad Company

Chinese Calligraphy

Transcontinental Railroad Trestle design for railroads

Chinese queue braids

Historical Chinese garments/clothing from 1800's

Avalanches

Taiping Rebellion

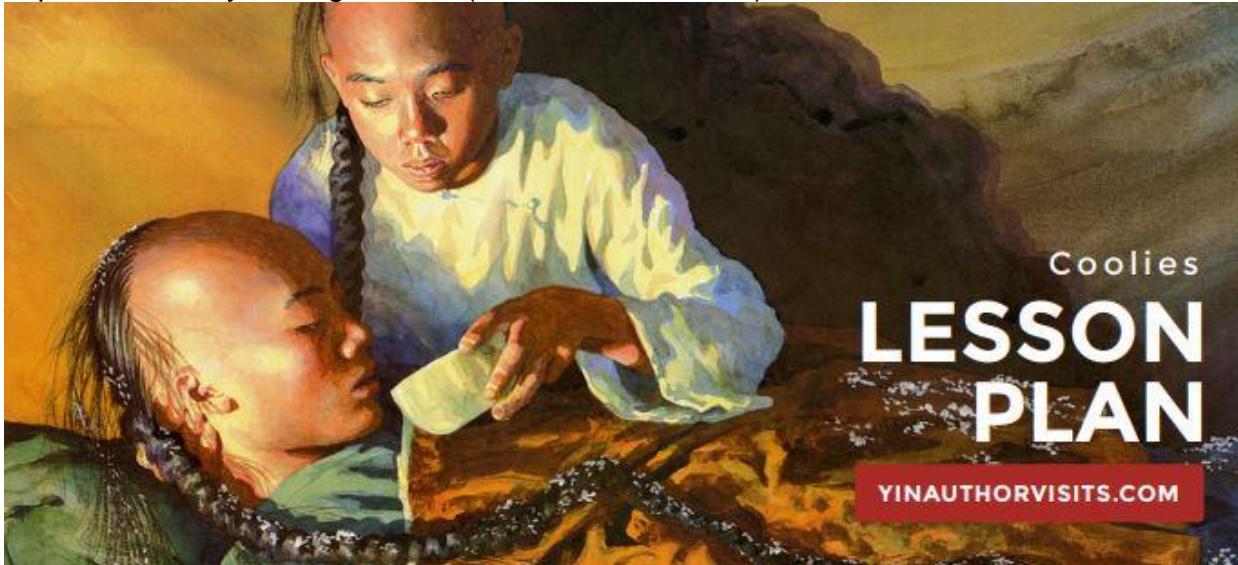
Research Organizer:



<p>Research Topic:</p>	
<p>Team Members:</p>	
<p>Sources Used: <i>(website, book, magazine, etc.)</i></p>	
<p>What is it? <i>(define your topic)</i></p>	
<p>5 Important Facts: <i>(List what you found out)</i></p>	

Reading: Finding Evidence

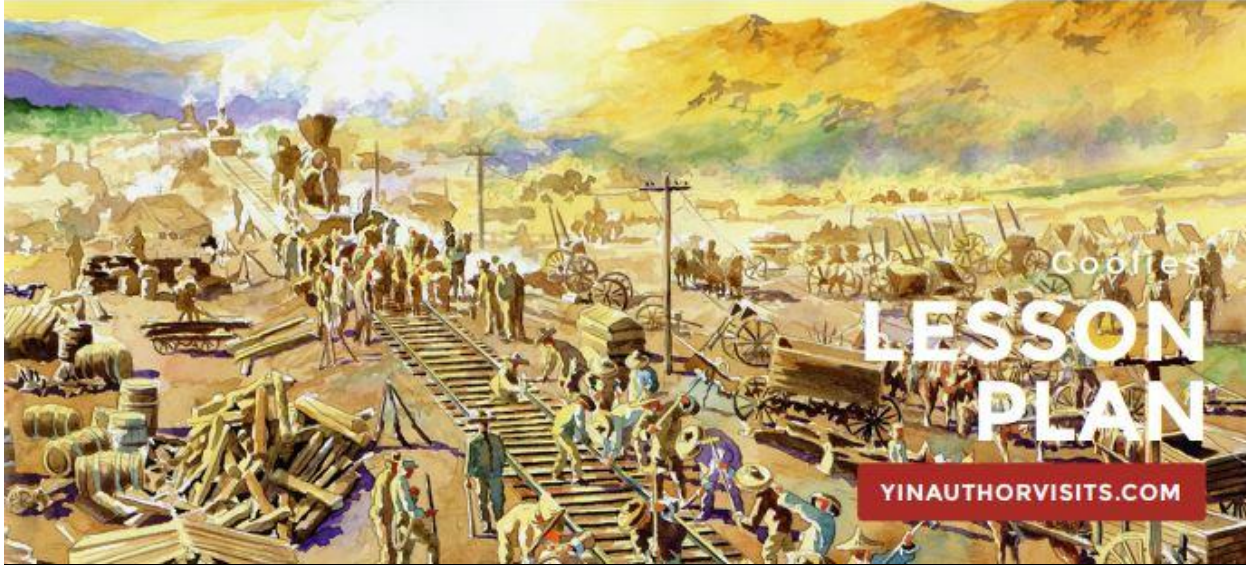
It's important that good readers can find evidence in a story to prove what they know. Practice this important skill by finding scenes (and then sentences) that show these statements to be true.



Statement About the Story	Proof from the Text
<i>Example: Shek is a good big brother.</i>	<i>Example: "During the steel-cold nights, Shek made sure his little brother had enough hot tea and blankets to stay warm."</i>
<i>The journey to America was long and hard.</i>	
<i>The Chinese workers were not treated fairly.</i>	
<i>The work on the railroad was difficult.</i>	
<i>The work on the railroad could be dangerous.</i>	
<i>The Chinese workers worked harder than they were expected to.</i>	
<i>Shek and Wong care about the family they left behind in China.</i>	

Illustration Study

Good readers know that illustrations are more than just beautiful pictures. They can help a reader understand the characters, setting, and mood of a story. Fill out the chart below to help guide you.

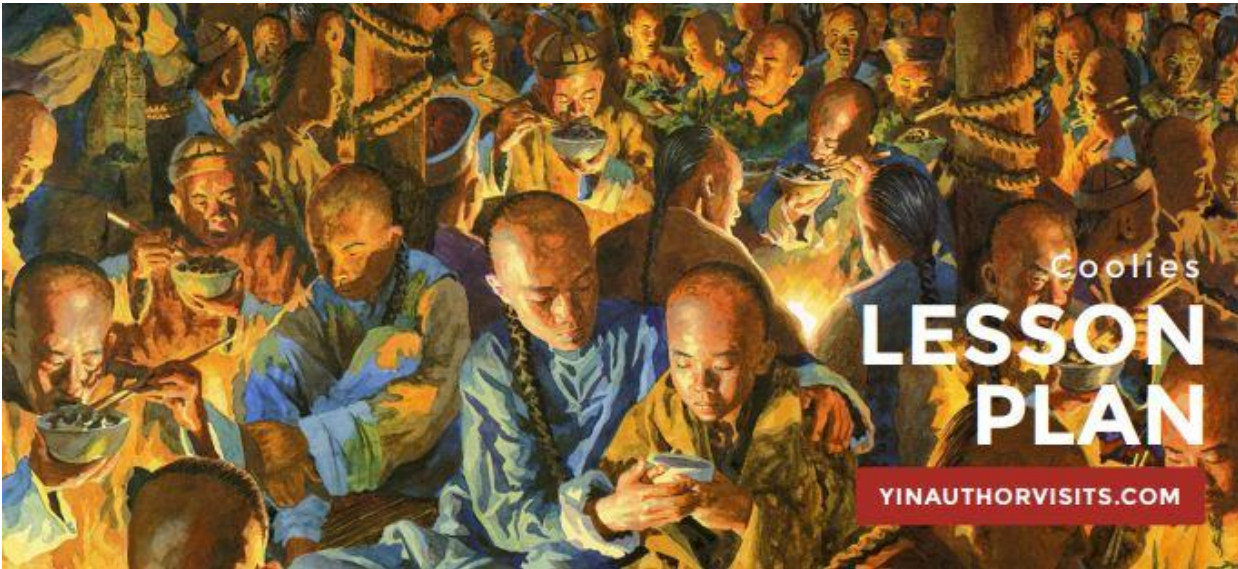



Cooper's
LESSON PLAN
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<p>MOOD is the feeling the reader gets from the author's words and the illustrators pictures.</p>	<p>CHARACTERS are the people (or animals) in a story.</p>	<p>SETTING is the place and time where a story happens.</p>
<p><i>How do the illustrations help the reader to feel what life was like for Shek & Wong? Why do you think Chris Sontpiet used certain colors?</i></p>	<p><i>How do the illustrations help us to know more about the brothers and the people around them?</i></p>	<p><i>What are the clues about time and place that are tucked inside each picture? What things do you learn from the illustrations that are not stated in the text?</i></p>
Empty space for student response	Empty space for student response	Empty space for student response

Vocabulary Study

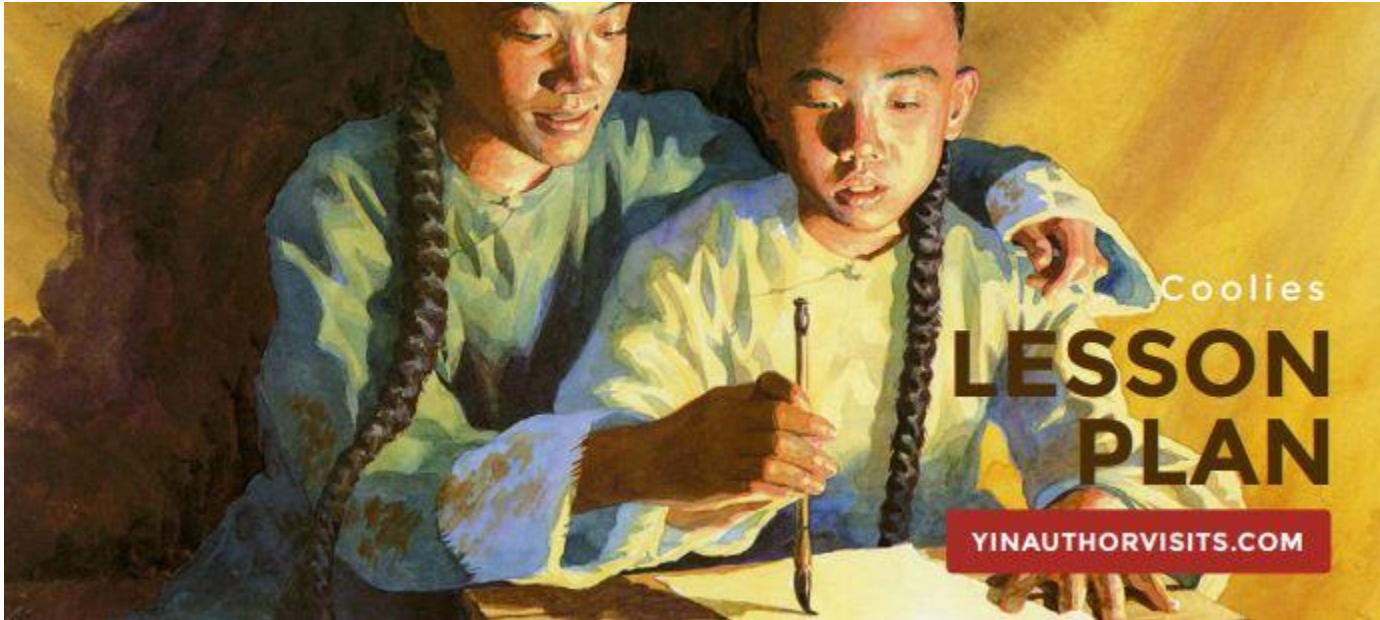
There are lots of new words within the story of Shek and Wong. Find at least three words that are new to you and fill out the chart below. Remember, you may not be right about what it means at first, but that's OK!



Word in its original sentence	What I think it means by the way it's used	A dictionary definition	A picture to help me remember the meaning (stick figures rule!)
"On this occasion we crouch on our knees and kowtow with the burning incense in our hands	to pray	Kneel or touch the head to the ground as part of Chinese worship	

Discussion Questions

Use the questions below to discuss the details of the story or have students answer them in complete sentences.



1. What festival do they celebrate to honor their ancestors in the story?
2. What special foods are made to celebrate the festival? What are your favorite holiday foods?
3. Who is PawPaw honoring during the festival? Why?
4. Describe life for people in China during the middle of the 1800's.
5. Why did Shek and Wong leave their family? What did they promise to do?
6. Summarize the voyage from China to America. What do you think would be the most difficult part?
7. Explain how the railroad would be constructed in two directions. Why was it important to the growing country?
8. Why did the Central Pacific bosses not believe in their new Chinese workers? What did they criticize them about and call them?
9. How did the boys earn their money? What did they do with it? Why?
10. Describe life at the end of the workday for the Chinese workers. Infer (or figure out using clues from the story) what you think they looked forward to most each evening.
11. Why do you think Shek taught his little brother calligraphy? Why would it be an important skill?
12. What job is Wong asked to do? How does Shek react to it? Why?
13. Explain how the Chinese workers were treated unfairly compared to others doing the same type of labor? What did they decide to do about it?
14. What was Shek's viewpoint about the men refusing to work? How do you know? Did you agree with him or not?
15. Summarize what happened when Wong saved his older brother's life. Why do you think they were being forced to keep working in such harsh conditions?
16. Describe the ceremony when the railroads finally met. Why were Shek and Wong left out of it with the other Chinese workmen?
17. Where did the boys settle after building the railroad? How did the rest of the family finally make it to America?
18. How is PawPaw related to Wong and Shek? How do they honor their memory at the end of the book? What do you know about your own ancestors?
19. What was the most interesting fact that you learned while reading this story? What more would you like to learn about the transcontinental railroad?
20. Which illustrations helped you to best understand the plot (or events) in the story?



Lesson plans on the Transcontinental Railroad created with the support of Spike150, the Utah Division of State History, and Utah Council for the Social Studies.

