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## Draft of Teacher's Guide to Sweet Home Alaska

June 6, 2016 by [Carole Dagg](#) — [4 Comments](#)

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Dear Educator,

From the point of view of a middle grade child, *Sweet Home Alaska* describes a little-known program of the New Deal: the Palmer Colony, which took two hundred and two families off public relief rolls and moved them to Alaska to become self-sufficient farmers. In the administration's eagerness to get results, they shipped up families a year earlier than originally planned. Not only were there no houses yet, but there were not even enough tents to go around. Colonists were thrown into the wilderness and back to the age of pioneers without cleared land, houses, school, or roads. As a testament to the resilience of youth, however, most of the old-timers interviewed about their childhoods in the colony remember it as a happy time.

This guide will suggest activities in research and writing, speaking and listening, and tie-ins to history, geography, literature, Greek mythology, science, and music.

About the Book:

In 1935, Terpsichore Johnson's family is selected to go north to the Matanuska Valley in Alaska under an innovative program of the New Deal. Terpsichore (Terp *sick* oh ree) is a fan of Laura Ingalls Wilder's books, so she's eager for the adventure. Her father is convinced it's the only way they can survive the Depression without going on public assistance. Her mother and younger sisters are wary. Terpsichore knows her mother misses her music, so she hatches a plan to earn enough money to buy her mother a piano, and it involves the help of her musically talented younger twin sisters, the theatrical flair of her new friend Gloria, the knowledge of bugs and mechanics of her new friend Mendel, and the Alaska know-how of an old-timer who likes popcorn. Many historical figures—President Wand Mrs. Roosevelt, Will Rogers, Wiley Post, and Shirley Temple—place the novel squarely in the Depression, but the themes of friendship, cooperation, perseverance, sibling and parent and child relationships, dealing with hardships, appreciating people's differences, and loyalty apply to any era.

*Sweet Home Alaska* is a Junior Library Guild Selection and is also available as an audio book narrated by Susan Denaker.

Reviews

"If Laura Ingalls Wilder had lived in Alaska, she might have written this novel. . . . Heartwarming. . . . A wonderfully satisfying ending. . . . Doesn't romanticize the hardships these stalwarts faced. Dagg does a fine job evoking a realistic sense of time and place. . . . Trip's a beautifully realized heroine, and readers will be heartened by her and her friends' efforts to develop a sense of communal spirit in their new, pristine colony. . . . Cozy, charming, and old fashioned, but in a good way; fine for curling up and reading under the covers—in Alaska or elsewhere."—**Kirkus Reviews**

"A memorable tale of physical and emotional survival."—**Publishers Weekly**



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"With conscious homage to Wilder's Little House books, Dagg evokes the same pioneering spirit in a Depression-era setting, lavishing attention on details..." —**The Horn Book**

"Fact and fiction and real and imagined personalities and events are seamlessly woven into this quaint, energetic, and engaging story...well-blended Depression-era facts will capture and inform middle grade readers."—**School Library Journal**

"Based on real happenings, this engaging novel is filled with charming characters and a very compelling story set in a time and place readers will find fascinating."—**San Francisco Book Review**

## Week 1 – Research and Writing, Speaking and Listening

### Activities Before Reading

Have students choose a topic, write a one-page report, and read the report to the rest of the class:

#### HISTORY

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Eleanor Roosevelt

New Deal programs

Fireside Chat

CCC- Civilian Conservation Corps

#### LITERATURE

These books were popular in the 1930's and were mentioned in *Sweet Home Alaska*. Have students read one of them and report.

*Little House in the Big Woods*

*Farmer Boy*

*Little House on the Prairie*

*Black Beauty*

*Little Lame Prince*

*Princess and Curdie*

*Nancy Drew and the Secret of the Old Clock*

*Dr. Doolittle's Return*

*Millions of Cats*

*Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*

#### SCIENCE

What causes extreme hours of daylight in Palmer?

#### DISCUSSION QUESTION

If you could take only one box of possessions with you before moving 3,000 miles away, what would you take?

## Week 2: Chapters 1-10

- Carole Dagg on [Draft of Teacher's Guide to Sweet Home Alaska](#)
- Carole Estby Dagg on [Draft of Teacher's Guide to Sweet Home Alaska](#)
- Darlene Clark on [Draft of Teacher's Guide to Sweet Home Alaska](#)
- شركة تملك مجازي بالرياض on [The First Review for Sweet Home Alaska](#)
- Carole Dagg on [The History of My Next Book, Sweet Home Alaska](#)

Archives

Archives

## VOCABULARY

Hillock, metronome, Matanuska, foraged, chicory, optimistic, whisked, dog mushing, cannibal, orthodontia, dormitory, inevitable, suggestible, hunkered, figuratively scrounge

## REPORT TOPICS IN MUSIC, HISTORY, SCIENCE, LITERATURE, AND POPULAR CULTURE

Felix Mendelssohn (listen to part of *Midsummer Night's Dream*)

Gregor Mendel and his experiments with pea plants

History of the Iditarod between Anchorage and Nome with Balto and Togo Newsreels (vs. television, internet)

Muses in Greek mythology

Basilisk in ancient legends

Clark Gable

Gene Autry

Gloria Swanson

Katharine Hepburn

Major Bowe's Amateur hour

Tangee lipstick

Little Orphan Annie

Shirley Temple

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What did people in Little Bear Lake give up when they had no money? (piano, real coffee, store-bought food, telephone for example) What would you give up?

Terpsichore and Eileen played Little house in the Big Woods. What pretending games did you/do you play?

Mother said, "Good manners don't cost a cent." What other adages or advice (Early to bed, early to rise, penny saved is a penny earned, etc.) do you know? See *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

## GEOGRAPHY

On a Map of the United States trace the route from the colonists' home states of Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin to San Francisco or Seattle, where colonists boarded the *St. Mihiel*, their ship passage to Seward, and rail transport from Seward to Anchorage and from Anchorage to Palmer.

## WRITING ACTIVITY and CONCEPT OF IRONY

Using the proper form for a business letter, explain why you would be a good candidate for the Palmer Colony.

Introduce the concept of irony, using the example of Terpsichore's submitting the application forms. Why did she submit the application forms for the Alaska program? What were the unexpected consequences of submitting the forms?

**Week 3: Chapters 11-20**

## VOCABULARY

oxfords, pneumatic, begrudgingly, biochemical, uncouth, billowed, casualty, dungarees, squadron, Chugach Mountains, entomological, meticulously

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Nicknames can be good or bad. Do you have a nickname? Do you know any sports stars' nicknames? Calliope and Polyhymnia seem content with their nicknames; why doesn't Trip like her nickname? What other nickname would you make up for Terpsichore, based on her name or her talents?

What talents do the twins have? Father? Mother? Terpsichore?

Share your first day in a new school experience. How did you prepare? Did anything go wrong?

Terpsichore's teacher had each student tell one thing they wanted people to know about them. What one thing would you like other people to know about you?

What do you think you would like or not like about Alaska?

Terpsichore missed her radio show about Little Orphan Annie. If you had to give up radio and television, what would you miss?

Before the 1930s, women seldom wore pants. Identify other changes in clothing over the years for both men and women. Compare clothing of Victorian era, the 1920s, the 1960s, and current fads.

## ART

Make a poster advertising your fund-raising scheme.

## READING

What were your favorite picture books? *The Story about Ping*, *Millions of Cats*, *Mike Mulligan and his Steam Shovel* were all written more than 80 years ago. Are you familiar with any of them? Find and read one of those titles.

## ACTIVITY

Conduct a meeting using proper parliamentary procedure.

**Week 4: Chapters 21-30**

## VOCABULARY

date due cards, cod liver oil, Percheron, flailing, jest, telegram, mimeographs, pectoral fin, ghoulish, Stetson hat, scrutinized, catalog cards, ratchets, slicker, dispatched, claim-jumper, chafing dish, solicited, relinquish, higgledy-piggledy, winding sheet

Slang: whoopsie-doodle, keen

## WRITING ACTIVITY

Write a ten-word telegram with an emergency message.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS or WRITING PROMPTS

Will Rogers, Wiley Post, and Charles Lindbergh were heroes in Terpsichore's day. Who are your heroes?

What famous person would you like to meet?

Compare Gloria and T's back-to-school outfits. What do they say about spending habits and the girls' personalities?

How would you describe Terpsichore, Gloria, and Mendel? List three traits or interests for each. How are Terpsichore and her friends the same? How are they different?

## ART

Make a poster advertising a school or youth group fund-raising program

**Week 5: Chapters 31-40**

## VOCABULARY

waif, convoluted, stanchions, oakum, toque wattles, serrated, penchant, cyclone, spinet, promotional, emery board pitch pipe, Victrola, germinate,

Talkeetna Mountains, stevedore, damask

Slang – okeydokey, keen-o

## LITERATURE

Read or listen to a short story by Jack London.

Read a Robert Service poem, such as “The Cremation of Sam McGee.”

Read one of the books Mr. Crawford loaned the Johnson family, such as a Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.

## SCIENTIFIC METHOD – EXPERIMENT

Test the hypothesis: Talking to plants makes them grow more.

Procedure:

Plant two batches of pumpkin seeds, following Terpsichore's method of keeping them warm until they sprout, then transferring them to a sunny window.

Take turns talking to one batch of pumpkin seeds. Ignore the other batch except to keep the soil moist.

Take notes, measuring each plant once a week.

After six weeks, are the plants that were talked to bigger?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Imagine living without electricity or indoor plumbing. Has anyone gone camping without electricity, running water, and devices using batteries? Imagine a long, dark winter without modern conveniences.

Why does Mother encourage Terpsichore to apologize to Miss Quimby? What was the result of hearing each other's point of view?

Week 5: Chapters 41-end

## VOCABULARY

slurry, thrumming, torrent, serrated, thronging, emphatically, lumberjack, block and tackle, riffing, deliberation, technicality, journalist, 'Scoop' as it applies to a journalist, proprietarily, moniker, calligraphy, crosshatched, cerulean

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS OR WRITING PROMPTS

How did Gloria, Mendel, Cally and Polly, Mr. Crawford, Pop and Terpsichore each help earn money for the piano?

Why did Mr. Crawford call Grandmother 'Happy'? (Hint: which art was represented by Thalia?)

Choose three characters. How did each character change from the beginning to the end of the book?

## SCIENCE

How does a block and tackle work?

What is the difference between a fruit and a vegetable?

## MUSIC

Listen to Bach's Prelude and Fugue in D Minor and/or Handel's Hallelujah Chorus

Research and report on the history of the song, Home Sweet Home. How was it used during the Civil War?

Compare the lyrics of 'Springtime in the Rockies' and 'Springtime in Alaska.'

## WRITING ACTIVITIES

Take a famous song or nursery rhyme and write new words to it.

What would you like to be famous for? Write a one-page newspaper article about yourself and your accomplishment.

Write a letter to the author. Tell her which character you would like to meet and which scene you liked best. Why did you choose that scene?

Ask your parents or grandparents about changes in their lifetimes. Include changes in communications, popular past-times, music, and famous people. What historical events do they remember? Take notes and prepare a one-page report to read aloud.

Q and A with *Sweet Home Alaska* author

Carole Estby Dagg

## About the Author:

Carole Estby Dagg was born in Kansas City, Missouri, but has lived most of her life in the Pacific Northwest. Like Terpsichore, she also read and re-read the Laura Ingalls Wilder books as a kid. With degrees in sociology, library science, and accounting, she has worked as a children's librarian, certified public accountant, and assistant library director. Her favorite places to write are a battered roll-top desk in Everett, Washington, and a converted woodshed on San Juan Island. *The Year We Were Famous*, which came out the year she turned sixty-seven, earned a place on the American Library Association's Amelia Bloomer list of feminist fiction and won the Society of Children's Book Writer's and Illustrators Sue Alexander award. *Sweet Home Alaska* came out five years later.

*Are you like any of your characters?*

I'm most like Terpsichore. I moved over a dozen times before the end of high school, have two younger sisters, usually have at least one cat, and always wanted to live in a small town or a farm

like Laura Ingalls. I have grown pumpkins, but never a giant. I envied my sisters, who both had curly hair and inherited Mother's musical talent, but as adults we are best friends.

*What were your favorite books as a kid?*

*To Think That I saw it on Mulberry Street* was the first book I remember owning.

*My Father's Dragon* was one of my first chapter books, which I read and re-read, sometimes perched in the maple tree in our front yard.

*Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales*

Childhoods of famous people; books that helped me dream that some day I could do something amazing too

Victorian classics, like *The Princess and Curdy*, *At the Back of the North Wind*,

*Secret Garden*, *Little Women*

All the Little House books!

Betsy-Tacy series

Anne of Green Gables series

Books about kids who were a little braver and more talented than I was, like Posy in *Ballet Shoes* and Miranda (Randy) and her siblings in *The Saturdays*

*Why did it take you so long to start writing?*

I was chicken. Although my grandmother always said I'd be a writer, I was afraid I'd be a flop. When I found out that even famous writers had to revise their books dozens of times, I decided that I had been giving up too soon, and started to write.

*How long does it take you write a book?*

It took me about fifteen years to write *The Year We Were Famous*, because I was still learning. It took me five years on my own, plus another year in additional revisions with my editor, to write *Sweet Home Alaska*. Besides having to live a long time with my characters to discover what they want to do, I get sidetracked on research. That's one of the hazards of writing as a retired librarian.

*How did you decide to write Sweet Home Alaska?*

My son bought an old cabin on the outskirts of Palmer, and I became intrigued by the history of the house and about the early settlers. Why hadn't I heard about the Palmer Colony before? I decided there should be a book about it.

*What advice do you have for someone who wants to be a writer?*

Read a lot.

Write a lot.

Revise a lot.

Make friends with other writers.

Don't give up!

## Comments



[Sandy Brehl](#) says  
[June 7, 2016 at 3:24 pm](#)

Carol, this is wonderful. I'm looking forward to sharing your terrific interview response with readers in an upcoming blog post.

[Reply](#)



[Carole Estby Dagg](#) says  
[October 30, 2016 at 9:20 pm](#)

Thanks, Sandy!

[Reply](#)



Darlene Clark says  
[October 30, 2016 at 8:53 pm](#)

I just picked up your book at the San Juan Island Public Library on Friday and devoured it over the weekend. I have an avid reader from Alaska in my second grade class and thought she might enjoy it. I now want to read it to everyone.

Is there any chance you would be interested in leaving your "writing shed" to visit my students? We are learning to write like real authors, so meeting you would be so exciting for them.

[Reply](#)



Carole Dagg says  
[October 30, 2016 at 9:26 pm](#)

Hi Darlene –  
Right now I'm on the mainland while my husband recovers from knee surgery, but do keep in touch – I would love to visit your class!  
Carole  
[carole\\_dagg@yahoo.com](mailto:carole_dagg@yahoo.com)

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