

# Reading to Children

There is no audience more delightful to read for than homeschooled children. Our children chuckle out loud with delight at humorous passages in books that I read with them, and we just naturally stop and talk along the way, making remarks about the pictures or the story.

I have read several biographies of home educated children -- Thomas Edison, George Patton, Woodrow Wilson -- and I have always been struck by how important their early experiences of being read to were to them. Thomas Edison liked to hear his mother read biographies of famous scientists and he became one of the most famous. General Patton liked to hear war stories like the Iliad. There is even a story that he once dragged his sister around in a game where he was Achilles who had just slain Hector of Troy. He went on to become a great General in World War II. Woodrow Wilson's father, who was a Presbyterian minister with a love for the well put phrase, used to read Woodrow great speeches and together they would analyze the speaker's choice of words. Woodrow, himself, became a great speaker who could capture the ideals of the nation in his words. His "Fourteen Points" speech during World War I captured the imagination and the world and helped lead to an early end of the fighting and a negotiated peace.

I have met very few parents of home-educated children who do not read to their children on a regular basis beginning when their first child was a baby. I think that one of the main reasons that homeschooled children are generally such good listeners is because they have been read to and they have responded to stories all of their lives. This contact with books also leads them to have the vocabulary and background that enable them to understand and enjoy books when they do read to themselves. Before I began to investigate home instruction, I supposed that parents would quit reading to their children once the children were able to read to themselves. I have been fascinated to find that reading continues with older children, because reading together is one of the best ways to share explorations of history, literature, science, religion and mathematics.

## Reading Together is a Family Glue

We have always loved books and reading. When Jesse was five and Jacob was just two, Susan wrote...

I remember wondering, while pregnant with my second child, how I'd ever be able to read to my older Jesse with a new baby around. I figured the early few months *might*

go all right, as I could read while nursing the baby, but I really worried about what would happen as our little one began grabbing books from us -- would he eat or rip them, or generally make a muddle of our good sharing times? Would they be too far apart in age to ever enjoy the same stories at the same time?

I've been delighted with what's actually happened. The early months *were* very easy for reading aloud to Jesse. We'd all snuggle in bed together with a book, lots of nursing, and we'd all feel relaxed. I think my "reading voice" was lulling to Jacob in the same way as a crooning, singing voice: I was often amazed to find both boys would drift off to sleep at the same time after our readings.

As Jacob grew, he began to open his eyes a bit as I'd read, pupils dilating with delight while Jesse and I would laugh over some delicious passage. Jacob began laughing with us over favorite parts just to share in our fun, began peeking away from the breast to see the pictures, began patting pages. We weren't reading *to* him, or *for* him, we weren't trying to give our baby a "boost" in reading ability by "exposing" him to print at a properly early age. It's just that as a part of our family, Jacob was always *there*, and took part as best he could at every stage. He did at times make very loud noises while we read, he did sometimes throw our books on the floor, and he maybe gnawed on one or two, but generally, that just meant the timing was wrong, not that Jacob was destroying our reading time.

Jesse and I enjoyed together seeing Jacob begin to embrace books as his own. By a year, he'd fallen in love with *Goodnight Moon*, laughing as we'd touch the "hot" fire, pointing ecstatically to the real moon outside. We somehow passed over most of the cardboard baby books -- Jacob seemed to be catching on so quickly to gentle handling of books since they were always about EVERYWHERE, and obviously treasured. He also seemed to prefer real *stories* to mere "point it out" books. We found our reading choices move towards Jacob's new favorites -- we must have read and poured over *Angus and Ask Mr. Bear* books by Marjorie Flack a thousand times the month Jacob was fifteen months old. It was our delight to rediscover Jesse's old treasures and share them anew with Jacob. Jesse seemed to enjoy these simplest tales immensely, too, even though he was a "bigger boy" of four and a half and also listening to Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* and *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *The Little House in the Big Woods* and other longer books. It wasn't a boring experience for him to hear the *Three Billy Goats Gruff* a hundred times -- he loved acting it out with his little brother, and also would see these timeless stories from his new older perspective, saw ever new questions to raise about them. I remember Jesse musing, "Well, I think they should have sent the *big* Billy Goat Gruff over the bridge *first*, then the littlest one wouldn't have had to be so scared by the troll, the big one could have gotten rid of that troll right away." I realized many times that we might never have gotten these first books off the shelf again if it hadn't been for Jacob growing into them and, so, bringing them

back to *all* of us. Jesse also began to have Jacob's favorites learned by heart. I remember him at four and a half "reading" all of the *Little Fur Family* by Margaret Wise Brown to Jacob, with engaging inflection and proper pauses to ask Jacob little questions.

Sometimes we let special reading to Jacob slide and focus more on Jesse's books. Jacob is used to falling asleep nursing while I read aloud, but again he always amazes us by popping in with appropriate comments or laughs when we think he's dozing. Jacob usually seems to grasp the main characters of our books, and so can follow and participate in Jesse's play-acting versions (*everything* seems to get acted out in our house!!!). Shared stories have become a cement to their friendship, a vehicle for them to enjoy play together, as they both know and love the common themes of the stories woven through their days. They share worlds through our books. The years ahead look exciting and rich, and now we're wondering how next summer's baby-to-be (Molly) will enjoy it all.

## Reading Around The Curriculum

**At home, reading together can be a way to explore just about just about every area of the curriculum. These explorations often begin with the children's questions.**

Think over your day with your child at home... How any times did your child come up with a thoughtful question, a sincere wondering, a puzzling observation? Count yourself lucky if the question count was high, for this is a treasure reserved especially for homeschoolers. This evening, reading a back issue of *Instructor Magazine* (October, 1968), I came across an article called, "Do Teachers Talk Too Much?" William Floyd reports on his research into classroom teacher's questioning styles, and also student's opportunities to raise their own questions. On average, in the 40 primary grade classrooms observed (recommended as BEST by their principals), he found that the teachers asked 96% of the questions, and the students only 4%. And this mere 4% was of course divided between whole classrooms of children, meaning that most never asked any questions at all.

"In one hour long session the teacher made 283 queries and the children none at all... On the average for every question asked by a pupil, a teacher asked 27 questions." This lop-sided chance to question is bad enough, but the nature of the pupils' questions is probably most disturbing. Floyd writes:

Not surprisingly, an examination of questions asked by pupils revealed a minimum of real interest or serious thought. Most were of a checking

nature ("what did you say?"), or were requests for permission to speak. Practically all were uttered with hardly any thought or deliberation.... Generally, children in these classrooms were given neither opportunity nor time to question. There was little waiting before -- or after -- the teacher started talking for children to think about the material and ask about it.

He concludes:

The teachers in this study labored more zealously to teach answers than to stimulate inquiry. Their students not only did not have much idea of how to ask good questions, they did not have any idea that it might be their responsibility to inquire.

Reading this made me think of the many and varied questions Jesse and Jacob ask in a day, and the many chances we all have for leisurely discussion and sharing -- and how lucky I feel! In just the past several days I've begun to jot down some of their questions. Here's a sampling:

- How do frogs get air when they're hibernating in the mud under a pond?
- Why are poodles often chosen for circus dogs?
- What letters make the sound "aw?"
- Guess what? Do you know what the notes in an F chord are?
- Where does cinnamon come from?
- What is this fort a picture of? (Fort McHenry? I thought so!!!)
- What are apostrophes for?
- Why did people used to like beaver furs so much?
- Was the new territory that the English won from the French during the French and Indian War, was it considered one of the colonies that broke away from England in the Revolution?
- How big a city is Chicago?
- Why don't the little countries all around Israel just make peace with Israel?
- Why did they make Washington D.C. a city all by itself, not part of any state?
- Why doesn't wolverine fur freeze?
- Why did they have that lexan shield above the dinosaurs in the museum?

Often these questions come up at meandering, quiet times of the day -- if Jesse is hanging about the kitchen as I fix a meal, while we're on a long car ride, or after Jesse has been balancing on his head on a stuffed chair. Odd moments, unplanned moments. They usually spur a whole little discussion, always making me see the issue in question in a new way, making me realize that as a "sophisticated" adult I'd never thought the problem through before, never even knew there was a question there.

Often we turn to reference books or maps about the house to further explore an issue. (The question about Chicago got us using an almanac for the first time, and we ended up comparing Chicago to Pittsburgh to the state of Alaska, comparing populations in two different censuses, as well as surface area.)

I think it's very safe to say that these questions would never have been asked by Jesse at a school. There would have been no time, no "permission," no expectation and welcoming of questioning. No one to listen and ponder and toss the questions around with. It often isn't so necessary to answer their questions, as it is to *value* their questions, show interest in their emerging ideas. Because they've raised a question, it shows they've already been doing serious thought about the issue, already may have some hunches or theories of their own, and so I often ask what they've thought so far. They aren't seeking "information" from an "expert," so much as wanting a colleague to discuss their path of thought.

You might want to think back to your own schooling days, and see how many opportunities you had to raise questions and share them with a responsive adult. If your children are now in school, you might want to do an unobtrusive "question count" in your child's classroom and see if Floyd's 1968 findings are still valid today (I'd be willing to wager they are). You might want to try to write down some of your child's questions for a day or two -- you'll probably be surprised to find just how many opportunities our home-taught children have to comfortably inquire and wonder about all of the world.

And should we "count" the times when our children pose questions as official "instructional time," part of our "5 hours per day, 180 days a year?" You bet we should. It is, after all, probably one of the most powerful learning tools we are giving our children -- the confidence to raise their own questions.

**The rest of this chapter consists of Susan's articles about how reading aloud has been involved in our study of almost every subject area.**

## **Science in Your Neighborhood**

As we travel about Pennsylvania, we keep being amazed at how many fascinating places our state holds for kids and parents to visit.

When I was an elementary school teacher, "field trips" were usually just an interruption or an amusement to make the last weeks of the school year tolerable. They rarely seemed to be broadening or indepth experiences. Nothing was followed through on back in the classroom, and there was no time for a teacher to hear any

wondering questions raised by students, if any questions were in fact raised during these "mob" outings. How different it is to go somewhere as a family!

*The Drake Oil Well Museum Memorial Park*, Titusville, is one favorite spot of ours. This is the site where the very first oil well in the world was drilled. Sometime after our first visit there, we found the children's biography, *Drake Drills for Oil*, which helped us to understand the man, Drake, and the great difficulties he faced trying to find a way to get oil from the ground in large quantities in 1860. For our second visit this summer (Molly was ten days old and slept through it all in her "sling pouch" carrier!), we borrowed the book again and read it on the drive to Titusville. The large museum at the park is run by the Pennsylvania Historic Sites and Museum Commission, and houses historical dioramas, displays of artifacts on the history of lighting, models of oil rigs of different eras, old photographs, and much more. There is also an auditorium showing a film about Drake and his discovery (made an interesting comparison to the book we'd just read). On the grounds the original derrick has been reconstructed, with an old steam engine to run the drill. There is also a cannon at the museum, used to blow holes in the bottoms of the wooden oil barrels in case of fire -- the oil could then drain out, leaving nothing to burn. My cannon-loving boys found this a good "peaceful" use for the weapon! If you visit the site in the summer months, you'll hear the wonderful clanging, squeaking, puff puffing and booms of an old gasoline powered oil rig, connected by an improbable spider network of cables to perhaps a dozen wells, all of it jerking and squeaking to the old motor's rhythms. Fascinating to watch!

We now notice all the old oil rigs dotting Pennsylvania roadsides, know where the kerosene for our lanterns comes from, as well as the gasoline for our cars, know a bit more about how an important discovery right here in our own state changed history. We have another "notch" to hang other dates on -- "Oh! the Civil War started right when Drake was scraping for oil from the creek!" or "See, Laura and Mary's family could have had kerosene for their lamps out on the prairie cause that was *after* Drake." The drive to Titusville takes you by all the modern Pennzoil refineries, bringing you right up to the 20th century.

And of course when we got home from the outing, Jesse and Jacob acted out the whole story with blocks and wooden toys...

For years now we've driven by a sign in *Tarentum* (on our way to Pittsburgh) saying *Tour-Ed Coal Mine -- 1 mile*. This summer we finally made time to stop in (it was on the way to a prenatal midwife visit -- Molly will have to wait a year to see it!). We already knew something of coal, as the hill on our farm had been stripmined thirty years ago and new stripmines are always being opened in our county. Our neighbor,

also, worked in a deep mine. Coal also held a special interest for my boys as they knew how important it was for running the steam engine trains they love.

At Tour-Ed mine you can actually go into a mine on a small electric "man-trip car." After a half mile trip into absolute darkness, we all got out to see working displays of deep mining methods, from hand pick and drill to the new rumbling, high-powered continuous miners. Jesse's favorite part was being able to use a pick-axe to hack out a piece of coal for himself. When I told him that often children had worked in the early coal mines, I could see the imaginings spinning through his head -- he threw himself into the work with great concentration and gusto! Tour-Ed also has life-size set-ups of an old miner's village, and a demonstration strip mine, as well as picnic areas.

As we drove away, we talked long about why coal miners were laid off right now, how coal relates to the steel and auto industries, why children had worked in mines and how child labor laws came about. Once home, we began listening to all the coal-related folksongs in our record collection, and now know the "Spring Hill Mine Disaster" by heart, even understanding all the references to the "cutter blade" and the "rattle of the belt." That week there were two severe explosions in deep mines, killing a number of miners -- Jesse followed the news reports with an understanding he couldn't have had before our trip. We looked for children's books on coal at our public library, and were able to borrow three excellent ones on inter-library loan (one written by Isaac Asimov!). We read them all, extending our knowledge of the "black rock that burns." We began noticing coal references everywhere -- in the Laura Ingalls Wilder books, in our train history books, in dinosaur books. Jesse even began discovering bits of coal in a "seam" of our unpaved driveway! We touched the huge anthracite coal chunk at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh and began looking into the differences between hard and soft coal. (Unfortunately, the guide at Tour-Ed was not at all helpful or respectful when Jesse asked *him* about hard and soft coal -- he patted Jesse on the head paternalistically and said one type was softer and then scooted Jesse over to a mechanical horse for a free ride. A proper occupation for a child, better than asking questions. Books were a better resource, here, than a real person.)

## **Everything Has a Story**

Jesse and Jacob have always had a love of transportation history -- we've read all about the history of railroads, canals, ships, a bit about rockets, so I'm sure the automobile is on the horizon. I have also been surprised over the years how our on-going reading in transportation history always DOES take us to the important, but often too emphasized, OTHER subjects of history -- the wars, the rulers, the political struggles and changes.

We began a first interest in the Civil War times (an in depth study this winter for all of us) through our train books -- had found out the Civil War was the first war that used rail travel, and this alone made it a very different type of war in many ways...

Reading about the building of the Erie Canal brought us to understand how emigrants were treated in our country in those times (they were given the back-breaking work that no "soft" American would take...), and also helped us understand the opening up of the West, the importance of trade routes, the way cities sometimes are built up (New York boomed with the Canal). In short, it all has made me realize again what John Holt said so often, that there is almost nothing in the whole world that is unconnected to the rest of the drama of history. Not only does everything have a story, a history to it, but all these histories connect and overlap and tie-in with each other. There is always another question waiting, another investigation, and so many good books and resources to look to.

My boys have thoroughly incorporated the habit of asking the "story" questions about anything new they come upon -- we've looked into the history of bread, paper, printing, fabrics, paintings, music, coal, oil, astronomy, calendars, even VELCRO, finding good stories everywhere, and finding that no matter how diverse our reading goes, it all ties in with what we already know. I remember one time, reading about the history of BREAD, when we came across a story about CRESCENT rolls being invented in Austria by a baker who had understood and averted a Turkish plan to overtake Vienna (the crescent was a symbol of Turkey). We happened to read this right after attending a concert with a Mozart piece that had used Turkish instruments (including a CRESCENT shaped clanging shaking rhythm instrument) in the opening, because everyone was a bit wild for Turkish music then, after the Turkish invasions! We are hardly astonished by such serendipity anymore, but take it as the normal (and delightful!) course of events in the world.

## **Electricity Explorations**

Today Jesse astounded me. He is 6 1/2 years old and today he rewired two lamps (one never functional before) and figured out and made a needed minor repair on a third. I was essentially off taking a bath with the two littler ones. I didn't really want to get involved with all this wire-stripping work as my mind was on the house cleaning necessary for a pending visit from friends. My attitude was, "Oh, yeah, well maybe, Jesse, just let me vacuum, do the dishes, wash diapers, mop, do the bathroom and bake bread and make soup for supper and if there's any time left, sure I'll help you do the electricity work." But Jesse had PLANS, he was ready, he was twitching to get at these lamps, pull their wires out and go to it. "Well, what's the first thing I need to do?" he pestered. I relented a bit, looked it over with him a moment, Molly on my hip.



The way was pointed and he was off. Jesse has a fine understanding of electricity gained from a year and a half of wide ranging experimenting and work with it -- from homemade battery testers, to repairing flashlights, to making electromagnets, to wiring up tinker toy inventions, to gouging apart dry cells to see the insides, to pulling apart broken electric meat grinders, clocks, record players and radios, to racing about shaking strings of beads with Jacob pretending to be electrons.

Back to the lamps -- I was still in the tub when Jesse brought in the first completed lamp. The big moment had come -- the new bulb carefully screwed in, plug inserted in socket. Click. And -- an amazement to us all -- LIGHT!!! (Note -- we don't recommend mixing electricity with bathtubs -- we happen to have a very large bathroom, and Jesse was nowhere near the tub...) Jesse had done every step himself -- pulling out the old cord, scrounging a new one (recycled from an old blender and saved by Jesse, he'd KNOWN it would come in handy!), stripping the wires, wrapping and screwing them onto the light socket posts, putting everything back in place, climbing to a high shelf to get new bulbs...

Perhaps I'm most amazed at this morning's work because I come from such an UN-handy about the house family. Minor repairs ALWAYS meant hiring professionals. I never once saw anyone in my family even attempt to wire a lamp -- the idea of being able to delve into a lamp's "innards" wouldn't have even occurred to us. At school I likewise learned nothing of these practical arts of simple home repairs -- science classes were mostly non-existent when I was Jesse's age and by junior high we were immediately plunged into the periodic table of elements and balancing chemical equations. (Did teachers assume we all had practical backgrounds to make these ideas real?)

And so I see now several more values to homeschooling -- it's given us working lamps for our livingroom, and a young boy who feels just pride in real and helpful work responsibly done. Homeschooling has helped ME follow my son's lead and learn by his side. Jesse and I surely would not have learned about rewiring lamps if a year and a half ago we hadn't begun scrounging for simple books on electricity, begun actual experiments with static, bulbs, batteries, wires, and magnets. It was these simple experiments which gave ME the courage to rewire MY first lamp a year ago. It is never too late to learn...

I think sometimes parents who feel disheartened to read about home-schooled kids doing all sorts of wonderful things "all on their own" may really be asking to know how the whole interest came about. They may just want to know the PROCESS of how the kid got to the point where he could do some astonishing thing "all on his own." And I think in most cases there IS a long process behind good accomplishments. Maybe parents just can't find it helpful to hear only about end

PRODUCTS. What we really want to know is the first inklings of interest, the slow beginnings, the amount of time and growing that a final accomplishment embodies. For me to tell people that Jesse can wire up speakers on his own, or rewire lamps, doesn't really mean anything unless they know the context of his learning, a context that in our case certainly involved ME a lot.

I was involved not so much as teacher (I knew little more about electricity than Jesse did in the beginning), but instead as a colleague. We were JOINTLY interested in all our electricity work, and our interest got Howard involved also, and HE took the work much farther than Jesse or I would've on our own. Jesse didn't just "all on his own" come up with a whole agenda of things he wanted to do with electricity and set about doing them with no input from us. As he wasn't reading during our first electricity binge I was the vehicle for him to gather new information about the subject. I found the books, I read them aloud, I mused aloud about parts I didn't understand, I took him to the hardware store for a special trip to buy needed supplies, I was ready to help him set up experiments that would have been too hard for him to do on his own, I was excited about our growing knowledge and understanding.

Now, if Jesse suddenly began playing expert baseball (he still calls footballs baseballs and vice versa, sports not being a big interest of our family), or spinning figure eights on the ice (we do have a farm pond that is probably perfect for skating but I haven't set skate blade to it in 10 years, not liking to get my feet cold in winter), or if he suddenly began playing tuba or riding horses or any number of things that we just don't do (yet) -- well, that would be magic and I'd be as astonished as anyone. But his electricity work and play has a long history to it and has just gradually grown and grown.

Just one more note about electricity and a free source of great wire to experiment with. Check your local phone company and ask them for some pieces of wire that they are throwing away. If brave, ask if you can peek in their dumpster. The kids and I were astonished to see 5 huge bins FULL of wire and cables and occasional parts of old phones and connectors and switches. I at first thought the wire would probably be sent on to a recycler -- all that COPPER -- but we were told that, no, it was all to be thrown out. We gratefully packed our little car to the brim. The bright colored very flexible wire encased in larger cables is also great fun to make wire sculpture and wild jewelry and gizmos and what-nots. And it's just as good as what stores sell (rather expensively) as "bell wire" for simple battery experiments. We also got ROLLS and rolls of heavier black wire (it is what Jesse used to string up his speakers), and all in all just felt like we had run into TREASURE. Maybe a homeschooling group could plan a tour through a telephone company, and ask in advance if the kids could all have some wire afterwards.

## The Soldier Game

Jesse and Jacob have never been involved at all with super heroes or He-men. We have no TV, don't go to toy stores much, and are usually simply blithely unaware of all these commercially pushed fantasies. The boys somehow agree with me that all those muscled toy dolls are hideous and creepy. For me, perhaps, the commercial, adult, pre-made fantasy aspects are what distress me the most about this sort of play -- it is adult made specifically for children, with no referents in the real continuum of human experience. I wonder if this sort of play can go anywhere, evolve into something personally meaningful, help the child to make sense of the real world.

Jesse and Jacob *have* evolved over four years time, though, an elaborate war-play game, and I'd like to share some of that with you now. As a new mother strange to the ways of little boys play, I often worried about how I'd handle the GUN Question. I had an older sister, and though I fancied myself something of a tomboy, war play was not one of my interests, ever. In college, I'd seen an alternative pre-school refuse to allow gun play, only to see the little boys push the rule to its limits by trying torpedoes, cannons, bombs, etc. The exasperated, but somewhat amused teachers finally felt that perhaps it was just not a possible rule to fully maintain, but that at least they'd put a bit of a damper on violent weapon play. I probably hoped my sons would simply not be at all interested in this type of play. Not so.

Jesse's first war interests came at about 3 1/2, when we visited Fort Frederica, a National Historical Site in Georgia near where my mother lives. We saw a filmed re-enactment of the fort and town settlement, we walked all about the excavation sites, and Jesse, of course, climbed on the cannons. It was love at first sight, those cannons. The place had a good story to it, and Jesse was hooked. Interesting, though, that *I'd* never found the place at all interesting when my family moved to the area when I was entering college, my "blase days" when little in the real world held much interest. I'd yawned my way through the site a few perfunctory times back then, but really found it utterly boring. Now, through Jesse's questioning eyes, the site became alive for us all. It was perhaps a first experience for Jesse in realizing that life was not always the present day, that there indeed was something called a past history, some dimly perceived continuum. Why, you could even dig it up!

Back at Grandma's house he spent hours delightedly acting out the battle scene with the Spanish forces from Florida attacking the undermanned English fort. He would sneak into the livingroom quietly, I would have to be the "lookout" at Fort Frederica and spy him out, and then the battle would ensue. Replayed again and again.

My mother was a bit surprised when the next year on our vacation visit, we wanted to go to the fort again, for after all we had "done" it the year before and would surely be bored by a repeat. Not so. We sat through the movie several times, remembering parts we'd seen before, putting together more historical pieces. That time, we read aloud all the exhibit signs, looked more carefully and thoughtfully at the miniature dioramas, felt more keenly the spirit of life in the now utterly gone town. More acting out of the battles, that year with closer attention to details we now understood better. Jesse received a huge set of cardboard brick blocks from Grandma, and they were used to build myriad forts and invading fleets of boats. Postcards of old soldiers were bought at the Fort, and a miniature cannon (!), and again the play went on for hours. Jesse also worked hard making some collage soldiers for extras, while Jacob at 18 months did his best to take part, probably feeling that this soldier game was the best sort of hide and seek and chase game there was.

Each year we returned to the fort, each year we loved it even more. Books extended our understanding, and I even found myself looking into a few adult history books on the area.

Other war interest grew over those years, too, and continued broadening our view and the boys' play. Any cannon was spotted and visited if at all possible, and we soon found ourselves at the Soldiers and Sailors Civil War memorial in Pittsburgh, Gettysburg, Fort Pitt, Fort Necessity, The Flagship Niagara, Fort Ligonier (with a homeschoolers group tour last fall), and another fort site in Georgia. A timeline gradually began forming in our minds: Ft. Frederica before Ft. Necessity, Ft. Necessity before Ft. Pitt, Civil War much later (we always peg *it* by Drake's discovery of oil). Our reading aloud, in among *Peter Pan* and *Heidi* and *The Wizard of Oz*, was full with history. Each fall we always read several biographies of Columbus (special interest of mine as I was born on Columbus Day), adding one a year, then the same with the Pilgrims in November. We found a book on the history of forts in America, archaeology in Georgia, Pennsylvania history, a Lois Lenski book called *Indian Captive* (based on the real life story of Mary Jamison, who decided to remain with the Senecas after her capture during the French and Indian Wars). We read about Jamestown and Pochahontas, we read biographies on many early American leaders (especially love the D'Aulaires biographies on Columbus, Franklin, Lincoln, Leif Ericson, and George Washington, and Jean Fritz's simple and wonderful Revolutionary War books -- *And Then What Happened*, *Paul Revere?*, *What's the Big Idea*, *Ben Franklin*, *Why Don't You Get a Horse*, *Sam Adams*, *Where was Patrick Henry on the 29th of May*, *Can't You Make Them Behave*, *King George?*). Forts led into an interest in war ships, and we've read extensively about the USS Constitution and many others. Connections were forming, a web of interrelated drama was being forged. Also, to offset war as the sole way of looking at history, we've also read all the

Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and *Caddie Woodlawn* by Carol R. Brink (feeling through it of course the underlying pulse of the Civil War taking place far away), and we've read about the history of transportation, especially trains and canals and ships.

Jesse and Jacob gradually added more cannons to their play, made their block forts both more elaborate and more true to the forts they knew about, made fleets and fleets of paper and cardboard boats (anyone want to go in on a case-load order of masking tape??). Actual battles were often acted out, with lots of loud "bang-banging" filling the air. This was their "soldier game," and they were always begging Howard to take part. They knew I was rather dull about it and not much into their re-enactments, much as I loved visiting the actual sites and reading to them about these older times. Somehow I just cannot get into being down on hands and knees and "banging" away and the boys have eventually accepted this. Jesse and Jacob have spent long happy stretches of time cutting out "armies" of men -- hundreds of different colored strips of paper bundled together with rubber bands by 10's and 100's, complete with generals and captains. They lay them out in elaborate battle formations and become enraged if I inadvertently sweep up or try to toss out a crumpled regiment. The soldiers are kept in special boxes, stored with aluminum foil carefully rolled into cannon balls.

On occasion I've thought of discouraging all this play, considering the GUN Question, feeling disheartened that my boys saw wars as such a game, such an exciting play theme, such an abstraction of paper soldier deaths. I'm glad now I've let it be and let it evolve and grow. It is their play, it belongs to them, and further it is clearly becoming their way of grappling with all the real questions of how people have and might get along in this world. Besides banging wildly, they've also worked hard at making peace treaties -- Daddy's soldiers will get all of the living room, Jacob's will have the attic and Jesse's will patrol the connecting zone of the playroom. They've made compromises, seen what happens when one side secretly doesn't go along with an agreement, they've made allies and promises of future aid.

And, then, just yesterday, I sat in the attic nursing Molly to sleep while Jesse and Jacob continued their new version of the soldier game. Both rebuilt elaborate block forts, sturdily reinforced, the paper ship fleets were lovingly repaired with masking tape, all was set. BUT THE BATTLE DIDN'T COME. Jesse looked up at me after a silence (I was reading a magazine), and said very quietly, almost reverently, "Look, look at this small building I've made... It is the House of Peace... It has one soldier in it, with NO weapons allowed, and it is where each side can come, in safety, to talk." His voice was almost choked, full with emotion. He took a wooden sculpted head (a leftover from an old tenant who was an artist of sorts), and placed it by the little building. "This is the grim-face of Peace, looking grimly at all the war." Another larger, grinning sculpture was placed by the huge fort. "This is the smiling face of

War, it looks down gleefully on all the fighting and destruction." We talked here of how Ares, the war god we'd met in the D'Aulaires book of Greek Myths always loved the battle scene. A metal crown (an old bongo drum rim, I think) was placed on the War God's head, as his side was winning over the much smaller God of Peace. Jesse and Jacob were both hushed and serious, this was important drama coming alive before them, universal questions hanging in a delicate balance. I was careful not to intrude. Somehow, over the next long half hour, Jesse and Jacob's armies were secretly meeting at the Peace House, their generals talking quietly and safely, and then -- TRIUMPH!!! PEACE won out! Plans were swiftly made to join the two opposing forts together in one large cooperative complex. Much reshuffling of blocks to bridge the ground between them, much excitement over these new plans. And when the rebuilding was complete, Jesse with solemn ceremony took the crown from the War God's head and placed it upon the Head of Peace, who somehow looked happier to us all, not so grim-faced. The whole drama felt like a refreshing cleansing, a noble setting of the world to right. We all took deep breaths of peace, and went down for supper keenly alive and aware, and *kind*.

If I had "banned" their soldier game out of some urge of my own to have my boys be peaceful and peace-loving, this scene could never have happened, they could never have grown to this point. Their growing and play of course, did not take place in a vacuum, but against the rich background of our reading and continuing discussions. We just this week completed reading Esther Forbes' Newberry Award winning book *Johnny Tremain* set in pre-Revolutionary War Boston, culminating in the battle of Lexington. The book moved Jesse perhaps more than any we have ever read -- it's the first book I remember him crying aloud over. It gave an especially close, sensitive look at the realities and ambiguities of war, the mixed and torn feelings involved. Johnny, an active young patriot, has warm feelings for many specific British soldiers - - knowing them personally, having his life entwined with theirs, it is hard to see them as abstract "targets" of scarlet. Instead of taking us into the actual battle scenes, Forbes has Johnny walk from Boston to Lexington the day after, seeing the crying women and children, the burial carts, the groaning wounded British soldiers, and finally the death of Johnny's beloved friend Rab.

I'm sure the soldier game will continue to grow and change as the years go by. The boys have already talked about having Molly be "Molly Pitcher" -- will be curious to see how Molly perhaps softens the game. I feel comfortable now about it all, rather than exasperated or guilty. I feel a trust that through their play they will all be made more ready to deal with the terribly difficult questions of war and peace in the real world. I feel hopeful when Jesse says, as he did today, that maybe a problem with these grown up real generals is that they still think they're playing with toy soldiers, and not real people.

## Civil War Times

Our studies of history and social studies have always grown organically, spiraling out from one core interest to weave into all our understandings. And so it's been with our study this winter of the Civil War times. When I think of the pallid bare bones information a school text book gives, I shudder. We've ranged far, finding resources everywhere.

We've read biographies together, beginning the whole study with four biographies of Lincoln. We always start out a study with the very simplest material we can find -- in this case the "Really Truly" series biography of Lincoln by the Lowitz's (a delightful series written in the 1930's). We moved up through the D'Aulaires, Genevieve Foster, and finally to the in-depth and poetic biography by James Daugherty (Carl Sandburg is waiting in the wings...). All through this we compared and contrasted these books -- noting where basic information was different, how each author chose to focus on some parts of Lincoln's life and leave other parts alone. Biography involves lots of DECISIONS, involves an AUTHOR not just a subject, and the boys really understand this. We understood more of Lincoln's life with each book, and by the end had a fair grasp of the course of the Civil War, too, and its strands of causes.

But we weren't done. The boys knew little previously of slavery (surely a seamy, unsavory side of our history, one I hadn't been overly eager to bring up with them). So now we went on to biographies of black Americans of the time -- Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, George Washington Carver. We saw how many of these lives were twined in with ones we'd heard of in our Lincoln books. We went on then to *Amos Fortune, Free Man*, and a biography of the black poet Phyllis Wheatley, and gained a view of slavery in NORTHERN cities in Revolutionary War times. Quite a different picture from the South with its sprawling tobacco farms and overseers. The reality of slave voyages, the practiced cruelty of the "pits," the determination to separate captured Africans from their tribesmen, were all brought before us and discussed. We were gaining a background, a peopled backdrop for the Civil War issues.

But there was still more to read. We went to the facsimile copies of Civil War newspapers I'd bought years ago from a homeschooling mother who had found them in a public school DUMPSTER! (I've almost always found it pays to pick up interesting resources inexpensively when I come across them, even if we aren't about to use them anytime soon -- almost everything EVENTUALLY finds its time!) The newspapers were astonishing, really giving us the feel of being present in those times (even looked over the "Want Ads" in the 1863 *New York Times*, and laughed over how many were for "reputable wet nurses" -- and realized that in the South there would not have been such ads because slave mothers would have been used).

We also began ranging beyond official children's resources, finding our growing background made us ready for more adult books. We began leafing through a stack of old American Heritage magazines we'd picked up for a song at library book sales. With Bruce Catton, well-known Civil War writer, as editor, the old copies we had were full of incredible Civil War articles. A first person account of the hanging of John Brown. The report by a newspaper war correspondent of his three years following General Grant (the kid's history books never went into such detail about Grant's severe drinking problem...). The story of how Booker T. Washington was able to first rise above the abjectness of slavery conditions. The gripping saga of a slave ship rebellion in the 1840's. The memoirs of privates who'd fought in the first Battle of Bull Run. Our view of these times was being fleshed out, peopled with unforgettable characters. No question here of "memorizing" information and facts -- we were coming to KNOW these times, and every new discovery could be hinged right on to our growing framework.

Howard got involved in this study too. He has sometimes been a bit left out of in-depth work like this in the past, because we'd do all this while he was away, and because he hasn't always had a regular reading time with the kids. That changed with this work. He began checking out Civil War books that HE was interested in reading, and sharing them with the kids. He found some intriguing ones I never would have come across, including one with words to almost all the Civil War songs you can imagine.

Which brings me to music -- we found a great musical history resource that tied in with this study. It's *The LIFE History of the United States* published by TIME/LIFE in 1963, a 12 record set, probably available in most public libraries. One side of each record has a sampling of music from each time period in our country's history -- instrumental music, spirituals, work songs, folk songs, war rallies, and church music. The flip side has important documents and speeches of the day, including snatches from diaries, letters, and famous books and poems. The boys LOVED these records, and played them endlessly. They actually loved them BEFORE we began reading about these times, but they found that once they had more background and information they could appreciate them so much more. Often as I'd be reading aloud to the boys, they'd stop me to say, "Hey! Isn't that on our record!?!!" and we'd get it out, play it, and listen with new understanding and interest.

The culmination of all of this work was presenting a display at the Fullmer's spring SOCIAL STUDIES FAIR. At first we wondered what "project" we could do, so we could have something to share and show. It then hit me that often times in school the whole idea of "projects" is a bit backwards -- it's hoped that by doing something nifty, MAKING something, perhaps for a display, that this will MOTIVATE the kids to WANT to do research on a topic. In our case our project WAS our research -- all the



many hours of talking, reading, wondering, making new connections -- and all the singing of "We are Coming, Father Abraham" and "Marching through Georgia." We didn't really need to do anything different now just to officially have a "project." So we just set out a display of most of the books we'd read, the records, the old newspapers, the magazines, and Jesse talked (on and on) about what we had learned. Jesse did make a large poster with a few simple illustrations and the title "ABE LINCOLN, SLAVERY, AND THE CIVIL WAR," and Jacob helped me make a poster listing all the books we'd read in different categories. The kids also decided to make Abe Lincoln "stove pipe" hats, as we'd read so many funny stories of how he'd used his hat to hold important mail, memos, and reminders, and they all had great fun doing that. Jesse then decided that he'd have a facsimile copy of the Gettysburg Address hidden in the hat when he talked about our exhibit at the Fair. This idea came from Jesse and Jacob, and they also had full input into HOW the hats would be made, with a good bit of trial and many "errors." We weren't following a script here, or a recipe, but finding our own way). I thought we could also sing with the group at the Fair one of the Civil War songs we'd really enjoyed, "Goober Peas" (a song about peanuts, a staple food of the Southern army, which they considered cow feed, since no PEOPLE ever ate peanuts in those days -- peanut butter hadn't yet been invented!). The Fair gave ME the motivation to actually sit down and listen to the record about 30 times until I REALLY knew all the actual words to the song (I don't think I'll ever forget them now...), and I got practicing on my guitar. At the Fair several mothers came up to me with further suggestions of Civil War books to read, ones THEY had enjoyed with their kids. It was a very special sharing time.

After we felt we had about fulfilled our Civil War interest, I did happen to find we owned a fifth grade Scott Foresman 1979 Social Studies textbook (Jesse and Jacob were officially 3rd grade and kindergarten then), and it had a big "unit" on the Civil War. The book looked attractive enough, rather classy and colorful, not drab at all, and I thought it might have some further information and insight for us. What a stunning disappointment -- it was just the usual school tripe, just in a more pleasing format. Names were bandied about non-stop with no real description of the PEOPLE behind the names, and then the kids were of course "quizzed" on the names. One three sentence paragraph on Harriet Tubman. Three sentences about Frederick Douglas. One on Clara Barton. And SHORT sentences at that -- choppy things, carefully metered out in proper fifth grade lengths. I just cannot imagine any child using this text book coming to LOVE learning about these times, feeling a part of that life or feeling any reason to really integrate and remember any of it. Just quiz and test; do the little canned projects and move on to the next unit. There was never once a suggestion to the child reader that he might want to look in other resources or books for more information or insight -- perhaps the authors suspected rightly that it would be enough of a chore for the teacher to get them "through" this one book. And so I felt doubly

good about our "organically grown," unplanned-in-advance work, after comparing it to the official school stuff expected of kids two to five years older than mine. WE all actually learned something!

## Home Economics

Amazingly enough, housework is seeming like less of a problem to me these days. Partly this is due to changes in my attitudes following reading *Side-tracked Home Executives* by Pam Young and Peggy Jones. Partly it's due to our growing repertoire of "cleanup games." It's becoming easier and easier to think these up on the spur of the moment, and certainly makes daily pickup chores pleasanter. In one new game, Jesse works in one room, and I work in another. We must both pickup and put away *something*, then we must guess what it is that the other person has put away. Involves a lot of going back and forth between rooms, but is good fun *and* gets two rooms neatened.

I sometimes ask Jesse to pick up, say, the spilled contents of the Lincoln Log can, adding that I'll time him to see how long it takes. A stop-watch is great for this. This approach usually gets much more cooperation than a stern command, and even helps Jesse gain a firm sense of the meanings of seconds and minutes. If a friend is over, they can work cooperatively to do the task. Always good to see kids scurrying about to *help* each other rather than to *beat* each other. Also it's surprising to all of us how *little* time these "put away" jobs take.

The game Jacob, our almost 3 year old, finds most delightful might be called the "Silly Mommy Nonsense Direction Game." I'll ask him to please put away the masking tape, IN THE REFRIGERATOR! He'll laugh at his silly mother who must not know any better. I'll look confused, then maybe say, "Hmmm, in the *washing machine*?" More indulgent laughs, and finally Jacob himself says, "Tape goes on the TAPE HOOK!!!" and runs to put it there. (We have LOTS of low-down hooks in our house -- saves rooting about in messy drawers.) Jacob's other favorite is when I pretend something very light weight is very *heavy* -- "Oh, Jacob, I couldn't let *you* put away this green marker, it's MUCH too heavy, *I* can barely lift it!" More belly laughs and Jacob races away with the marker, usually now even putting it in the right place.

I'm also realizing that for many things the kids are doing, they really *don't* need me sitting right by them "helping." Today, when Jesse and Jacob built wonderful houses and people out of our "wild clay" from our stream, I got the dishes washed, the refrigerator and freezer tops cleaned off, scrubbed the stove, and the oven door, and even did my three minute bathroom cleanup. I was right near, as they were working at the kitchen table, and we were all talking together happily the whole time. They didn't

feel left out or ignored because I hadn't dropped everything to just sit and watch *them* work. I could always easily see what they were making, could comment as I felt like it, and none of these little jobs of mine were the type that couldn't bear an interruption of a minute or two. Perhaps some homeschooling parents worry that there are only two types of time in a day -- time spent directly with a child, when *you* do nothing else, or time spent directly with household tasks when the child must be out of the way. Perhaps more blending of these times is a more realistic, fruitful approach. It seems to work best for us, anyway.

A children's book by Phyllis Krasilovsky, *The Man Who Didn't Wash His Dishes* has also helped us greatly. I remember reading in Holt's *Escape from Childhood*, that probably most young children simply don't have our adult perspective to see the consequences of not doing various jobs. He writes,

When we take the garbage out, we know the reason: if we don't take it out, the kitchen will eventually be full of garbage. In our mind's eye we can see it there, we can almost smell it. In this sense we could be said to have a *more* active fantasy life than the children. The child has no such fantasy. We may ask him, "What do you think would happen if we didn't take out the garbage?" He has no idea. He thinks, I suppose, the sack of garbage would just sit there where it is, what's so bad about that?"<sup>1</sup>

The Krasilovsky book tells what happens to a man who decides, each night, that he's just *too* tired to do his dishes, and so keeps putting off the task day after day. Finally, he can barely get in the front door because of the dirty dishes stacked everywhere, and he's even eaten out of all his ashtrays, soap dishes, flower pots, and vases. The book ends with a rainstorm washing all the dishes clean in the back of the old man's pickup truck, and the man resolving that from then on, he would always wash his dishes immediately after eating. Both of my boys think the story is very funny, and now whenever they nag me to stop washing dishes to help them with something I'll say, "Oh no! You want me to be the little old *woman* who never washed *HER* dishes. That's usually enough to get them laughing and let *me* finish my job. We've transferred the idea to other tasks -- we imagine what the house would be like if I NEVER folded the laundry... the heaping piles on top of the dryer, the empty clothes drawers, the entire house stuffed to bursting with unfolded clothes... And all this delicious imagining *while* we're folding and carrying the clothes!

One more children's book that's helped us to cooperate better around the house is *Pelle's New Suit*, a charming Swedish picture book by Elsa Beskow about a little boy who asks all of his relatives and the town tailor to help him out in making a new suit of clothes from his own little lamb's wool. Each person always answers Pelle's requests for help by very politely saying, "Oh! that I will gladly do, if while I'm doing

\_\_\_\_\_ for you, you will do \_\_\_\_\_ for me." Pelle hauls wood, weeds carrots, tends cows, watches his baby sister, and ends up with a completed suit ready to show to his lamb. Now when Jesse asks me to do something for him, and it really is something he can't do for himself, I'll answer in Pelle language, "Oh, I will gladly mend your bluejeans for *you*, if while I am doing it, you will kindly clear off the breakfast dishes for *me*." Jesse always catches the "literary reference" and is ready to do his part as I help him...

## Literary Appreciation

This fall we were delving into a whole "cache" of old school readers and Jesse (7), Jacob (4), and I had an amazing in depth discussion about schools, expectations for learning, biases of textbook writers, and more, after a particularly startling find in one of the second grade basal readers that we were randomly flipping through. I saw an illustration of a red steam shovel with an overalled man next to it, done in the rather pallid style of basal reader illustrations of the 1950's. There was a vague resemblance here to our old favorite story, Virginia Lee Burton's *Mike Mulligan*. We looked closer and found that, indeed, this WAS *Mike Mulligan*, only it was strangely altered, edited, re-drawn, watered-down, strained and pureed. What was left was a pabulum version of the robust, rollicking original. Our boys were shocked, as was I, to find all the lilt and poetry carefully removed and made "sensible" and "direct" and EASY. All "hard" words like "Mrs. McGillicuddy" and "town constable" were struck, replaced by "a lady" and "some people." Mary Ann and Mike Mulligan no longer "finished the first corner, neat and square," they merely "cut around the first side of the cellar." There were not just single word substitutions, which would have been bad enough, but wholesale reworkings of entire passages, added "explanations," and paragraph eradications. My boys and I pored over the two stories, real one and adaptation, noting every discrepancy. Jesse and Jacob both have a fine ear for good language and storytelling. They love metaphor, delicious twists of a phrase, rhythmic refrains chanting through a story. They love odd quaint names for characters and villages. They saw right off that this basal reader rendition had stripped all that they loved best about *Mike Mulligan*. I told them how the committees who put these types of books together felt the original was too complicated and hard for young children to read, and they didn't realize that if a child grows up hearing and loving these words, they aren't hard at all to read in print because the child expects to find them.

Jesse culminated our days and days of discussion by reading aloud to Jacob and me the entire *real* book of *Mike Mulligan*. He had never read such a long or "hard" book before. He just began reading full books a bit over a half year ago, and mostly reads books like *Little Bear* or *Danny the Dinosaur*, and others in the "I CAN READ" series from Harper and Row. Jesse felt proud and amazed to read this book through, needing

only very occasional help (usually *not* on any "hard" words, either). He then went on to Burton's *Choo Choo, the Story of a Little Engine who Ran Away*, and her Caldecott award winner *The Little House*. Again, same result -- what might have been considered "hard" words by controlled vocabulary standards weren't so hard at all because Jesse knew what to expect.

We talked about how perhaps some teachers and parents might mistakenly think this adaptation travesty *was* the real version of *Mike Mulligan*, and applaud the basal reader for giving kids a real classic good story. After all, the table of contents just listed the story as *by* Virginia Burton -- we had to search the small print in the acknowledgements to find the words "adapted from." Closer inspection showed that almost all the other stories in the book that had authors listed were *also* adaptations. We wondered how many children were turned off to these authors because of reading such "basalized" versions. Interesting also to note that the teacher's manual makes no mention of there being another, better version of *Mike Mulligan* available in the school library, or any other books by Burton, in their "Enrichment Activities" suggestions for further "stories to enjoy." Research has shown, too, that most teachers do *not* use many suggestions for extra activities -- *unless* the suggestion involves handing out dittoed worksheets on "skills."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>J. Holt, *Escape from Childhood*, N.Y.: Ballantine Books, 1974, p. 134.

<sup>2</sup>D. Durkin, Is There a Match Between What Elementary Teachers Do and What Basal Reader Manuals Recommend? *The Reading Teacher*, 1984, 37, 734-748.