

# Choo Choo the Runaway Engine

Book by Virginia Lee Burton

Literature based unit study prepared by Melissa Crabtree

## *Spiritual/Biblical Significance*

This entire book could be a present day parable, I believe. Here are the parallels I found:

- The conductor, fireman, and engineer could be compared to the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). All three of them are concerned about the welfare of Choo Choo and care for her in their daily interactions with her.
- Choo Choo allows her pride to rule her. She wants to be seen and noticed by others. It is not enough that she is loved by her engineer, fireman, and conductor and is playing an important role in her society. Because of this pride, she goes on to make bad choices that endanger herself and others. She jumps a drawbridge, disobeys traffic signals, fails to perform her expected duties, and ultimately ends up lost and alone on an old, abandoned train track.

Proverbs 16:18 “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling.” NASB

1 John 2:16 “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father but is from the world.” NASB

- Choo Choo is pursued by her fireman, conductor, and engineer. They focus completely on finding her. This is similar to Christ as our shepherd who says He will leave the 99 who are safe to look for the 1 who is lost.

Luke 15:3-7 This is the parable of the lost lamb.

- The people were very condemning of Choo Choo. Yes, she made bad decisions, but none of us is innocent. We will all, at one time or another, make decisions that deserve scorn. We need to be understanding and forgiving, rather than scornful and condemning.

Romans 3:23 “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” NASB

John 8: 1-11 Here is a story where Jesus defends an adulteress, challenges her accusers to examine their own lives and throw a stone if they claim to be perfect.

Matthew 7: 1-5 Here is a story where Jesus challenges his followers to examine their own lives before judging another.

- Choo Choo realized that she could not save herself. She could not rescue herself from the scary forest at the end of the old track. She was out of steam and could not go any further. She had to be towed back to the roundhouse by a big Streamliner. Choo Choo realized contentment and safety in being cared for by the fireman, engineer, and conductor and in performing her daily jobs. Her caretakers rejoice that she is home unharmed and gladly welcome her back!

Luke 15:11-32 This is the story of the prodigal son.

## ***SOCIAL STUDIES***

### **Compare and Contrast Urban (City) Life to Rural (Small Town) Life**

Look at the differences in the pictures. The small town is mostly houses and a few small businesses. The city is made up of big buildings (businesses and apartment buildings) and skyscrapers. What is your city/town like? If you live in the city, have you ever visited a small town, or vice versa? How do we get between the two? How are businesses connected between the two? Choo Choo played a big role in mail/freight delivery and personal transportation. When this book was written, many people did not own their own cars, so they were dependent upon trains for transportation. Going to the city was a major outing for a family.

**Personal Responsibility** – We need to take care of what we have. Jim, the engineer, took good care of Choo Choo. He shined and polished her and oiled her parts to keep her running smoothly. We need to take care of things that belong to us...not throwing books, playing carefully with our toys, not leaving things outside to get ruined, not stepping on toys, putting things where they belong so we don't lose pieces, etc.

Obviously this book could lend itself to an extensive study on trains...

Study the development and history of trains.

Study the first steam locomotive, who built it, when was it, what was it used for? What other kinds of engines do we have now? (diesel, steam, electric, turbine)

What different kinds of train cars are out there and what are their various purposes? (Tanker, hopper, freight, flatbed, coal, boxcar, logging, passenger, dining, sleeper, and more!!)

What was the original purpose of the caboose and is it still used? (To house the crew during non-working shifts.)

What are the employment positions available with the railroad and what are their purposes? (engineer, fireman, conductor, switchman, driver, to name a few)

What are the main parts of a steam engine and what are their purposes? (smokestack, cowcatcher, pistons, wheels, boiler, cab, couple, connecting rods, to get you started!)

## ***LANGUAGE ARTS***

**Idioms** - An idiom is an expression or phrase that does not mean exactly what it says. All cultures use idioms. Look at these train-related idioms specifically:

1. “letting off steam” It means to do something that helps you get rid of strong or intense feelings.
2. “full steam ahead” It means to do something with all possible energy and enthusiasm.
3. “running out of steam” It means to suddenly lose the energy or interest to continue doing what you are doing.
4. “all steamed up” It means to be angry or upset.

Heavens to Betsy, A Hog On Ice, or Thereby Hangs a Tale are all books by Charles Earle Funk and explain the origins of some of our curious sayings. The Scholastic Dictionary of Idioms by Marvin Terban is another good one.

**Alphabet Fun** - Think of a train word for each letter of the alphabet.

### **Train Vocabulary:**

Couple, cowcatcher, boiler, steam, gauge (in relation to trains, the distance between the rails), tender, pilot, connecting rods, locomotive, conductor, engineer, fireman, rail, tracks, caboose

### ***Applied Math***

**Counting** - There are numerous opportunities for counting practice in this book. One page in particular has several of each of these: people, horses, cows, ducks and chicks, birds.

**Counting by twos** – Based on the Whyte Notation for Classifying Steam Engines, steam engines have three kinds of wheels – leading wheels (the front set), driving wheels (the middle set), and trailing wheels (the back set). When you look at a train from the side, you can only see one wheel of each pair (the other of the pair is on the other side which you cannot see). You count by twos to classify the engine. Here is a small picture. A train's might look like this- ooOOOoo -from the side at which you are looking. You would count by twos to classify the engine, from the front to the back. This one would be a 4-6-4 engine. (An excellent website for this is [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whyte\\_notation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whyte_notation) .)

**Shapes** – Cut shapes from construction paper - squares, rectangles (cars & windows), triangles (smokestack & cowcatcher), cylinders (tanker cars), and circles (wheels). Glue them onto another paper and make a train.

**Parallel lines** – Discuss and model the definition of parallel (lines extending in the same direction, never getting closer together or further apart). Train tracks consist of two parallel lines. What are some other examples of parallel lines? Can your student draw parallel lines?

**Perpendicular** – Discuss and model the definition of perpendicular (a line meeting another at right angles). Explain that train tracks consist of two parallel rails combined with railroad ties placed perpendicular to the rails. Can your student draw perpendicular lines?

## *SCIENCE*

**Steam** -- Discuss how steam is made. Explain how a heat source is required to heat the water and cause it to boil, thus creating steam. Putting a lid on it allows it to build up pressure and create the whistle as the pressure releases. Get a teapot or pressure cooker and allow your child to hear the whistle it makes as the steam comes out of a small hole because of the pressure created within. If you use a pressure cooker, you can take this a step further. After the pressure is built up and you hear the whistling, quickly (an adult with a potholder/glove on - IT WILL BE HOT) remove the cap and hear the ssssssSSSSSwish of the steam quickly releasing.

## *ART*

Black & white illustrations. Virginia Lee Burton chose black and white only for these illustrations. She creates value by shading. You can combine black and white to make gray. Have your student draw a black and white picture and experiment with shading. Is it easy to shade a picture correctly? Try it with pencils and crayons. Which is more effective?

On a white piece of paper, paint a train with black paint only.

## *JUST FOR FUN!*

You can read the story and add some sound effects. Use a bell (or a spoon on a metal bowl), a wooden train whistle, and a ssssssSSSSSWISH sound in the appropriate places as you read the story. It makes it so much more fun!

## *Field Trip Ideas*

Get out somewhere and take a train ride! Whether you have a subway, el, or steam engine near you, take a family ride!

Visit a train/railway museum if you have one near you.

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