

Discussion and Activity Guide for
THE YEAR WE WERE FAMOUS
By Carole Estby Dagg

The Year We Were Famous is based on the true story of Clara Estby and her suffragist mother, Helga, who walked 4,000 miles from their farm in Mica Creek, Washington to New York City in 1896 in a heroic attempt to win \$10,000 that would save the family's farm and prove women could do it. For a year, they were famous as they met governors and mayors, camped with Indians, and visited the new president-elect himself, William McKinley.

In a starred review, Publishers Weekly called the book "unforgettable." Honors include the Sue Alexander Award for most promising new manuscript, 2012 WILLA award, Will Rogers Medallion, and a place on the American Library Association's 2012 Amelia Bloomer list of best feminist fiction.

WALKING IN CLARA'S SHOES

Clara and Helga each had only seven pounds of equipment, including the weight of the satchel. What would you pack in a satchel for a seven-month trek?

Clara felt obligated to help her family but also wanted to pursue her own life. Helga knew her neighbors thought her place was at home but left the family for days to attend suffrage meetings in Spokane and for a year to walk across the country to save the farm and prove women could do it. Mrs. Bryan wanted to help her husband campaign but also wanted to be at home with her children. How do you balance obligations to others and to yourself?

Is there any cause for which you would walk 4,000 miles?

Clara had to work as a servant in Spokane in exchange for room and board so she could go on to high school. How would that have affected Clara's relationship with her high school classmates? Would you have been willing to do the same?

How do the people Clara meets change her understanding of her parents and perception of the world and her possibilities?

POLITICS, THE ECONOMY, AND MEDIA COVERAGE

In the Panic of 1893, people were losing homes, unemployment was above 10% for six years in a row, and 7 of 10 banks failed in Spokane. How is that situation like today? How is it different?

The liquor lobby was reportedly against giving the vote to women because it might lead to prohibition. Does big business affect elections and legislation today?

President McKinley ran his presidential campaign while seldom leaving home. Compare his style to election campaigns now.

SOCIETY AND CHANGING ROLES

How many generations back do you have to go to find the first woman in your family who might have voted in 1920?

Helga knew her neighbors thought her place was at home but left the family for days at a time to attend suffrage meetings in Spokane and for a year to walk across the country to prove women could do it, as well as to win money to save the family's farm. Can you think of other people who have gone against public opinion to effect social change?

Clara and Helga knocked on the doors of strangers for a place to stay, and were even admitted to the president-elect's home. Could they have done that today?

How did Mrs. William (Ida) McKinley) and Mrs. William Jennings (Mary) Bryan represent traditional and new roles of women?

How do the bicycle craze and the bicycle skirt symbolize the New American Woman?

What were Helga's stated motives for the walk? Why else do you think she wanted to walk? Why do you think Clara was willing to go?

The author could only find a dozen or so newspaper articles about Clara and Helga's walk across the country. If a mother and daughter attempted to walk across the country today, what kind of coverage do you think they'd get?

Were you surprised by Ma's revelation in Pennsylvania? What clues had Clara had that this might be true? If you had never met one of your parents, what would you want to know about him or her?

WRAP-UP AND REACTIONS

What was your favorite scene of the book?

Do you think the ending was sad or hopeful?

How does Emily Dickinson's Poem, "Fame is a bee," describe *The Year We Were Famous*? (preface)

Fame is a bee.
 It has a song—
 It has a sting—
 Ah, too, it has a wing.

WRITING ACTIVITIES



This is how Clara and Helga Estby were depicted in the New York World when they arrived after walking across the country.

Examine the pictures that appeared in the New York World before and after the walk. Make up your own story that would explain Clara and Helga's transition from proper Victorian ladies in black silk dresses to gun and dagger-toting adventuresses. (PDFs of photos available from the author.)

Pretend you are a journalist interviewing Clara and Helga and write a newspaper article describing their trek.

Interview your parents or grandparents for the most exciting or funniest event in their lives.

Take one of these newspaper quotes and expand it into a fully developed scene:

“They [Native Americans they encountered in Utah] took our small satchel and went through it, but oddly enough the only thing they could make use of was our curling iron. This puzzled them very much and we had to demonstrate its use.”

—Minneapolis Tribune, June 2, 1897, p. 4

“At one time we got into a cloudburst, and it was only by holding onto shrubs that we escaped with our lives”

—Minneapolis Tribune, June 2, 1897, p. 4

“...the only man who molested them was a LeGrand (sic), Ore., dude...they shot him in the leg. They were not arrested for it.”

—New York World, December 25, 1896, p. 3

Re-write a scene as a script and act it out.

Essay prompt: Why I would/would not like to have lived in 1896.

Re-write one scene from Helga’s point of view instead of Clara’s.

Find examples in the book of how Clara’s background on the farm and her love of reading affect her word choices and images.

GEOGRAPHY and ART

Draw a map of their route, noting where various episodes took place.

Create a cover for the book.

Choose a quote from the novel and draw a sketch or cartoon to illustrate it.

MUSIC

Compose a song about Clara and Helga’s trek.