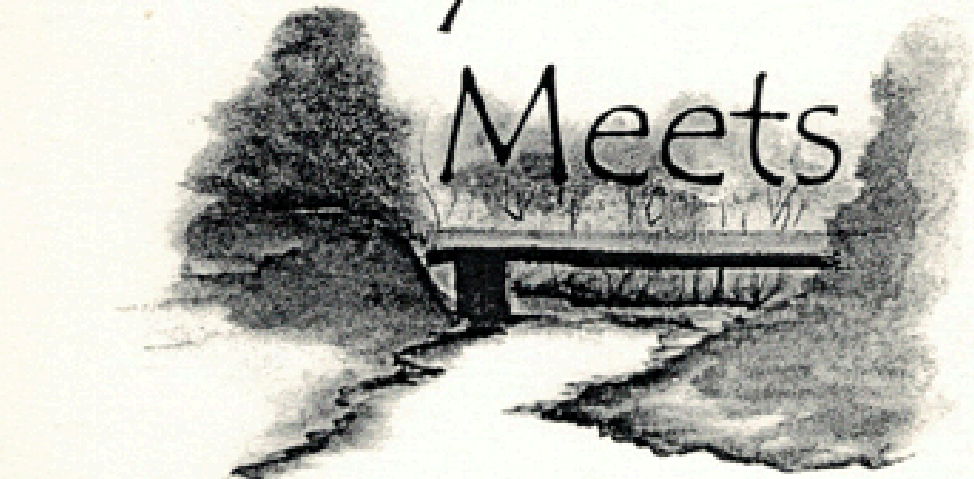
Benny Meets Mr. River John





by Margaret Sommerfeld

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CHAPTER 1

"Git up a little higher," yelled Skip from the bottom of the willow tree. "We can't hold on much longer."

Benny carefully climbed a few inches higher. "I'm ready," yelled Benny. "On the count of three let it go, one, two...three...."

The boys jumped free of the tree. With a whistle and a zing, the top of the tree snapped upright, flinging Benny into the air and into the river, KER-SPLASH!! "That was great, the best darn ride I've had yet!" he yelled as he swam to shore. The other boys staggered over to meet him.

"It's too hot to do this," grumbled Alvin as he waddled across the hot sand. As usual, his ride had been a complete failure. Every time they tried to get the willow tree pulled back he lost his balance and fell to the ground.

"Tubby's tired from fallin' otta the tree," teased Skip.

"Aw, come on Skip," scolded Benny. "We can all do with a rest. It must be a hundred in the shade." Being Benny's best friend, Skip knew from his tone of voice he better do just that.

Lying on the bank the boys gazed across the river. Directly on the other side were small, wooden, box-shaped cabins lining the bank. Even though the caretaker tried his best to maintain the property, the neighborhood didn't appreciate the mill bridge cabins. Benny had heard many stories about the towering, aged, wooden mill. Power was still supplied from the passing river even though more modern methods had been installed. An old utility building in the center of the grounds was surrounded by run-down cabins. Faded and torn curtains dangled half way out the open windows. Unusual travelers would stop over night and during the summer months, gypsy wagons, loaded with all their belongings and extra horses tied behind, always found room to set up camp in the open grassy areas surrounding the cabins.

As a baby's impatient crying irritated Alvin, he said, "I wonder what it's like living in one of those things."

"My Dad says the city should take a bulldozer to them" added Skip. "This guy was really yelling the other night. It even woke me up. Then we heard a shot and lots more racket. Dad told Mom it was probably that bum that hangs around under the bridge."

Benny sat up with a jerk and exclaimed, "That was my Dad! There were some gypsies over there and a couple of them waded across the river and were in our chicken house. Mom was really scared. Dad took his shotgun and ran out the back door. By that time they had a chicken under each arm and were crossing the river. He shot into the air and they let the chickens go. Boy! Were those chickens ever wet! Mom sure cussed Dad out for shooting. No one knew me and my Sis were awake and watchin."

Having heard enough about this subject at home Benny quickly suggested, "How about goin' fishin?"

He was always looking for adventure and the summer was too short for him. When he was with friends and near the river he was happy. They accepted him and didn't expect anything in return. He had always been taller than the other boys. Being five-foot eight he was tired of being called "Slim" or "Stretch." In school he knew the look on his teacher's face when he walked in, 'Where do we find a desk to fit him?' Even the dentist had told his Mother that he had grown too fast. His deep blue eyes and wavy blonde hair, combined with a glowing smile helped the boys to trust his judgment. Besides, he was also the oldest of the group. "Alvin, run home and get some sinkers," ordered Benny.

Skip and Benny hurriedly cut willow poles before Alvin returned. Benny's shirt, hanging in a nearby tree, provided the needed fish hooks. He always kept fish hooks in his pocket on hot summer days. Alvin brought a large handful of washers and nuts from his Dad's workbench for sinkers.

Their can of worms dug yesterday had kept well in the sand at the base of a tree. Tossing their lines in the water, Benny and the boys lay on the bank waiting for a fish to bite. No luck! Benny spoke first, "Guess those fish aren't hungry today. Maybe we should have tried earlier this morning."

Skip interrupted, "Just where are those sunfish and crappies you said were so plentiful? This is stupid, there's no fishin' today."

"What else is there to do?" grumbled Alvin, who was much hotter than the rest. He weighed 125 pounds and was only four-foot three. His afternoon had been a waste so far, His left eye was still swollen and black and blue. If only he had seen his sister's roller skate in the middle of the sidewalk last week, he wouldn't have fallen and hit his eye on that coaster wagon. "Sure wish I had something to eat or drink," he complained.

"Who's got any money?" asked Benny.

"I almost got enough for the nails and screws for my kayak." added Skip. "I'm not going to waste it on any old pop."

"How about going after some crates for our kayaks tomorrow morning?" asked Benny. "Mr. Jason at the furniture store told us to come up the end of the week."

"But I don't have enough money for my kayak," whined Alvin.

"If you didn't use all your money on eating and drinking pop we could flip you off that willow tree. One of these days you ain't going to even get up that tree," teased Skip.

"I'll share my money with him," interrupted Benny. "Besides, Dad has all kinds of screws and nails in the basement."

"Maybe if I hurry home and mow the grass I could borrow some money from Dad," Alvin said. He always obeyed his parents' wishes and seldom got into trouble even when he did something wrong. His parents were sure he was always a good boy.

Benny and Skip were in no hurry as they didn't eat until at least six o'clock. "You know, Skip, I could live on this river bank my whole life. No school work, no girls, and when I got to smellin' too bad, I could go for a swim."

"Hey, don't be so quick to do away with girls," Skip said. "That new girl that moved in up the block said 'Hi' to me the other day. She acted kinda nice."

"Go ahead and talk to her. By the end of the summer you'll be pushing that doll buggy of hers down the sidewalk." Benny replied.

"Not all girls are sissies," argued Skip.

"You just name one that ain't. If you gave my sister a fishworm she'd scream for Mom and I'd be in big trouble. They can't keep a secret neither. She can't wait to tell on me. Just don't go bringing any girls 'round my river bank!"

"Okay, okay, don't get so excited." Skip loved to be with Benny along the river but girls seemed to interest him also. Not a girl in the neighborhood could resist his charm. When he smiled his dimples grew more obvious and his curly black hair helped to bring out the sparkle in his dark brown eyes. Of course, he was always willing to carry books and be of any assistance to the opposite sex. If only his parents hadn't named him Eugene.

The two boys lay on the sand as they watched the water spilling over the dam only a half block away. The splashing water flowed into a narrow channel below the dam and spread into a wide, gently-flowing river lapping at their feet as it passed. The trees branches hung limp in the blistering, summer sun. The neighborhood was silent as windows and doors had been shut to keep out the approaching late afternoon heat. "Hey, Benny, by the bridge, isn't that smoke?"

"So what, it's just smoke from somebody's bonfire," answered Benny.

"Who'd have a bonfire on a hot day like this," said Skip. "Maybe it's that same fire we saw one other time. Remember?"

"Oh hey, I remember, let's go see," urged Benny. Picking up their clothes and putting on their shirts, they started down the river bank. Taking a short cut through the willow trees along the river bank the smoke got closer and closer. As they neared the dam they could see the smoke ascending like a giant rope winding up a ladder. They crept along the edge of the cornfield that bordered the riverbank.

"Look! Down there," whispered Benny.

Crunch! The tree branch snapped under Skip's feet. Abruptly the overall-clad figure below turned around. His small squinty eyes met theirs and the boys stood speechless. Removing a twig from his mouth and taking his tattered cap in hand, he bowed gently and spoke kindly, "C'mon down boys, jist in time for supper."

CHAPTER 2

"We saw smoke from down river," said Benny.

"Wondered what it was?" added Skip.

"Jist makin' supper," interrupted the bum "I was gittin' powerful hungry."

"Whatever's in that kettle sure smells good," said Skip.

"Oh, jist a carrot, onion, taters and a couple tomaters a lady gived me," answered the bum.

"My Dad said you guys always beg all your food," said Skip.

With a smile the bum answered quickly, "I'd ruther cook me own. Ya mostly git sandwiches and leftovers when you knock on doors. Ain't you guys usually upstream further?"

"Yup," answered Benny. "We all live up that away."

"And it's about time we were gittin' home," interrupted Skip. He didn't know how he would ever explain spending time with a bum to his parents.

"You go ahead," urged Benny. "Just stop and tell Mom I'm on my way."

"You're going to be in trouble again, scolded Skip.

"That's my problem, just do as I say," ordered Benny.

Impatiently Skip replied, "Okay, okay, just remember I told you so. See you later."

As Skip was telling the bum good-bye, Benny sat daydreaming, what a way to live. No wash water to empty, no chicken house to clean, sleep under the stars, and no nosy sister.

His daydreaming was interrupted by an invitation from Mr. River John. "How's 'bout eatin' with me? It's not much, but I make a powerful good stew."

"Maybe just a little bit," answered Benny in a hesitant tone.

"Here you are, ain't got room for much dishes but tastes powerful good out of a washed tin can.

Benny had never eaten out of an old battered coffee can. "Gee, thanks Mr.————-"

"Jist call me River John. That's what me friends call me."

"How'd you get a name like that?"

"I've spent a lot of my life near the water. Jist don't like trains or roads. Too many people. They jist want to ask questions that ain't none of their business anyways. Besides, on a day like this it would be doggone hot in a boxcar. River got a mind of her own. This here river can be a wicked one."

"Oh, that's just stories, isn't any truth in it," argued Benny.

"That's what you think, I growed up not too far upstream from here. See that feed mill over yonder. That's how Norfolk sprung up. Only had ten families in the beginning. Used to be said that the Indians warned puttin' a town t'wixt the Norfolk and Elkhorn Rivers might be a big mistake. You know, Sonny, you even say it wrong. It's really the Northfork River, not the Norfolk River, because this is the northfork of the Elkhorn River."

But the Elkhorn River is south of town. How can that hurt anybody up north? Rivers can't run upstream."

"Rivers in Nebraska, especially up this fur north, kin really pile up ice. That's gotta melt and go somewheres. You git two rivers full of them ice jams and heavy spring rains and yous got trouble, me boy! Pop telled me back in the late 1800's the stores and sidewalks were built so high that ladies stepped outa wagons right onto the wooden sidewalks. The water used to git five-foot deep on main street. Boy, wouldn't that be a mess with a horse and wagon in that muck and mud?"

"Didn't they try and fix it?" asked Benny.

"Ya, they finally piled up a dike on the north side of town. Next flood comes along and the levee broke. I wasn't no bigger than you when I remember Pop tellin' about this huge cake of ice roarin' down the already bank-full Elkhorn River and it knocked out ninety-foot on one end of the bridge in the south end of town. Another time he told me that he heared tell that a muskrat dug a hole in the Norfolk River dike and this broke the dike. Guess the townsfolk have been battlin' this here river for lots of years."

"Gee, I can't imagine this river with that much water."

"You may someday. Hope I'm not around. I'm leavin' one of these days. Ain't no jobs to keep me in food. Besides nobody would hire me."

"You lived here once? Where did you live and what did you do?"

"Aw, that was some time ago. Pop and Mom been dead for quite a spell. Don't really care to talk about those days. My sis still lives here, she don't care for the likes of me. Lives on top of Snob Hill, married herself the town's doctor. Carries her nose so high, she stumbles over cracks in the sidewalk."

"Where are you going to sleep tonight?" asked Benny.

"Wherever I lays me head and can see the stars," replied Mr. River John.

"I know a neat place to sleep tonight," offered Benny.

"Where's that?" asked Mr. River John.

"Down the river a bit and under that cement bridge," answered Benny.

"You're right. That's a honey of a bridge. Sure beats that old wooden one they used to have over there," said Mr. River John as he pointed to the bridge.

"Us kids go down there and mess around," said Benny. "But now I gotta get home or I'll be in big trouble. Thanks for the stew, Mr. River John."

Tipping his tattered cap to Benny he added, "Anytime, me boy."

Scrambling up the bank Benny ran along the river bank, hurried up the bank to their garage and arrived home in time to meet Father walking briskly toward the river bank. Benny knew immediately his Father was angry. Usually he walked the same speed, slowly and a little round shouldered from a hot, hard day's work. He realized his Father worked too hard and that he was much older than his friends' Fathers. If Benny was certain of one thing, he knew he would never work as hard as his Father when he grew up. They never went fishing together. In fact, he only saw him for meals, at bedtime, and on Sundays. Every Sunday morning Benny and Bernadine attended Sunday School. Father and Mother would then join them to go to church, followed by a delicious dinner and Mother's home made pie or angel food cake. Following dinner Father would relax and start to read the Sunday paper. Either he fell asleep or relatives dropped by.

Of course, they always managed to remain long enough to be invited for Mom's Sunday evening lunch. This never helped his Father's mood.

Benny knew other men that worked over at the WPA building nearby. They didn't look tired and always took time to sit and visit with Benny, Skip, and Alvin. Benny read the words on the building one day. "WORKS

PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION." It was a huge building with an old, large heating stove in the middle that remained there all year long. Rows of shelves covered one side of the building stacked with paint, nails, and other supplies. Shovels, forks, and hoes hung on the opposite wall.

One day Benny asked the foreman, "Why do you work here?"

He replied, "Well, Benny, I couldn't find a job anywhere and my family has to eat, so I decided to sign up to work for the WPA."

"Why don't you work by yourself like my Dad does? He pours concrete driveways, lays cement blocks for foundations, and fixes chimneys," said Benny.

"Well, it's this way, this is the only place I could find a job. I'm sure your Dad has told you about the Depression of the l930's. The government pays my wages and we build and repair roads, erect public buildings. and improve parks," complained the man.

But Benny couldn't understand why the men sat so much, talked so much, and rested so much. Usually his Father's day started at five o'clock in the morning and he didn't return home until six in the evening and sometimes much later. His overalls would be stiff from the dried on plaster or cement. A mason's job was not easy any time of the year, but Mr. Winterton never complained. The band on his hat was wet with sweat, his face was still dirty from his days toil.

The unlit cigar in his mouth shifted quickly back and forth on his lips, the anger showing in his eyes.

"Where ya been, Benny, don't ya know it's time to eat?" questioned Father.

Benny answered quickly, "Just looking for my can of worms."

"Well, where are they?" asked Father.

Can't find them, they was under that tree, Skip must have taken them."

Father asked, "How's come the other guys aren't with you?"

"They was in a hurry. Skip was gonna tell Mom I was coming," added Benny.

Dad frowned as he said, "You git in that house and no more excuses. Tell your Ma I'll be right there. Have to put trowels in my pickup. Got ta sidewalk to patch tomorrow morning. Nobody can afford a new one."

Benny raced to the house, washed his hands and slipped into his chair at the supper table. The back door slammed, Benny's Father stomped up the back hall steps, sat down at the table and gave a sigh of relief.

"Fold your hands, Bernadine and Benjamin, remember to give thanks for your food," reminded Mother. She had given her children good Christian names and could never understand why anyone would call her son Benny. It was a proud day when he was christened Benjamin Richard Winterton. Her family was the most important thing in her life. She labored endlessly. Freshly baked bread was cooling on the cupboard, jars of green beans and corn stood in rows on the sink. The constant whining of the aged fan blades attempted to cool the overheated kitchen.

Mother was concerned that Benny wasn't eating in his usual style. "Eat your ear of corn, Benjamin," she insisted. "You haven't touched your drumstick, your favorite piece of chicken."

"I'm not too hungry," answered Benny.

"Do you feel okay?" questioned Mother.

"Just hot," replied Benny.

"So who isn't, doesn't bother my appetite," added Father, taking his second helping. "If you'd cleaned the chicken house as you were told you'd be hungry."

"Now John, leave the boy be," said Mother. "He can do that first thing in the morning when it is cooler."

"I'll eat my cake later," complained Benny.

Tenderly Mother spoke, "You run along now, Benny. The sun is starting to go behind the trees and the back yard looks pretty cool. Why don't you rest for a while, you may have gotten too much sun this afternoon. Your sister will be happy to help with the dishes, won't you Bernadine?"

Bernadine was five years older than Benny. She gets up the first time Mother calls, she makes her bed, helps with the dishes, and never gets dirty. Benny would never understand Bernadine—she doesn't fish, hates worms, and plays with dolls. With a slight smile and a look of revenge in her eyes, Bernadine replied, "Of course, Mother." The expression on her face made Benny uncomfortable and he knew she'd get him back.

As Benny lay on the parched grass in the back yard with his eyes closed he could imagine the cool waters lapping on his feet and could smell the wood smoke from Mr. River John's fire. What a way to live!

CHAPTER 3

The old green clock in the kitchen struck loudly, BONG! BONG! BONG! BONG! BONG! BONG! BONG! Benny rubbed his eyes, stretched lazily, and sat up abruptly. Where was he? Then he remembered. The house was so hot last night he had spread a quilt on the floor in the hallway by the front door. The morning sun hurt his eyes as it shone brightly through the screen door.

Coming from the kitchen, Bernadine yelled, "Are you going to sleep all day?"

"Oh, it's only you," grumbled Benny.

Bernadine stood over him with a disgusting look, "Did you think I might be that old bum friend of yours? I saw you and Skip talking to him. Dad was mad about that lazy guy that begs for food and wears that dirty old cap. Heard him tell Mother he is just an old bum that travels along the river. Looks like company you'd keep."

"He's no old bum!" said Benny. "That's Mister River John! Knows lots of stuff. More than my old Geography teacher. Tell Mom and you'll be sorry."

"Get out of dishes again and we'll see who'll be sorry," warned Bernadine. "You had better get up, Dad's at work and Mom's washing clothes already."

"Got to get to Skip's house this morning," said Benny. After getting dressed he hurried to the kitchen, reached for a banana, gulped a glass of milk, and disappeared out the back door.

"Where are you going?" asked Mother, who was outside hanging up clothes.

"Over to Skip's house," answered Benny.

"Did you eat breakfast?" asked Mother.

"Sure, even washed my dishes," lied Benny.

"My, that's a nice son. Don't stay too long. Want you to empty the wash water on the trees. It's so dry," called Mother.

Skip was coming outside as Benny arrived. "What's to do today," asked Skip.

"Fishin's no good but I got a better idea. Let's build those kayaks," answered Benny.

Skip complained, "I don't have no money to buy stuff we need."

Benny answered, "Alvin has some money. Besides we can beg a lot of stuff. My Dad's got nails. So does yours. You get Alvin and meet me back here."

Alvin brought along his coaster wagon to haul the wooden crate. Mr. Jason, the owner of the furniture store had promised them a large crate to use for their kayaks. The boys traveled down the shady street, turned the corner to the main avenue, crossed the concrete bridge, and continued downtown. As they turned the corner the paving was hot on their bare feet.

"I'm tired, somebody pull me," complained Alvin.

"Are you kidding?" laughed Skip.

"It's my wagon, I'll go back home and then see how you get that crate home," threatened Alvin.

Benny ordered, "Get in!"

First Skip pulled and then Benny took his turn. As they reached the edge of town the street was no longer paved and the old, bumpy, red bricks became hotter and hotter on bare feet.

"I'm not pulling you anymore," griped Benny. "Take your old wagon home, but see if you ride in my kayak." Benny hurried ahead of the rest without glancing back. Skip caught up with him.

As Benny and Skip strutted ahead Benny snickered and said to Skip, "Look at that reflection in the store window. See him following us. He knows we're the only ones that can build him a kayak."

When the boys reached Jason's Furniture Store they sat on the sidewalk and waited for Alvin. Mr. Jason saw them and came to greet them saying, "The crates are out in back. You'll have to go out in the alley and get one off the dock."

"Gee, thanks, Mr. Jason," said the boys in unison as they hurried into the alley. Alvin held the wagon in place as the others lifted the crate on the wagon.

"Pull!" yelled Benny. Alvin yanked the wagon ahead, the crate came crashing to the ground.

"This ain't gonna work," complained Skip. "That stupid wagon's too small!"

Benny interrupted, "Let's put the crate on the wagon, set Alvin inside for some weight, you pull and I'll push."

After a lot of tugging, lifting and Alvin's whining, they finally started down the alley, turned the corner, and were in front of the store. Skip pulled, Benny pushed hard when ....CRASH! Both Alvin and crate fell from the back of the wagon. The crate hit Benny's big toe. "Ouch, darn! You dumbbells, I'm not pushing anymore," growled Benny.

Skip stood by the curb shaking his head when Mr. Jason appeared. "Could you boys use a rope to tie down that crate?" he asked.

He helped them tie the crate to the wagon and the boys labored down the hot sidewalk. As they neared the bridge, Benny exclaimed, "Look, there's Mr. River John!"

They pulled the wagon to the edge of the sidewalk and ordered Alvin to watch over their crate. "What are you two goin' to do now?" asked Alvin. "This sun is hot! I'm not sitting up here in the wagon while you guys go sit in the shade with Mr. River John.

Skip answered, " We'll only be a couple of minutes."

Benny interrupted, "You know, Alvin, Mr. River John has been around rivers all his life. He'll probably have some good pointers on how to make a better kayak. Of course if you want to pull the wagon on home we'll meet you there."

"Just hurry up and get goin' and hurry back," muttered Alvin.

As the two boys made their way down the bank they heard a voice, "Hi there, boys, what you doin' out on such a hot day?" asked Mr. River John. "Come and sit a spell, thought maybe I could catch me some fish, get tired of some of those dried out sandwiches people give me."

Benny said, "We just come from town, Mr. Jason, at the furniture store, saved a wooden crate for us, we're going to build a couple of kayaks this afternoon. Got any suggestions for us?"

"You bet your bottom dollar I do," answered Mr. River John. "You gotta be careful how you put one of those contraptions together or you can get into big trouble, me boys!

"We got plenty of nails and glue to put the kayaks together. First we have to take the crate apart," answered Benny.

"Be sure you use plenty of nails, don't want to be stingy on nails.

get done be sure and put a good coat of paint on em," said Mr. River John. "Let them dry over night, I might be around these parts later this week. I'll try to come by and see how they look."

Benny said, "First we have to get them built and then we have to find some paint, but we don't have any money for paint."

"That's no problem," added Mr. River John. "Those guys over at the WPA building always got some extra stuff. If I'm near this area I'll look you up and see if you're having any problems."

"Thanks a lot," said the boys. We have to be careful getting them down to the river when we're finished, don't want my sister and her friends poking into our plans."

"Sounds good, me boys, I'll watch for you. See you later!" called Mr. River John as Benny and Skip hurried up the river bank.

"Well, it's about time," said Alvin, with a nasty look.

Benny and Skip immediately started pulling the wagon and ignored Alvin. Because of their visit with Mr. River John, the boys really needed to hurry to Skip's house. It was going to take a while to get that crate apart. The remainder of the morning was spent pulling nails and cutting the crate into strips. At noon the boys hurried home for lunch. Benny called to them, "I promised my Mom that I'd empty her wash water for her, see you as soon as I get done."

Benny's Mom had already forgotten that he hadn't washed breakfast dishes and Bernadine wasn't home to remind her. Eating quickly, Benny had enough time to empty the wash water on the thirsty, parched trees. He did such a fine job, even swept the basement floor. How could Mother resist his request to spend the afternoon at Skip's house?

Arriving at Skip's house, Alvin met him and exclaimed, "Look at all the washers I got and I found some glue in the basement." Alvin had forgotten the morning problems, he was so excited to help with the kayaks.

Busily the boys built a frame from lumber that Skip found in the garage. One by one the strips were fitted on the frame, glued, and then nailed as Benny supervised. By late afternoon the kayaks were set in the hot sun to dry. Skip and Benny volunteered to get material for coverings. "Alvin, you round up some paint!" ordered Benny.

"Remember that big sign that used to hang on the end of the filling station down on the corner?" asked Skip.

"Let's go over there," urged Benny.

When they arrived they stood impatiently while the owner talked more than he worked filling a customer's gas tank. The boys watched the gas splash in the glass dome atop the metal post. Finally he asked, "You boys want something?"

"Remember that sign you used to have hanging over there? Pictures of oil cans all over it. Sure could put it to good use to cover some things we just built," begged Benny.

"Let me see...well, it's pretty old and beginning to crack," answered the station man.

"That's okay, it'll work great!" exclaimed Benny.

"You'll have to look back there in the junk," the man replied.

Rummaging through piles of empty old cans, grease rags, and worn-out tires, they were rewarded. "I found it," yelled Skip. "It's not in too great a shape."

"A good coat of paint will put lots of life back in it." assured Benny. They rolled up the faded piece of canvas and hurried back to Skip's house.

Alvin was sitting on the grass drinking pop. "I can't find any paint," he complained.

"Where'd you look, in the pop cooler?" griped Skip. "Can't you do nothin' right?"

"You're just a big know it all," screamed Alvin.

"Hold it! snapped Benny. "I think I know where we can beg some paint. C'mon guys."

"Where are we going?" asked Skip.

Benny replied, "You know that big metal building over north. Dad always gripes about how the government paid to build it. They keep all the WPA supplies there. I guess anybody that can't get a job can work on WPA. They build stuff and fix streets. Dad says the government pays their wages from the money he makes."

"All they'll have is shovels, my Dad says all those guys do is lean on their shovels all day," added Skip.

They reached the huge olive drab building and the large door was open. At least half a dozen men were sitting around smoking, some rolling their own cigarettes, and drinking coffee. One of the men stretched, yawned, and said, "What can we do for you boys today?"

Benny answered quickly, "Been building today, Spent all our money on other stuff. Still need some paint. Do you have any leftover paint?"

The worker replied, "We don't have much to pick from, how does brown sound?"

Skip interrupted, "Great! Just what we need." The boys were desperate, they would have taken pink.

"Here's a gallon, just forget where you got it, don't want the foreman catching us giving away paint," said the worker.

"Gee, thanks," replied the boys as they hurried through the huge door and down toward the river to reach Skip's house.

The WPA worker leaned back in his chair and said, "Have to be good to those young boys. Treat 'em nice and they won't give us any trouble, besides, who'll miss a can of leftover paint?"

Benny and Skip arrived back at the yard to find Alvin admiring the kayaks. Alvin smiled and said to them, "Boy, we should did do a great job making those kayaks, didn't we?"

"See, you can do something when you aren't eating or drinking pop," praised Benny. "What do you say we get the paint on these before supper time?"

"Quit slopping paint on me," yelled Skip to Alvin." "Go help Benny."

"I can't help it," said Alvin. "You're in my way!"

As they finished the painting Skip laughed and sneered, "Good thing you're fat Alvin or we wouldn't be able to tell you from the kayaks."

Alvin had lost his patience. He turned quickly to hit Skip with his paint brush when he stumbled over the open can of paint. "Skip! Watch out!" warned Benny.

Ker-plop! Alvin fell on Skip, the brush sailed through the air landing on Benny's backside. Alvin was sprawled across Skip, slightly dazed.

"Get off me, you oof!" "The paint, the paint, get the paint!" screamed Skip.

Benny had uprighted the can and was using his hands to scoop the spilled paint into the can. The boys, especially Alvin, helped to save all the paint possible. Alvin was the first to dash home and return immediately with turpentine to clean up the mess.

As the kayaks were set on the saw horses to dry a voice was heard, "ALVIN, TIME TO COME HOME!!"

The boys said good-bye and hurried home. It had been a long, hot, day but their kayaks were done and only needed to dry.

CHAPTER 4

Voices awakened Benny as the early morning sun peeked through the trees. He lay quietly and listened to the distressing voices of his parents. "John, it's much to hot to pour a sidewalk this morning," said Mother. "Wait until it cools off."

"Do you think the bills we owe can wait until it cools off?" asked Father. "Today I have a chance to make some money. May be weeks before I get another cement job. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life making cement bird baths. Nobody can afford them anyway. This may be the only sidewalk job I get this month. No one has called for foundations, I might get a couple of driveways to pour. I really don't like to plaster in this hot weather, it dries too fast and could crack. Where will we get money to buy food and pay the light and water bills this winter?"

"We'll manage somehow," comforted Mother. "There's always the WPA."

"Don't even say WPA in my house," shouted Father in an irritable tone. "I'll starve before I accept a handout from the government."

"I'm sorry," apologized Mother. "We still have jars of food in the fruit cellar from last year. Bernadine can help me can more yet this year. Could even butcher some of the old hens that aren't laying too well. I'll try and redo some of the children's clothes for them to wear to school. They don't mind."

Father replied with a disgusted tone, "Benny could care less if he even went to school. All he wants to do is go fishing and lay on that stupid river bank. One of these days I'll give him what's good for him if he doesn't help out around this house. That chicken house better be cleaned today," warned Father.

"Don't worry, John, he"ll get it done," promised Mother. "He's a good boy. All boys have to have a little fun. I've told him not to play by the river and he will do what I tell him. The boys play marbles at Skip's house and they like to build roads in the dirt out back. They love to play with their trucks. Any boy that goes to Sunday School and church every Sunday will listen to his parents."

Following her husband to the door Mrs. Winterton handed him his

thermos of coffee and reassured him everything would be all right.

Benny waited until he heard his Father's pick-up drive away and then hurried to the kitchen. "What's for breakfast, Mom?" he asked.

"What would you like Son?" asked Mother. "There are a couple of pancakes left."

"That sounds great," answered Benny.

Bernadine came into the kitchen yawning and saying, "It's too hot to eat. May I go back to bed while the house is still cool?"

Benny hurried out the back door while Mother tried to comfort Bernadine. She had already forgotten about Father's insistence that Benny clean the chicken house and he would be the last to remind her. Crossing the back yard, he saw Skip walking behind their garage. "Hey, Skip, think that the kayaks are dry yet?" asked Benny

"Just took a look at them, should be ready by this afternoon," answered Skip. "What do you want to do this morning?"

"How's about hiking downstream to the fork of the Norfolk and Elkhorn river?" asked Benny.

"What if our folks find out?" questioned Skip. "Boy, would we be in big trouble."

"Just what I told you the other day," said Benny. "Stay around those girls much longer and we won't even get you to go fishing, some guys are real sissies."

No one could call Skip a sissy. He looked at Benny and replied, "Okay, I'm game. But first let's tell Alvin what we're up to. That way if anyone looks for us he can stall for time. Alvin is good at thinking up excuses."

After the boys found Alvin and gave him instructions they headed down to the river bank and started walking east. "The hot weather has sure kept these straggly weeds from growing tall," said Skip.

"Good thing," said Benny. "Otherwise we'd have a heck of a time walking along here."

"Look," whispered Skip. "Over there!" Atop a mud and stick mound lay two shiny beavers sunning themselves. As the boys tried to sneak closer the parched grass and weeds under their feet warned the beavers of their arrival. SPLASH! Into the water they bounded. Their tails slapped on the water

echoing in the distance. As the boys hurried along coons scurried into their hollowed out rotten logs. The fluttering of the red-winged blackbirds flushed a great-horn owl from his tree limb.

As the blistering sun rose higher in the sky the boys pace slowed. Finally Skip yelled, "Benny! There's the bridge!"

"That's not the one," complained Benny. "We have to go to the next one. You'll see it pretty soon."

In a short while a much larger and newer bridge loomed directly ahead. "If we continue east of that bridge I hear there's a good place to catch catfish," suggested Benny.

"Isn't that the rendering works over there?" asked Skip. "Gonna be kinda smelly near there."

"That's why the catfish hang around there, said Benny. "They like the blood that the rendering plant dumps into the river."

A small building was perched on the south shore of the river. Dead animals were hauled from farmers in the area and processed. The processed tankage was then sold to farmers for feed. The river was convenient, the water was used to clean the cutting floor.

Hurriedly the two boys ran along the bank until they reached the spot where the two rivers joined together. "Over here," called Benny. "Look how the current has dug a deep hole. That old tree is perfect for a dive into the water."

Stripping off their clothes the boys ran out onto the dangling limb. "Isn't this great?" asked Skip. "No neighbors!"

Benny interrupted, "And no spying sister."

"Ah..ah..ah...ah..ah..ah...ah!" came the Tarzan cry from Benny as he held his nose and dropped off the log.

Before Skip could jump into the water he noticed Benny acting strangely. "What's wrong?"

"My foot, it feels like it's on fire! Ouch! It hurts!" cried Benny. Hastily swimming to shore he climbed out of the water.

"You're bleeding, look at your foot!" yelled Skip as he raced from the log to the shore, pulling on his pants on the way.

The blood was oozing between Benny's toes as he tried desperately

to stop the bleeding. Skip washed the blood from Benny's foot.

"It's a pretty deep cut, must have been a broken bottle washed in that hole. Gonna need something to wrap around your big toe to stop the bleeding," said Skip.

Reaching into his pocket, Benny gave Skip a handkerchief. "Sure glad Mom always makes me carry a hanky. Tie it tight, gonna have to walk on it."

Skip brought Benny his clothes. The sun's rays were scorching hot. Benny began to complain, "Wish it wasn't so blasted hot. That toe is really throbbing, gonna be hard to walk."

"All you need is a cane," offered Skip. "That old dead tree we used for a diving board should have some good strong limbs."

Breaking off a sturdy branch, Skip helped Benny to his feet and gave him the crooked cane.

Benny hobbled along the bank and complained all the way. Skip was getting worried how they would get home by noon. Nearing the second bridge Skip suggested, "Let's get up on the road, might hitch a ride to town. Never gonna get home by noon walking, will I ever be in trouble if I'm late."

Benny was too hot and tired to argue. Reaching the approach of the bridge they saw a truck from the rendering plant headed toward them. The truck stopped on the other side of the bridge. The door opened and a voice asked, "You boys look like you could use a ride, I'm heading to town."

"Do we ever!" cried Skip. He almost dragged Benny to the truck. As he helped him into the truck Skip threw Benny's cane in the ditch.

"What happened? Get hurt?" asked the truck driver.

"Naw, just sprained my ankle, it'll be okay," answered Benny. "Hurts when I walk, sure do appreciate the ride."

"Glad to hear you weren't swimming in that muddy river," continued the truck driver. "Kinda low this time of year with not much rain, guy getting hurt in that water is bound to end up with infection."

Benny squirmed and Skip just gulped loudly. "What did you say?" asked the driver.

"I bumped his foot and he moaned," said Skip.

"Want me to take you home?" offered the man. "Your folks wouldn't

want you walking on a sprained ankle."

"That's okay, it'll be fine," Benny added quickly. "Mom's not home, just leave us off at the concrete bridge."

"Okay, if that's the way you want it," the driver replied. He stopped the truck and the boys thanked him. Benny limped down the edge of the bank and collapsed on the ground.

"You all right?" questioned Skip.

"Just tired of all the questions, sounded like my Dad," complained Benny.

"Hey, over there, in the trees," interrupted Skip. "It's Alvin, somebody's with him."

"Alvin, over here," called Benny.

Alvin ran to meet them. "What's wrong Benny?" asked Alvin. "You don't look so hot."

The story that followed contained vivid details, none of which were entirely true. "Your Mom's been calling for you," said Alvin. "We answered and said you were busy picking berries." Alvin pushed two boxes of chokecherries and plums into Benny's arms. "Take these home, she'll never know," said Alvin.

"With that limp," laughed Skip.

"I got a pair of shoes in the basement that are too big," Benny said to Skip. "You know that box of rags by the furnace, bring some of those too."

"Won't your Mom wonder what's going on?" asked Skip.

"Tell her we need another box for the berries," added Benny. She's busy making dinner, won't pay no attention." Impatiently he said, "Hurry, that sun's directly above us, that means Dad's goin' to be home soon."

While Skip hurried to the Winterton house, Benny and the boys went to the edge of the bank. Benny soaked his foot in the cool, swirling waters and proudly displayed the injured toe to Alvin and his friend.

"Here's your rags and shoes," gasped Skip. "Better hurry, your Mom has been calling you."

Benny tore the rags into strips and wrapped his toe tightly. Painfully he put on his shoes. As the boys hurried up the bank toward Benny's house he asked one small favor, "What are you guys doin' this afternoon?"

Skip answered quickly, "I'm beat, resting I hope."

"What's to do?" questioned Alvin.

Sadly Benny said, "So's I keep out of trouble could you help me clean the chicken house? If you do when Dad's cement mixer is home we'll mix cement and make roads around the big boxelder tree in the back yard."

Alvin was excited and spoke first, "Really? I got some new cars to play with. I'll be back as soon as I get done eating."

Skip agreed hesitantly and left for home. Benny gritted his teeth and slowly walked in the back door, baskets of berries in hand, and gave them to his Mom. "Benny, how sweet!" exclaimed Mother. "You're such a good boy and so thoughtful. Bernadine, come look what Benny picked. You can help me make jelly after we eat. Such a good boy!"

Bernadine could stand it no longer. As she sat down at the table she kicked Benny. "Ouch! Mom!" cried Benny. "Bernadine kicked me!" He got up and limped into the bathroom saying, "I can't walk!"

"Bernadine," scolded Mother. "Behave yourself. You want to do dinner dishes?"

As Father arrived he washed his grimy hands, slumped into his chair at the table, and said, "Let's eat, got to hurry. It's so hot the cement is settin' up too fast."

Benny limped to the table. "What's the limp for?" asked Father. "Trying to get out of cleaning the chicken house?"

"No, Dad, Bernadine kicked me," explained Benny. "See, got my old shoes on already. Gonna clean the chicken house right after lunch."

All during the meal Mother praised Benny for being such a fine and thoughtful boy. Father and Bernadine just looked suspiciously at Benny.

CHAPTER 5

Benny didn't sleep very well because he kept seeing the looks on Dads and Bernadines faces. Mother was always so trusting when it came to her son. He also felt a little guilty for what he had done after supper last night. With all the hustle and bustle of washing the berries he had managed to sneak out the back door with no one noticing.

"Benny, if your Mother wants to know where I am tell her I went to check some newly poured cement," called Father as he backed out of the driveway in his pickup.

Benny knew he should not have taken the chance but couldn't resist. Going down the bank to the river he saw Mr. River John. "Mr. River John! What are you doing?" asked Benny.

"Just finished my supper, come on down. I still have a few fresh berries that need to be eaten," invited Mr. River John.

That was the last thing Benny wanted to hear about. "Sorry, Mr. River John, I just finished eating supper. Can't look at another berry," Benny remembered saying.

The striking of the old green clock awakened him from his dreaming. The sun was already up and he lay looking out the screen door daydreaming about yesterday. He knew he shouldn't have taken the chance of going down to the river bank but when he was with Mr. River John nothing else seemed important. He had showed him his toe.

Mr. River John had said, "My boy, I got jist the right medicine you need for that." He had reached in his overall pocket and pulled out his tobacco pouch. "Let me get it a little wet for you," he said as he put it into his mouth. "Not only will this help it to heal but that old tobaccey will kill any germs in there."

That tobacco had really taken away much of the pain. He didn't have many clean rags left in that box in the hole of the cottonwood tree. Now if he could only take away the pain of his nosy sister. He knew he was going to have to treat her nice.

After breakfast he called Skip and said, " Do you and Alvin think you could help me clean the chicken house this morning? Maybe this afternoon we could go fishing."

"Sounds good to me," answered Skip.

He limped to the kitchen and sat down at the table. "Does your toe feel better?" asked his Mother.

"Lots better," said Benny. "This morning Skip and Alvin are going to help me clean the chicken house."

"That sounds great, Bernadine and I will bake some cookies for you and your friends to eat when you finish," said Mother.

He thought to himself, 'I could do the breakfast dishes, Skip and Alvin will help me clean the chicken house, Bernadine will be happy and Mom will be so proud of me.'

After calling the boys, doing the dishes, and telling Mom he only wanted to be nice to his sister, everything was back to normal. There was one little problem, it cost him two of his best marble shooters to convince Skip and Alvin to clean the chicken house while he sat on a bucket and gave instructions. Even his foot was feeling much better, thanks to Mr. River John. If only there was some way to get those kayaks in the water after lunch. But——he thought he must be still asleep and dreaming. He pinched himself. "I am awake," he said to himself.

Mother was telling Bernadine, "I'm so pleased, your Father won't be home until after six o'clock tonight. What a good time we'll have, Mothers sewing with their daughters."

Bernadine answered, "My friends are so excited, so are their Mothers. Skip called to talk to Benny and I guess his sister is so excited."

Skip had told Benny that some girls were coming to his house and they were going to sew. His Mother had invited all of them for the complete afternoon.

Benny was so excited, a complete afternoon with no interruptions. All he could think about was those two kayaks that they had put behind Alvin's garage. What a day this was going to be!

"Benny, you be a good boy, you and Skip watch over Alvin," instructed Mrs. Winterton. "Remember you two boys are older than Alvin, there's some cookies for afternoon lunch, we'll be back around four o'clock or so."

As Benny hurried to the back yard he was joined by Skip and Alvin. "Times a wasting," he complained. "Let's get those kayaks in the water."

Quickly the boys carried the kayaks down to the river bank. Everytime they tried to put a kayak into the water, it would get stuck in the mud or the weeds. "This is hopeless," said Alvin. "These weeds are too tall to get through and that old canvas is going to get a hole in it before we ever get it in the water."

"There's only one place to test these things," Benny said disgustingly.

Skip interrupted, "Above the dam! Let's go upstream."

"Shoulda thought of that right away," answered Benny. "The channel is much deeper and wider up there."

"What we waiting for?" questioned Skip. "Let's get going."

"Whoa!" cried Alvin. "My Dad said I am not supposed to ever go in the water above the dam, that's a no-no. There's rocks along the edge that we could get caught on or they could puncture our kayaks. There's some floating wood up there that could damage them too."

Benny looked angrily at Alvin and exclaimed, "Why do you think we made paddles? Think we were going to string fish on them?"

Alvin and Skip knew that Benny was upset. After all he was older and seemed to really know about that old river.

Besides they had worked so hard on the kayaks and when would they find another afternoon when their Moms wouldn't be around to keep track of them. The paddles looked pretty safe, they had gotten discarded broom handles out of Benny's garage and nailed a wood shingle firmly on one end.

Benny and Skip headed for the kayaks, picked them up and gave Alvin a look that he clearly understood. "Are you gonna bring those paddles or should Skip and me come back and get them?" asked Benny. Alvin picked up the paddles and slowly dragged along behind Benny and Skip. The water really looked pretty calm except for the current running down the middle. Skip looked at Benny and said, "Just enough current to get down the river."

Benny looked at Alvin. "We'll just launch one kayak, the bank is so clean here. You get in and we'll hold on to the kayak while you use your hands to paddle. That way you can get the feel of the water."

That sounded fairly simple to Alvin. "Okay, I guess that might be a good idea," agreed Alvin.

Skip watched anxiously and then said, "Benny, get him out of that kayak. We didn't spend all that time and money to watch Alvin sit and play in the water."

When Benny helped Alvin get out of the kayak and up on the shore, he and Skip put the other kayak in the river. Skip got in and the fun began. "Boy, do those paddles work good, even pushes that debri out of the way," yelled Skip.

As the boys watched Skip paddle down the river, Alvin said, "Look at Skip go, he really knows how to handle that kayak."

Benny interrupted, "Alvin! Look, down river on the bank, it's Mr. River John."

As they watched he took off his tattered cap and waved to Skip. Guiding his kayak to shore Mr. River John was there helping him get it out of the water.

Alvin could resist no longer. Looking at Benny he begged, "Help me get this one in the water." Benny helped him into the kayak, handed him the paddles, and off he went.

As he watched Alvin he said aloud, "We're doggone good kayak builders, even if I say so myself."

As Alvin neared the area where Skip had landed, some boys on the bank began throwing rocks into the water. One boy let go with a large rock. Klunk! A bull's eye right in the front section of Alvin's kayak. Alvin looked as though he had been shot. The rock made a large hole in the canvas. His kayak began to turn, first to the left and then to the right. Over it went, with Alvin splashing in the water, grasping for something to hold onto.

"Benny! Help me!" Alvin screamed.

Benny had begun to walk along the bank when he saw the rock hit the kayak. With lightning speed he raced to the spot where Alvin was in the water. Mr. River John had jumped into the water and was holding Alvin's face above water. Alvin was waving his arms wildly.

"Benny," ordered Mr. River John," get hold of his shoulders. Let's get him up on the bank."

As they lay him on the bank he coughed, "Hack, hack," spitting water in Benny's face.

"Is that the way you say 'thank you' to your friends that rescue you?" asked Benny, but you could see the look of relief on Bennys and Skips faces.

As Mr. River John took off his shirt and was wringing it out, he said, "I'm sure glad I came looking for you fellas today."

The boys were so thankful all they could say was, "So are we!"

"Don't you think it would be wiser to stay on the bank and put your fish lines in the river?" asked Mr. River John.

Disgusted, Benny picked up a paddle that had floated to shore. Breaking it in half and tossing it into the water he angrily spoke, "You got the kayak, you might as well have the paddles too."

As they watched the kayak disappear below the water, there was silence."We've learned our lesson," said Benny. "Come on guys, help me carry this stupid contraption up to the garage," growled Benny.

"But Benny, you haven't even had a ride," complained Skip. "You did most of the work on the kayaks."

Benny answered, "Don't bother me none, we had no business even making those dumb kayaks."

"Now you're gettin' smart," said Mr. River John.

Benny added, "It's just like Mr. River John says, this here river has got a mind of its own."

Thanking Mr. River John the boys listened to his warning again, "Promise me boys, that you'll stay on the bank and out of the water."

"We promise," they answered.

Silently they dragged home the remaining kayak. Reaching Skip's garage, Benny ordered, "Okay, fellas, throw it on the junk pile behind the garage. It was a good idea, but it failed. See you all later."

Alvin and Skip walked slowly towards Skip's house. Alvin dragged behind Skip so his clothes would be dry by the time his Mother would see him.

CHAPTER 6

The sun was disappearing earlier and earlier, ducks and geese were flying south and then there was that horrible word, SCHOOL! Benny could hear his Mother already, "Children, you must get used to going to bed earlier, wash your face and hands each morning, comb your hair and don't forget to wear your socks and shoes. Most importantly, be sure to brush your teeth."

Benny couldn't understand why he had to brush his teeth. Dad was always complaining about the dentist. Whenever Dad did cement work for the dentist there was never enough money to get paid. Benny and Bernadine just had their teeth fixed and Dad never had to pay the dentist.

Bernadine loved wearing shoes and socks but—she was a girl. Alvin couldn't wait for school to start because his Mother always had a great lunch for him after school. And then there was Skip. He just couldn't wait to meet the new girls that might be in school. As Benny sat on the river bank staring at the ducks and geese flying south he began to feel sad. He thought about Mr. River John. Maybe a few years from now he could go with him, he started to daydream. "Let's get a boat, Mr. River John," suggested Benny. "Then I could go with you."

"I ain't got no money! I do good to eat and keep clothes on my back. Boy, you's a real dreamer, Ben me boy."

"There's still a few lawns to mow," suggested Benny.

"Probably snow fore's you see green grass long enough to mow Sonny. I have to head south, soon will be frostin', no place to sleep outside, why you want to go with me?"

"You're so kind and have showed me how to fish, told me such good stories. You know more about our town than any of my teachers. I could leave my folks a note," begged Benny.

"What the heck would I do with a kid?" asked Mr. River John.

"Hey, I'm big already, could easy say I'm 15."

"Listen here, you git that notion outa your head, hear me, Ben?" insisted Mr. River John. "You go to school, mind your Pa and Ma! I'll be back next Spring and see you by the river."

"BENJAMIN, I'M NOT CALLING YOU AGAIN. YOU DON'T HAVE ANYMORE CLEAN UNDERWEAR OR TROUSERS! GET THEM

DOWNSTAIRS NOW OR STAY IN THE HOUSE TOMORROW," called Mrs. Winterton.

Benny sat up with a jerk. He rubbed his eyes. He was sure Mr. River John had left town already. Oh, how he missed him. What was he going to do?

Monday morning arrived and school bells would ring. Slowly climbing out of bed Benny staggered to the kitchen table. Dad was finishing his cup of coffee and Mother had his lunch all packed. She spoke gently to Benny. "You better hurry, you don't want to be late for the first day of school."

Benny thought to himself, really couldn't make any difference to me. For the next few months Monday through Friday would all be the same. Get up, eat breakfast, get ready, walk to school. School is boring, boring, boring! Stay after school to finish that dumb school work and then back home only to do the same the next day. Mother hurried him to get dressed. Of course, Bernadine was already on her way to school with her friends.

"Have a good day Benny, and be sure to be a good Christian son like I taught you," called Mother.

"Bye, Mom," Benny answered. He was already thinking what he could do to amuse himself. Days passed quickly and soon he had survived over two weeks of school and even got home a few times without staying after school. Boy, was his life boring!

It was Monday morning, he had poked too long at home and missed walking to school with Alvin and Skip. As he walked past Mr. Jones' goats on the way to school they knew he would stop and feed them. They would eat almost anything. One of the goats really liked him. Benny had named him "Hiccup." This morning he had sneaked some of his breakfast in his pocket. As he passed by the gate he couldn't resist unlatching it and began dropping pieces of toast on the sidewalk. As he neared school he looked back to see if Hiccup was following him. Hiccup was just entering the school yard and ran over to Benny.

The children came running and inquired, "Where did you find the goat?"

"This here is no goat, this is Hiccup," answered Benny.

As the group moved toward the drinking fountain near the school

door, Hiccup spotted the bubbling water. Benny called to Hiccup, "Come here, Hiccup, do you want a drink?"

Hiccup ran to the fountain and got a long drink of the cold, bubbling water.

"Benny, we dare you to let Hiccup in the door," dared some of the boys. How could he resist? Peeking in the school door, he saw no one and quickly opened the door and gave Hiccup a push. BANG! The door struck the back end of Hiccup and he took off down the hallway.

Miss Krab, the principal, came rushing out the door. "How did that goat get into my school?" she screamed.

"Mr. Jones must have left his gate open. He lives down the street and has goats," volunteered Benny.

As Miss Krab stood with the door open Hiccup came charging down the hall, barely missing her as he came dashing out the door. He ran to the edge of the playground, stopped, and looked at Miss Krab. She was mumbling as she rushed into school, "I'll call that Mr. Jones, leaving his gate open, what's wrong with that man?"

Immediately Mr. Shaker, the janitor, came out the door, walked to the sidewalk. Coaxing Hiccup with something in his pocket he led him down the street to Mr. Jones' house.

Many students were called into the office that day but Mrs. Krab never discovered who let Hiccup in the school. Benny became a hero to many of the students that day.

Without the weekends Benny would have never survived. His Mother had gone shopping with Bernadine and another neighbor. A Saturday with no pesky sister to tattle on him. Heading to the river he saw a figure under the cement bridge. "Mr. River John," he called as he ran along the bank. "What you doing here? Thought you left?" asked Benny.

"On my way end of next week, been trying to figure a way to get some more spending money," answered Mr. River John. "Come see what I've been making."

"It's a horse," exclaimed Benny. "How'd you do that?"

Learned that a long time ago," said Mr. River John, "You mix mud, grass, and tiny sticks together, have plenty of that around here."

"But that's a big horse," said Benny. "Boy that's neat. Got to go find Skip and Alvin."

"Wait Benny, it's nothin', stay and talk," begged Mr. River John.

"Can't stay, I'll be back in a jiffy," answered Benny.

As Mr. River John stood and scratched his head and wondered what Benny was up to now, here they came. As the boys looked at the horse and rider they were really excited. "Benny says you need some money to go south," said Skip. "We know lots of kids in the neighborhood and it's Saturday so they'll be home."

Benny repeated, "You told me you needed money to go down south for the winter. Alvin, get some paper, make some signs. Skip, tack them around the neighborhood, we've got the rest of the day," ordered Benny.

Mr. River John couldn't believe what he was seeing and hearing. He thought, 'Wouldn't it be great to have some boys like that?' He felt movement on the bank and then he heard children talking and laughing. The boys were coming down the bank followed by more boys and some girls.

Alvin stood at the top of the dirt steps they had built during the summer. He had a gallon can in his hands with a sign on the side, ADMISSION 10c.

Benny looked at Skip and said, "We always wondered why we put steps down to the bottom of the bank. Now we know why."

The boys were so busy that they took turns going home for supper. The neighborhood was buzzing about the man under the cement bridge that had built a horse and rider. Benny heard Dad tell Mom, "You remember that deadbeat bum, back in the 30's? Thought he left for good but he's like a bad penny, always returns."

Mrs. Winterton replied, "I saw Alvin's parents when I was outside. They were coming from the cement bridge where they saw a life-size horse and rider that a man had made. I remember Alvin's Mother saying, "I've never seen anything like it, he must have really worked on it."

Father replied, "I certainly hope you didn't go look at something a bum put together."

Just then Benny arrived, " Mom and Dad, you've got to come see what is under the cement bridge."

"I already heard, some old bum mixed some mud together and came up with a horse and rider," grumbled Father.

Skip and his Dad were coming up the river bank and saw Benny and his parents. Skip's Dad spoke, "You really ought to go over under the cement bridge. That's quite a sight to behold. He seems to be a pretty friendly fella," he continued.

Mr. Winterton looked up and said, "That bum needs to be heading down south. Nothing up here for him in the winter time."

Skip's Father interrupted, "Understand he was quite a help to the boys the other afternoon?"

Almost stuttering Benny said, "He knows quite a bit about a lot of stuff."

"Gotta git my pickup loaded for morning," said Mr. Winterton. "Supposed to be a hot day tomorrow, nice talking to you," he added.

"See you later," called Skip.

As Mr. Winterton headed for the garage Benny stayed behind. He saw Alvin coming up the street and called to him, "Alvin, what you got in those two cans?"

"You're never going to believe it, we got two cans of money for Mr. River John," bragged Alvin.

"No kidding," said Benny.

"Tell you about it tomorrow, got to get home now," replied Alvin.

Benny hurried in the house calling to his Mom, "I'm so tired, I will take my bath first so I can get to bed."

"Do you feel okay ?" asked Mother.

"I'm just tired, see you in the morning," called Benny.

Mother was sure that Benny was getting sick, Bernadine knew he was hiding something, and Father was too busy griping about that "old bum" to worry about Benny being in bed already.

Sunday morning came too soon for Benny as he lay dreaming about Mr. River John. The dream was always the same. If only Mr. River John would take him along.

"Benny!" called Mother. "Time for breakfast!"

"Benny didn't read his Sunday School lesson," tattled Bernadine.

"Is that correct?" asked Mother.

"I'm sorry, I was so tired, I forgot," complained Benny.

"Do it now!" ordered Mr. Winterton.

"I've already started," answered Benny.

"The only thing you think about is that 'old bum' that hangs around the riverbank. He better leave town before I catch up with him. Don't want him getting chummy with my boy. Even Skip's Father is believing the tales he tells," warned Mr. Winterton.

"John, it's time to take the children to Sunday School, we'll see you at church," said Mother, as they hurried out the door.

Sunday morning was always the same at Benny's house. Get up, eat breakfast, go to Sunday School, go to church, eat Mom's fried chicken dinner with all the trimmings, topped off with coconut cream pie. Bernadine would spend the afternoon in her bedroom reading a book. Mother would do dishes and take a nap in her rocking chair. Of course Father would read the Sunday paper, smoke his cigar, and then fall sound asleep.

This was Benny's clue to sneak out the back door, go down the river bank, and head to the cement bridge. He was so excited, Mr. River John was still there.

"Bout ready to leave, hear the weather is going to change," said Mr. River John. "You boys were just too good yesterday. There are some really nice folks in your neighborhood. That money will sure help a lot."

"I'm sure gonna miss you, Mr. River John." said Benny sadly.

With his pack over his shoulder, his twig in his mouth, and that old tattered cap on his head, he stopped and put his hand on Benny's shoulder, saying "Benny, me boy, you take care, mind your Ma and Pa, and be seeing you come Spring."

As he headed downstream and was rounding the bend of the river, he turned, bowed, and waved his tattered cap to Benny.

Benny was calling, "Bye, Mr. River John!" Tears were streaming down his cheeks as he headed home.

CHAPTER 7

Fall had turned into winter. Very little time to play outside after school. Benny seemed to spend more time staying after school. His teacher had called Mrs. Winterton to ask, "Is Benny having any health problems?" "Seems like he just isn't with us at times, seems to be very far away and I was concerned."

Mrs. Winterton promised, "I've noticed the same thing at home." We will be listening to his favorite radio program, Fibber McGee and Molly, and he doesn't even laugh at the funny parts."

That evening Benny helped Bernadine with the dishes. This really made Mother suspicious. As she finished her mending she asked Bernadine, "Where is Benny?"

Bernadine answered, "He went down to the basement and hasn't come up again."

Benny was getting older and needed some privacy. Father and Mother decided he could sleep in the basement. Skip's Mother had called and asked, "Does Benny have any use for a single bed?" "Skip's sister got a new bed and he can certainly have her old one."

Benny had fixed a cozy space on the opposite side of the basement. His Atwater Kent radio worked well when he fastened an antenna out the window. Mother surprised him and as she looked at him she asked, "Benny, what's the matter?"

"Nothing," answered Benny. "Just tired, got a big test at school tomorrow."

Mother looked and him and said, "I've never known you to cry about a test at school, now have I? You know you can tell me your problems, maybe I can help you."

The dam broke and tears just kept rolling down his cheeks.

"I miss him, Mom," cried Benny "Maybe he'll never come back again."

"Who do you miss?" asked Mother. "Did one of your friends from school move away?"

"Mr. River John!" sobbed Benny. "I know that Dad don't like him but he doesn't even know him. He told me all about his family and he really

loved his Mom and Pop. He has a sister that lives here but she don't even talk to him."

"How do you know all these things about that old bum?" asked Mother in a surprised voice.

Hesitantly he spoke, "Sometimes after school I would stop and talk to him. He was always so nice to me, Mom."

Mrs. Winterton put her arm around Benny and tried to speak kindly to him, "You know, Benny, some people judge others by how they live, what they wear, and what they say."

"But, Mom, he never said nothing bad about nobody, and he told me all kinds of stuff about Norfolk that my teacher never even knew," answered Benny.

How could she explain to him about people that make decisions about other people they know nothing about. She looked at Benny with a tear in her eye and said, "You know, Benny, I think I know what we can do about this problem. You fold your hands and close your eyes and we will ask for some help from someone that knows our hurts. He even knows Mr. River John."

They sat on the bed together, bowed their heads, folded their hands and Mrs. Winterton said a prayer for Mr. River John. "Do you think you can sleep now?" asked his Mother.

"I sure will try, thanks a bunch Mom," said Benny. "Goodnight Mom."

As Mrs. Winterton went up the stairs it was clear to her why Benny was daydreaming in school. She thought, 'It's really not necessary to discuss this with John, he wouldn't understand.'

The next day she saw quite a change in Benny and that afternoon received a telephone call from his teacher, "Mrs. Winterton, I am so pleased to tell you that Benny's attitude today was great. He even complained about a spelling assignment I gave them for the weekend."

"Thank you for calling," said Mother. "I think we got the problem solved."

Sunday morning Benny was up before Bernadine and called to Mom, "I'm hungry, what's for breakfast?" That was her Benny.

As the family drove in the driveway after church, Dad spoke as he

opened the car door, "You know, I think that's a chinook wind, it actually feels a little bit warmer."

Benny waited for Bernadine to go to her room, Mom to lie down for her nap, and Dad's cigar was ready to fall from his mouth. This gave him the 'all clear' sign to head to the backyard to meet Alvin and Skip. As the boys walked behind Benny's garage, they noticed that the city workers had hauled old wrecked car bodies into a low spot. Snow had been scarce so they were just sitting there in plain sight ready to be used.

Skip yelled to Benny and Alvin, "Look, there's a car with only one window broken."

After examining the car, Benny added, "The doors open and shut and not too bad inside."

Alvin checked it out, maybe he'd find left-over cookies. He complained, "Kinda cold in here, there's a hole in the roof."

Benny stood and scratched his head, "You know what? See that barrel over there with a hole in the top. Let's put it inside the car and put an old stove pipe out the hole in the roof. There's an old stove pipe in our garage."

Wasn't long and things were in place. Skip was gathering some sticks and Alvin ran home for matches. What an afternoon this was going to be.

Bernadine and her friend came down and asked, "What's happening down here?"

Quickly Benny asked, "Are Mom and Dad still asleep?"

"Mom came and fell asleep on my bed so she's really sleeping," answered Bernadine.

"But what about Dad?" asked Benny excitedly.

"You mean you can't hear his snoring way down here?" asked Bernadine.

They took turns sitting in the car and even Bernadine and her friend stuck their heads in once. But Bernadine finally said, "Benny, you know that Dad can't sleep all afternoon. We all better get for home and I mean right away."

'Sisters can be worthwhile when you need one,' thought Benny.

Going inside the house they heard Dad and Mom talking. "Have you seen Bernadine?" Mother asked Father.

"I'm right here, Mom," answered Bernadine. "Went for a walk with my friend and stopped to visit with Benny and his friends."

Everything seemed to be going smoothly until the Winterton family was eating supper that night. Mrs. Winterton sniffed and said, "Something sure smells like smoke."

"I just fired up," grumbled Father. "Takes lots of wood in the winter."

"Smells different than that," said Mother. Leaning over she sniffed Benny's shirt and said, "Benny, you stink! Where have you been? Answer me!"

"Outside is all, must be from the neighbor's chimney," answered Benny.

"Were you sittin' on the roof?" asked Father sarcastically.

Innocently Bernadine blurted out, "Probably from their old car down on the river bank behind the garage."

Benny wanted to disappear under the table. "BENNY!" yelled Mr. Winterton. "TO THE BASEMENT NOW!"

The switch came down from its hook and Dad put him over his knee. Benny sure was glad he had on two pair of trousers that cold day.

As he limped up the steps, crying pathetically all the way, he kept saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Try something like that again and you'll be more than sorry. Upstairs with you, get in that bath tub, get rid of that smoke stink," ordered Mr. Winterton.

Benny and Bernadine quickly took their baths. Mom had just started supper dishes when Benny arrived in the kitchen. "Is there anything I can help with?" inquired Benny.

"Bernadine has already cleared the table but you can sweep the floor." said Mrs. Winterton. "Since you two were in the bathtub we'll have our cookies and apple sauce now. Call your Father, he's in the basement putting wood in the furnace."

Benny only ventured as far as the back hall and called, "Dad, it's time to eat."

There wasn't much conversation as Mother tried to mend the feel-

ings between Benny, Bernadine, and their Father. Finally Father said, "Sure does smell much better in here, don't you think so Benny?"

Bernadine giggled but Benny replied, "I still have some homework to finish."

Father looked at Mother and said, "Guess I better be prepared to stay home tomorrow. If Benny is doing homework by himself I would predict a raging blizzard by morning."

CHAPTER 8

Christmas vacation had finally arrived. No school! Lots of spare time, no homework, but Benny had to find some way to get down to the river bank. Bernadine had forgotten about their last visit to the river but Benny was always looking forward to more adventure.

Many relatives would be visiting their home in the next two weeks. Benny overheard a conversation that his parents were having. "I just can't be feeding all this company," complained Father. "With this winter weather and the coal bill for heat, we are going to need every penny we can come up with."

Benny headed for the basement and his bed, knowing this would be another Christmas with socks and underwear.

"John," said Mother in a soft voice. "This is such a wonderful time of year, we need to get together."

"What are we going to give the children for Christmas?" asked Father.

Mother said excitedly, "I bought material on sale some weeks back and almost have a Christmas dress finished for Bernadine. Had enough scraps to sew a complete set of doll clothes for her doll she got for her birthday."

"But I don't have anything for Benny," said Father in a sad voice.

"I've been making him a new bedspread for his bed, found some material with fish, pheasants, and boats," answered Mother.

"I did have a man offer me a bright red sled as part payment on his bill," said Father. "Guess we are provided for after all," he spoke with a smile.

"The concrete company usually gives us a turkey and plus all the food that I canned this summer, we will have a plentiful and blessed Christmas," reassured Mother.

"Guess you have it all planned, as usual," said Father. "But then you always are able to make something out of nothing," he said as he squeezed her hand.

Father and Mother went into the living room and settled in their usual chairs for a relaxed afternoon. Benny and Bernadine had quickly done dishes after dinner. Benny knew his Mother was the world's best cook. His

friends' Moms never made home-canned meat, mashed potatoes, and coconut cream pie.

Benny awoke from his short nap and sneaked upstairs on tiptoe. He knew immediately when he saw his Mom and Dad that he was safe for at least an hour before they'd miss him.

"See you sis," said Benny. "Skip and Alvin are coming over. We're going sledding. See you later."

"Behave yourself," cautioned Bernadine. "You're already in trouble, remember what Dad said."

"Ya, ya," said Benny as he disappeared out the door and down the river bank behind the garage.

Skip called to Benny, "What a perfect day for sledding."

"Look at that river," added Benny. "Just a small stream running down the middle of the ice. See how that caused the ice to crack making a bulge on either side?"

"You're right," added Alvin. "That will really work to jump the water."

With his sled on top of the bank Benny lay down on his sled. "Skip, give me a good push," ordered Benny. Down he went, hit the ice, over the water, hit the ice on the other side and part way up the other bank.

Next came Alvin, and then Skip. "Boy, what fun!" called out the boys.

They took turns going back and forth from bank to bank. They completely lost track of what time it was.

Inside the Winterton house Father had awakened with a start, dropped his cigar and remembered the orders his wife had given him. "Be sure and check the chicken house for holes, echoed in his head. Hens that are cold do not lay many eggs," she had spoken firmly.

As he went toward the back door he heard her say, "Don't forget to check the chicken house."

"I know, I do have a memory," he grumbled. As he came near the garage he heard a racket and noticed sled tracks.

"And I mean get in the house, put that broken-down sled in the garage," he shouted. "Skip, Alvin, you can be sure your Dads will hear of this.

You just can't stay away from that river. That's a mean old river, now stay away from it! Understand?" scolded Mr. Winterton.The boys knew they were in deep trouble.

But Benny was always a couple of steps ahead of his Father. Next day he built a bench in the basement and Skip and Alvin came over. They built model airplanes to stay out of trouble. One warm, Saturday afternoon they looked out the basement windows. Tulips were coming up and a robin was in the yard.

"Come the weekend, let's go down and look at the river bank," suggested Benny. "Can't get into no trouble doing that—I don't think. We can probably find some pussy willows to pick for our Moms."

The following weekend they found lots of pussy willows for their Moms. "Look, over in that tree, it's a bluebird," exclaimed Skip.

Just then Benny yelled from upstream, "Up in the sky, flocks of quacking ducks and another flock of honking geese flying north."

"Yea, Spring is coming," cried Skip.

"School will soon be over," added Benny.

"The ice cream shop will open," giggled Alvin.

CHAPTER 9

Spring finally did come but with it came rain, rain, and more rain. The boys spent many hours in Benny's basement on their model airplanes. Skip complained, "Do you think it will ever stop raining?"

"If it keeps raining fishing will never be any good," moaned Benny.

Alvin said, "We heard on the radio, it said lots of towns north of us are having high water."

Benny added, "My Dad says we don't have to worry because those flood gates that the WPA guys built next to the dam can be opened. When the river up above the dam gets full, they just open the flood gates and it empties the river bed."

"You're right Benny, that's why they call them flood gates," said Skip.

"Mom says we're going up north to my Uncle Jake's farm to see all the water," said Benny.

"Sure wish we could go along," begged Alvin.

"I'll ask my Mom if you can come along. She'll call your Mom if you can, so be on your best behavior guys," ordered Benny. Any place Benny went you would certainly find Skip and Alvin also.

Benny was so excited. Mom and Dad decided to let Skip and Alvin ride along to see the water.

Following supper, the boys got into the back seat of the car. Bernadine had no desire to look at muddy water so she went to her friend's house.

"Wow! Look at all that water," said Alvin, as they drove north out of town.

"I hope those new flood gates can handle all that water when it gets to Norfolk," replied Benny's Dad.

Following a short visit to Uncle Jake's farm and seeing all that muddy, rushing water Dad said to Mom, "I think we better be heading for home. I don't like the look of those large thunderheads building in the west and moving toward Norfolk.

As they arrived in Norfolk and crossed the bridge near their home, Benny exclaimed, "Wow! The river is drained above the dam. Look at that empty river bed, there's only a small stream of water."

Skip added, "But look at the channel where they drained it"

"I bet it's at least 6 foot deep," added Benny.

As soon as they got to Benny's house Skip and Alvin ran for home as it had started to rain. Wintertons had just gotten into the house and the phone was ringing. Benny rushed to answer it. "Benny," said Skip breathlessly, "my Uncle John called and said they told over the radio that a 3 foot wall of water will arrive before morning, going right down the Northfork River."

"Mom, Dad!" shouted Benny, "Turn on the radio, there's a 3 foot wall of water coming our way."

Father looked at Benny and said, "You just saw the river, it's empty. That water will be through those flood gates and on its way down the river before we ever get up in the morning."

Mother looked worried but reassured the children, "Look out the window, to the west, that storm we saw coming went to the north of us. The sun is peeking out in the west. The clouds don't look that bad."

As bedtime approached Bernadine begged, "Can I stay up a little while longer?"

"I'm not very sleepy either," complained Benny.

"Now children, you know the Lord is watching over us. You need your sleep. There's school tomorrow. We will listen to the 10:00 news and wake you if anything changes," promised Mother.

The children finally fell asleep only to be awakened by a sound that troubled them. Benny sat up abruptly. "Mom, what's that noise?"

Bernadine was running out of her bedroom in tears, "Why is the siren sounding? Is there a fire?" Dad and Mom had their clothes on. Bernadine continued to cry, "It's getting louder and louder."

Benny and Bernadine quickly put on their clothes and the family went outside. Neighbors were coming from all directions heading to the river bank. It was so dark, children were crying, some parents had flashlights and lanterns. Everyone seemed to be talking at the same time.

When they reached the garage, Skip called to Benny, "The chokecherry and plum bushes are covered with water!"

Alvin yelled, "The junked cars are covered too."

Men with lights were by the banks. "Stay back, banks may undermine, go back to your homes," ordered the men. "A wall of water is fast approaching. Heavy rains have fallen west and north of town. The water is coming from both ways. Go back to your homes by orders from the mayor. Turn on your radios and stay inside."

Mr. Winterton turned around, he picked up an old license plate and stuck it in the ground about two feet ahead of them. In a short time Benny cried, "Dad, look, the license plate is covered."

Immediately a second siren began to wail. Chaos began. Everyone was rushing to their homes. Benny's first thought was his rabbits. "Sis," called "Benny, help me carry the rabbits in the house!"

Mother was in the basement, she had her laundry sorted and lying on the floor. "Benny," she called, "come and carry the clothes upstairs."

"What about the potatoes we have cut on the floor for planting?" asked Benny.

"No time," said Mother. "Get some carrots for your rabbits." They rushed up the steps to find Bernadine singing to the rabbits.

Father was yelling outside, "Benny! Hurry! We have to get the pickup to higher ground." Benny jumped into the pickup, Father backed out the driveway and was ready to back into the street.

"Dad, look, water's coming from the north." It was rushing down the street, over the curbs and sidewalks." Father drove back up the driveway. He jumped out of the pickup and hurried to the house with Benny in the lead.

"Ellen, Bernadine, stay out of the basement," Father called. "Go to the kitchen, water's coming fast. Give me two brooms."

Water was starting to come into the yard. Handing Benny one of the brooms, Father said, "Take this broom and help me knock out the glass in the basement windows."

"But Dad, won't the basement get flooded?" questioned Benny.

Father replied, "That will let the water run through the basement. Otherwise the force of the water will knock in some of the foundation and weaken the house."

Benny knew Dad was smart about cement construction. They broke in all the basement windows and ran for the front porch and into the house.

"The waters are coming up the driveway and heading back to the river," cried Bernadine.

"Come and look out the other side of the house," called Benny. "Our whole yard is a river and we are surrounded."

Bernadine sat on the couch crying, while Mother sat next to her, head bowed and hands folded. Father paced the floor, his unlit cigar twitching in his mouth. Benny was so excited he ran from window to window. Finally he perched himself on the top step in the back hall and watched the water slowly edge up each step.

"What's all the crying?" Benny asked his Father.

"Guess not everyone was able to get out of those cabins across the river," answered Father. "They'll need boats to get them out now." Mother insisted Benny and Bernadine needed to go to bed. She made up a bed on the davenport for them.

She said, "There is nothing we can do tonight except pray for them. We will have lots of work to do in the morning. Your rabbits are high and dry, the chickens are on the roosts, and your Father and I will take turns sleeping. We will wake you if anything changes, goodnight children."

The only sounds that Father and Mother could hear were voices of men warning people to stay in their homes, children in the cabin camp crying and the never ending songs as the frogs croaked into the night.

CHAPTER 10

Benny and Bernadine didn't sleep much. Father and Mother did what they promised, they spent the night in the living room in their comfortable chairs.

Benny awoke with a start and said, "Mom, Dad, the sun is shining, and listen to the birds singing."

His Dad was already pacing the floor. Robins were not his main concern this morning. Bernadine was still on the couch. Benny ran to the front porch where he had drawn a line below the top step last night. He darted into the house calling, "The water has stopped coming up." His line had not been covered up.

As he ran through the house, he took a look at the back hall and said, "Wonder if we have any fish in the back hall or basement. Just my luck, a basement full of water and no worms, hooks, or fishing pole."

"Hey, we've got lights," called Benny.

After a breakfast of cold cereal the family ventured to their small front porch. A bright sun made the rays shimmer across the water to the south. As they looked east the water became more shallow. Mother said, "Look north, the houses are floating on a sea of muddy water."

Bernadine had run into the house and turned on the radio. "Good morning," said the announcer. "For many of you this is not a good morning at all. We have many reports and announcements for our area folks. First we have an official announcement from the Mayor."

The rest of the family heard the radio and quickly entered the house and sat quietly and listened.

"Attention all flooded area residents!" stated the Mayor. "Do not drink any water from your water faucets. Stay in your homes, rescue boats and amphibious vehicles are being directed to flooded areas. Keep your children away from the dirty, unsafe water. Once more we repeat! Stay calm and stay away from the flood waters."

"Dad, can we put on boots and go down town?" questioned Benny.

"Benny, didn't you hear the radio? You're not going anywhere right now," ordered Father.

Once again they were interrupted by the radio. "And now for an update on the flooding situation. We had an unlikely situation develop last evening. Torrential rains fell to the north and west of Norfolk on already saturated ground. Four inch rains sent the Elkhorn River west of town out of its banks. A three foot wall of water spilled over the banks of the Norfolk River north of town. This smashed the dance pavilion and deposited it against the Elm Street bridge two blocks north of the dam and flood gates. Water has spread across the area east and is flowing back into the river." We interrupt this report. 'Do not drink water from you faucets. If it is absolutely necessary, boil it first. If you have a gas stove, do not turn it on.'

Now we return to our ongoing report. "The business area is flooded. Water reaches residents to the railroad tracks west, north for miles, Elkhorn River south to low lying areas and east for blocks. Raging waters have smashed in plate glass windows downtown, furnishings and merchandise have been washed away."

Once more we interrupt this report. 'Please stay away from flooded areas unless you are authorized to be there.'

Just as Father got up to turn off the radio, Benny heard, "There will be no school in the flooded areas. This includes Washington, Monroe, Christ Lutheran, Junior High, and also Jefferson"

"Yea! Whoopee!" announced Benny. "No school. Wow! What good news!"

The announcer continued, "Any students living in flooded areas do not attempt to go to Senior High School."

Benny was running from the kitchen to the front porch shouting, "No school! Rah! Rah! Rah! No School!"

Bernadine was hanging her head and you could see tears flowing down her cheeks.

Father grumbled, "S'pose all my form lumber floated away, bags of cement in the garage are no good after getting water soaked. Sure glad I left my tools in the back of my pickup."

"Benny! Where's my wheelbarrow?" asked his angry Father.

"Let's see, we hauled some chicken manure down to the riverbank

yesterday," said Benny slowly.

"Oh, darn! I suppose you guys left it on the river bank and went fishing, How do I work without a wheelbarrow?" asked Father.

"Now, John William, please be thankful we are safe and have a home to still live in," comforted Mother.

"Dad! Dad! I remember, we stood the wheelbarrow against the chicken house," Looking out the back pantry window, he shouted, "it's still there, it's not gone."

Ring, ring, ring. The telephone interrupted Benny. "Benny, please be quiet so I can answer the phone," begged Mother. Benny overheard her saying, "I guess that will be okay. Not much he can do around here. He'll be ready."

"Benny, that was Skip's Mother," she said. "Skip and his Father will stop by in a little while."

Mr. Winterton looked at her and said, "Are they going to swim over? You can't drive in this mess. How stupid some folks are. We don't need no visitors!"

"No! No! John, they're coming in their motorboat. They invited Benny to ride along to view the area around here," said Mother disgustingly. "Skip's Father was called to help with the rescue."

"YES!!" Benny cried out, "Great! I'll get ready to go."

Bernadine hadn't seen Benny this excited about anything since his last birthday. Realizing everyone had forgotten about breakfast Mother made a quick snack.

Benny was so excited he couldn't stay seated on his chair. His eyes were on the front porch. Stuffing some cookies in his pocket and a sandwich in each hand he headed for the front door. "They're here, they're here!" he yelled through the front screen door.

Father made his way to the front door and said, "You be careful and pay attention to Skip's Father."

"Mind your manners Benny, don't stand up in the boat!" said Mother with a concerned look.

Waving good-bye from the boat, they headed north, then over the cement bridge, and out of sight.

Benny and Skip were chattering like a couple of squirrels. "Isn't this great?" asked Skip.

"Hey, this is Christmas all over - no school - and we're in a boat," answered Benny.

Nearing the cabin camp cries could be heard. Muddy waters were flowing throughout the cabin camp. As they turned in they noticed another boat. It was stopped by a cabin.

"Dad, look!" called Skip, "there's a man on top of the cabin. And there's a lady with a baby on that little porch roof. The guy on top is reaching for the baby, the lady looks really scared."

Just then the man took the baby from her and the men in the boat threw a rope to her and she got it tied around her waist. As they got closer Benny got so excited he almost stood up in the boat. Skip's Father was worried about Skip and Benny seeing this. Just then they got close to the cabin.

"She's in the boat, boy that was close," gasped Skip.

"But what about the man and the baby on the roof?" asked Benny.

"They're getting closer, all they have to do is hold that boat steady." said Skip's Dad.

"Skip, that guy on the roof, we know him, look at his cap, that's MR. RIVER JOHN!" cried Benny. "He's a brave man and knows lots about rivers and floods. See, the boat is right under him and Mr. River John is handing the baby to the man in the boat. Mr. River John is trying to step back on the roof. Oh, Skip! He slipped and he can't catch himself!" cried Benny.

Mr. River John went tumbling down into the swirling waters below. As he disappeared from sight, the workers could only see his tattered cap being rocked to and fro in the churning water, along with debris and dead animals rushing down the river. His cap got hooked on a floating branch and they watched it disappear under the cement bridge.

Everyone was asking? Who is He? Anybody know him? As Benny, Skip, and his Dad reached the other boat they heard one of the men say, "He's that bum that always hung around the river. Remember when he made that horse and rider out of mud and sticks?"

As Benny watched his tattered hat disappear under the bridge, he was almost hysterical, "OH, NO! MR. RIVER JOHN! MR. RIVER JOHN!

Skip and Benny were sobbing. Skip's Father knew this was no place for those boys.

They left Benny at his front porch and went on home. Benny just sat there, all he could see was Mr. River John saving the baby and his tattered hat floating down the river. How could anyone know how he was feeling. He heard the phone ring but he really didn't care.

Skip's Mother was on the phone and explained the accident to Mrs. Winterton. Mother went to the front porch, hugged Benny and told him, "Now Mr. River John will be able to look down from Heaven anytime he wants and will see His River." As she held Benny in her arms, she said a prayer for her son's friend, Mr. River John.

Benny spent the afternoon sitting on the porch staring into the muddy water reliving those memorable visits with his trusting friend, "Mr, River John."

CHAPTER 11

The waters were receding and the big cleanup began. Immediately following breakfast, the Winterton family went to the living room. Mother read from the Bible and then they prayed together. Mother had a special prayer of thanks that included people like Mr. River John, whose bravery and kindness saved the life of a baby. There was complete silence in the room.

Finally Mr. Winterton spoke, "We have lots of work to do today, let's get started."

Bringing the garden hose Benny and Bernadine washed down the sidewalks. Father backed his pickup to the back door and the loading began. Mother gave the order, "Empty all the canned fruits and vegetables but don't throw the empty jars on the pickup, we will wash and boil those later. We cannot afford new jars."

Rows and rows of water-soaked cigar boxes filled with screws, washers, bolts, and tacks had spilled on the now muddy floor. Bernadine and Mother were washing the walls while Benny and Father removed the coal from the coal bin. The coal was stacked in a pile near the wall and would have to be turned daily to dry for next winter's use.

The old asbestos covered furnace stood naked in its tin underwear. Next to the furnace stood the mud-packed bench where Benny had spent many hours building models and listening to his Atwater Kent radio. The radio was a prize possession costing Benny fifty-cents at the second hand store. Reluctantly Benny carried it up the stairs and tossed it on the pickup as tears were tumbling down his cheeks.

Father had tied a hanky over his face, covering his nose. He complained, "Boy, do those potatoes we cut to plant in the garden smell bad. Let's get this stuff to the dump before it gets any hotter outside."

Driving to the city dump atop a hill east of town, Benny and his Father had to wait in line. Vehicles of many descriptions were waiting to deposit possessions that were of no use to the occupants.

Benny was enjoying the vacation from school but added chores left no time for play. Father had insisted, "This is a time to make some badly needed income, I can take care of our repairs later. We'll tear down the chicken house before it snows."

Skip lived east of Benny and only had water in their yard. He arrived early at Benny's house anxious to help. Alvin's Father had to find a way to get to work to help clean up. Winterton's yard resembled an Easter egg hunt. Even Bernadine had a bucket and was picking up sticks, hunks of wood, tin cans, bottles, and matted hay that had twisted around the bird bath by the flowing waters.

Benny yelled, "Ready or not, here I come with the hose to wash the front sidewalk!"

Bernadine was bending down to pick up a bucket from the flower bed. The bucket flew, Bernadine screamed, and in mid-air sailed a long, slender, multi-colored garter snake. The boys were stooped over with laughter. They ran to catch the snake, break its neck and hang it on the bird bath. Mother was standing on the porch watching and called to them, "Get that stupid snake off there, don't you know hanging up a dead snake will only bring more rain?"

Early next morning Benny was allowed to call and invite Skip and Alvin to go uptown with him and his Father.

As they left the yard, Mr. Winterton informed the boys, "No playing in the muddy water and don't touch anything lying around."

As they came to the city auditorium, they stopped to see the damage. "Look, Mr. Winterton," pointed Skip. "The water has buckled the floor, what a mess."

"Going to take a lot of work to get that all loaded on those trucks," answered Mr. Winterton. "We were at the dump yesterday and it's getting mighty full and what a smell."

As they walked farther they saw the curbs littered with boxes, bottles, and almost anything that the water picked up. Benny said, "See that fuel oil tank, it's floating down the street."

As they passed a local garage they overheard the owner say, "I had 40 inches of water in this garage. We had gotten some of the cars to higher ground but when that wall of water hit coming from up north of us, we didn't stand a chance."

Water was belching from pumps in a nearby basement. Mr. Winterton said, "You boys remember this building? That old junk yard he has behind the building, won't that be fun cleaning that up? The owner also bought hides

from the Rendering Works south of town. He stored them in the basement and sold them to companies that make shoes, purses, jackets, and lots of other stuff." Skip and Benny didn't want to even think about their trip to the Rendering Works. All up and down the next few blocks it was the same scene. The boys had smelled and seen enough mud and muck for one day.

"Dad, we're getting sick from the smells, can we go home?" asked Benny.

Father answered, "You guys remember this day, and hope and pray that nothing like this ever happens to Norfolk again."

When they reached home Dad said, "You boys want to ride along with me, need to haul another load of stuff to the dump?"

Benny responded quickly, "No thanks, I got enough of that dump the last trip, we'll stay at home."

When Father backed out of the driveway Benny said, "Let's go down to the river bank, see what's cooking."

The current was running fast but the water level had really dropped. "Benny, upstream," called Skip. There's a boat way up there heading this way."

Benny spotted a big rope lying on the ground. "Let's tie this to that big tree over there, leave some slack, and then we'll lasso the boat when it gets down here."

As it neared them Benny tossed out the rope. "Wow!" yelled Skip. "Help me drag her in to shore, we'll just leave it tied to the tree."

About that time a lawn chair got snagged along the bank. "Benny, down there, grab that lawn chair, lay it on the bank."

They were ready to go back to the house when a guy drove up with a trailer. He asked, "You boys ain't seen a boat come down the river, have you?"

Benny laughed, "You're not going to believe this, but look down there tied to that tree. Does that look like yours?"

"By golly, nobody's ever going to believe this story," he said. "How's 'bout a reward for your work?"

They just stood there and finally said, "You want a lawn chair too?"

"Naw, ain't got no use for that but sure do need my boat." he answered. "I'll get some help and be back tomorrow." He opened his billfold

and gave each boy a five dollar bill. " Thanks alot guys," he said as he drove away.

By the time Father arrived home the boys were tired and were drinking cold lemonade and eating some of Mother's cookies that had survived the flood. Father came into the kitchen saying, "Our car is a mess and no one can clean it until next week."

"Yea," cried Benny. Hear that guys, we can ride in Dad's pickup." Father just stared at Benny.

After the devastating flood the community decided something must be done about the river situation. Many suggestions and future plans were suggested by the towns people, but the most important news that the boys remembered was on the front page of the Norfolk Daily News.

Mother was busy reading. The mill was closing down, also the cabin camp was beyond repair and would be demolished. There was a drawing of the future plans.

"John, call the boys in, they need to hear this," said Mother. " Don't you be going anywhere either."

As he brought the boys into the living room, he said, "Your Mother says there's something in the paper, must be important if you boys have to sit on the couch to hear about it."

She showed the headline to the boys and then showed them the map. It was a map of the land where the mill and cabin stood. Printed across the map was Civic Center and Neighborhood Park. In the middle was a statue with the words, MR. RIVER JOHN, HERO OF THE 1944 FLOOD.

Mr. Winterton was just ready to open his mouth but the only thing they heard him start to say, "Oh, no! Now he's a hero and—"

Mother just ignored him and said, "John, look at this!"

Under the map was one sentence. Mr. John Winterton, well known in town for his masonry knowledge is being contacted to supervise the construction of this project. We feel that we also need the help of Mr. River John's good friends, Benny Winterton, Skip Schipawrong, and Alvin Fenerson.