

The Great Covered Wagon Race



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Alan Hofmeister, author

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Chapter 1:

Sneaky Snake Snaxon

The shrieking and squeaking of Speedy Sim Somber's metal file sounded like a cat fight. It echoed down Cripple Creek's moonlit main street.

"Do you have to make such a ruckus cutting through that wagon wheel?" whispered his sidekick, Sneaky Snake Snaxon. "You're going to wake up the whole town."

"It's the best I can do," answered Speedy Sim, looking up from under the wagon. "This wheel is almost as tough as my file."

"Well, hurry it up," said his sidekick. He turned his eyes back to the darkened town. "I don't want to get caught."

Snake Snaxon knew what would happen if the townspeople caught them sawing through Tom Johnson's wagon wheel. "The townspeople would be furious," Snake told himself. "They'd lock us up."

A short time later, Speedy Sim emerged from beneath the wagon.

"That's it," he said, dusting the dirt off of his clothes. "That wheel will snap in two before Tom Johnson goes a mile."

"Great," said Snake, patting Sim on the back.

"Now let's get out of here. We have to get some rest. After all, we're starting a big race tomorrow."

At daybreak, everyone in Cripple Creek came down to the main street of town. They came to watch the start of the big race between Sneaky Snake Snaxon and Tom Johnson.

Snake Snaxon's covered wagon was painted bright red. Johnson's was blue. Speedy Sim was riding with Snake. Tom's daughter, Laura, was riding with him.

"Do you think Sneaky Snake and Speedy Sim will cheat?" Laura asked her dad.

"I wouldn't put it past them," said Tom. "I've yet to see those rascals do anything the honest way."

Just then, Mr. Andrews, a large man in a stovepipe hat, stepped into the middle of the street beneath a huge banner. The banner stretched from one side of the street to the other.

Mr. Andrews held up his hands. The crowd fell silent. "Ahem. Your attention please," he said with self-importance. "The big race is about to begin. As you all know, this race will cover one thousand miles. It will go all the way from Cripple

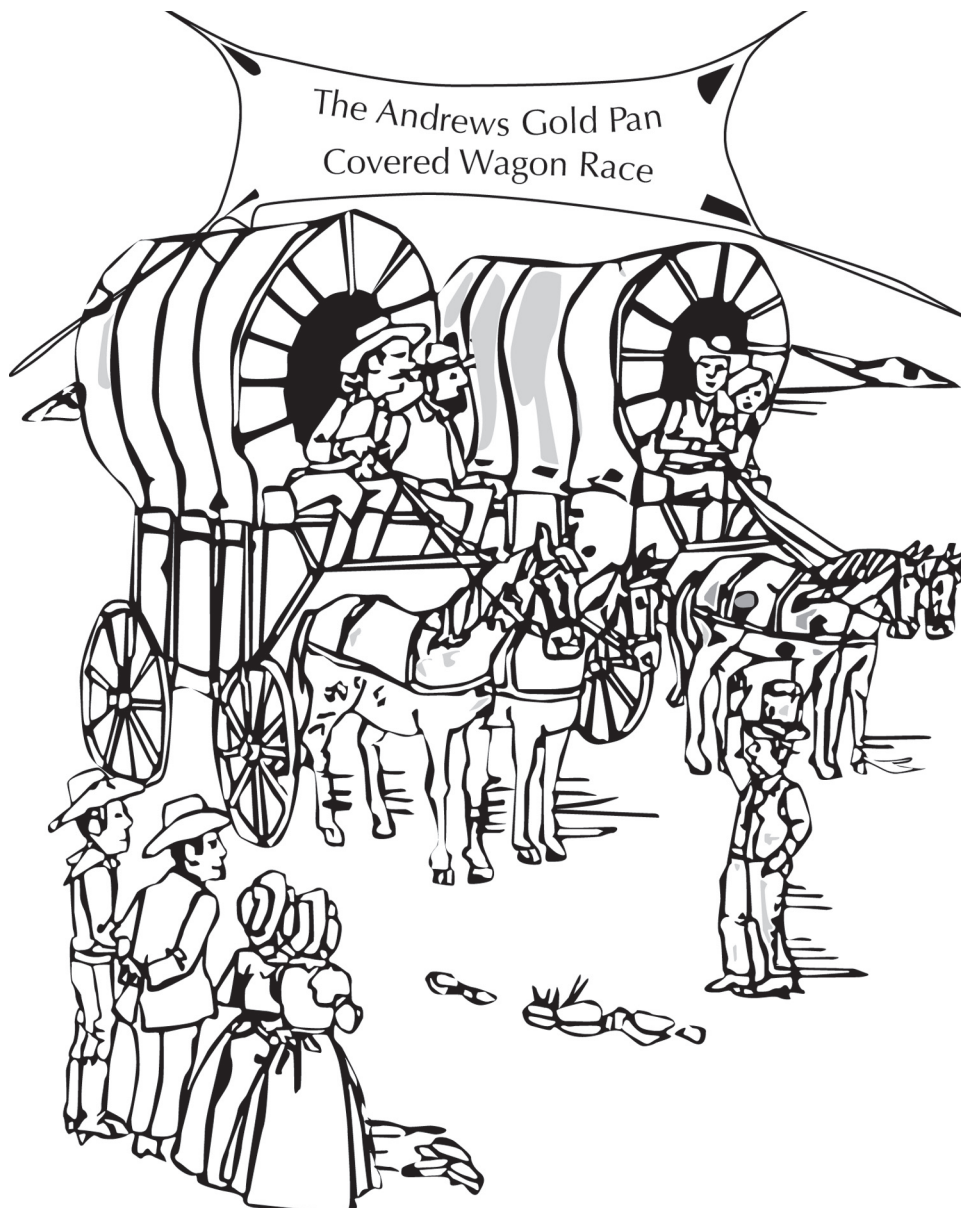
Creek to the town of Julian, California. The first wagon to reach Julian with a gold pan from my factory will win. That person wins the contract to deliver all the gold pans to California. I don't think I need to remind anyone that there's a gold rush going on in California. Every miner there is begging for an Andrews Gold Pan. The winner of this race can earn thousands of dollars a year for delivering the pans from my factory to the California gold fields."

"Cut the talk and start the race!" shouted Jess Bender, the barber.

"Yes," echoed three or four other townspeople, "we came to see a race!"

Mr. Andrews took off his stovepipe hat and held it above his head. "If it's a race you want, then it's a race you'll get. Tom Johnson, are you ready?"

"Ready," replied Tom, gripping the reins.



"Snake, are you ready?"

"Ready!" said Snake, gripping his reins.

"Then, good luck," said Mr. Andrews, dropping his arm to start the race. "May the best team win!"

"They're off!" roared the crowd. They watched the two teams of horses pound down the main street. "Tom's already winning!"

"We're going to win!" shouted Laura, as her father's wagon pulled out ahead.

"Save your joy for the end of the race," Tom shouted back. "We haven't won yet. Don't forget, we've got a thousand miles to go!"

Tom was still pulling away from Snake when, suddenly, one of the back wheels cracked in two. The back end of the wagon slammed to the ground. The wagon slid wildly from one side of the road to the other.

"Hold on!" yelled Tom, fighting the reins. "If we go into that ditch by the side of the road, we'll flip over."

Laura got a grip on the seat and held on as tightly as she could. Tom called to the horses and pulled on the reins. Finally, he stopped the runaway wagon just short of the ditch.

"That was close," said Laura, trying to catch her breath.

"It surely was," said Tom, climbing down from the wagon. "I'm really surprised that wheel broke. It looked all right yesterday."

Tom and Laura walked over to the broken wheel.

"Why, this looks like it's been cut," said Tom, running his finger along the edge of the break.

"Cut?" said Laura. "Who would do such an awful thing?"

Just then Snake Snaxon and Speedy Sim pulled up alongside Tom's wrecked wagon.

"Trouble?" said Snake, smiling down at Tom and Laura. "That's too bad. It's so early in the race."

"Don't count us out yet," said Tom. "I'm still planning to win this race, no matter how you try to stop me."

"Try to stop you? Me?" said Snake, rolling his eyes. "You're absolutely wrong."

"Who cut through this wheel?" asked Laura, pointing to the broken wheel.

"Kid, I wouldn't know," said Snake. "I have more important things to worry about."

"Like the race," said Speedy Sim. "Let's go."

"We're wasting time," said Snake. "So long. See you in Julian."

Snake Snaxon urged his two horses forward, and their wagon shot down the trail. They left Tom and Laura standing in a cloud of dust.

“This guy gives snakes a bad name,” muttered Laura. “Snakes don’t deserve that!”
“They’re getting a head start,” said Laura, kicking the broken wheel. “We’ll never catch up.”

“Maybe we won’t,” said Tom, “but we’re going to try. I’m not letting that Sneaky Snake Snaxon get away with this. Now, come on. Help me get this wheel back to town. We’ve got hard work ahead of us.”



Chapter 2:

The Hot Springs

Laura and Tom carried the broken wheel back to Cripple Creek to be fixed.

"If you could just prove Snake Snaxon filed through your wheel, we could send the sheriff out after him," said Mighty Marty, the town blacksmith. "That was an awful thing he did. It wouldn't be fair if Snaxon won the race."

Tom watched Mighty Marty weld the metal tire for the outside of the wheel. "Laura and I will take care of Snake by winning the race," he said. "Seeing the look on his face when we win is all I need."

"Well, I wish you two luck," said Marty, rolling the finished wheel to Laura. "I'd like nothing better than to see you win the race."

"We're doing our best," said Laura, rolling the wheel out of the blacksmith's shop. "You can count on that!"

Two or three hours later the wheel was back on the wagon, and Laura and Tom were underway again. The road to California was rough. It was nothing but a pair of wheel tracks across the plains. Sometimes the holes in the road were so deep that Tom had to guide the wagon out across open country. At other times the road seemed to disappear.

Laura looked up into the bright, blue sky at the hot afternoon sun. "Can't we go any faster?" she asked. "We'll never catch Snake and Sim at this speed."

"It won't do us any good to tire our horses too quickly," said Tom.

"I suppose you're right," said Laura. "Say, isn't that smoke up ahead?"

"Why, I believe it is," said Tom, looking out at the long, narrow cloud of white smoke. "Perhaps we've caught up with Snake and Speedy Sim."

Laura watched the smoke rise up from a nearby pile of rocks. "Won't they be surprised to see us," she laughed. "It looks like we're going to have a race after all."

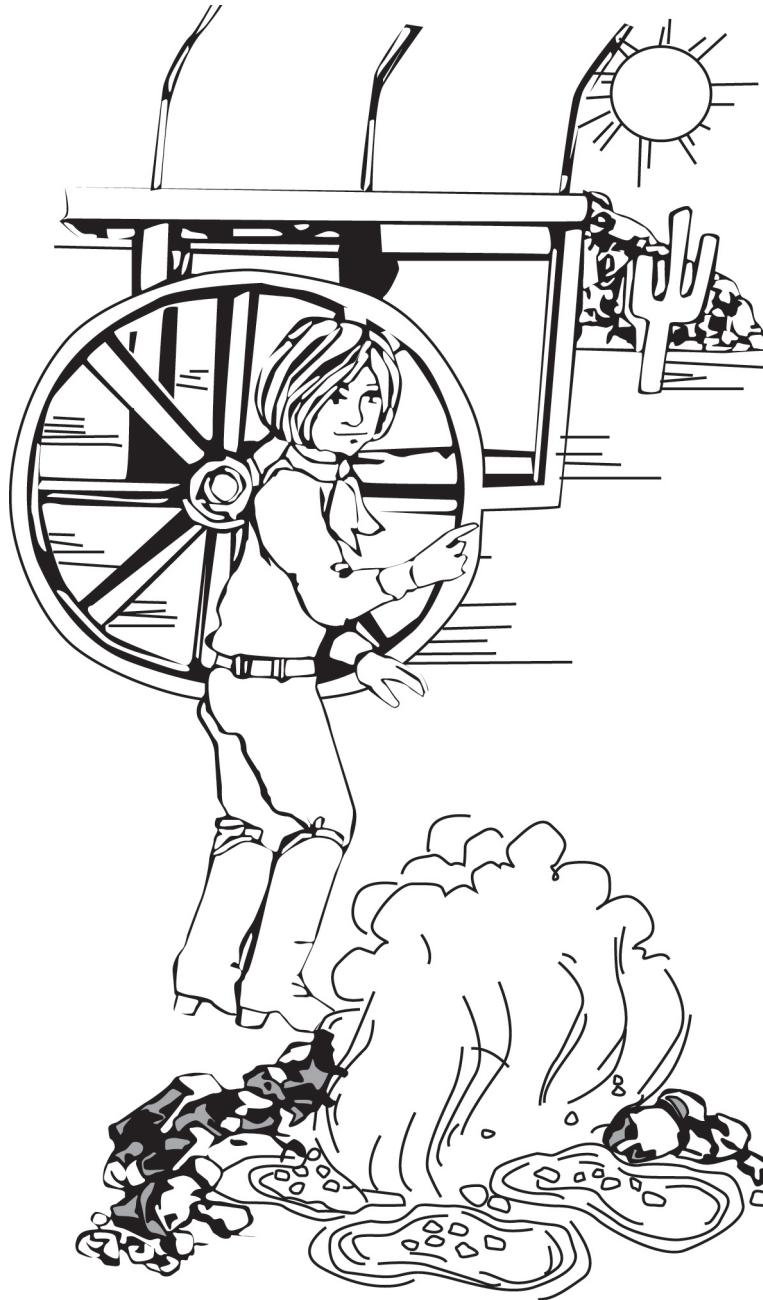
Tom called to the horses and they broke into a run. "Come on, Crackers, come on," he shouted. "Let's go, Smokey!"

The wagon rattled and banged toward the smoke. Down the road they went. Finally they reached the pile of rocks.

"Whoa, Crackers. Whoa, Smokey," shouted Tom, and the horses came to a stop.

“Anybody home?” called Laura, jumping down from the wagon and walking over to the pile of rocks.

There was no answer, and when Laura looked over the pile of rocks, she knew why. There was no fire. There never had been a fire. What they had seen was not smoke, but steam.



"Is it Snake and Speedy Sim?" asked Tom.

"No," said Laura, "it isn't even a fire. It's only steam from a hot spring."

There were three small pools of bubbling water set among the rocks. Steam was rising from all three.

"I guess Snake is still ahead of us," said Tom. "Maybe we'll catch him tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" asked Laura.

"I think we should camp here," said Tom. "The sun will set soon, and we couldn't ask for a better camping spot."

"I suppose you're right," said Laura. "I'll get some food from the wagon."

While Laura was getting supplies, Tom found an empty bottle beside one of the pools.



"Dr. Horsefeld's Spring Water Cure," said Tom, reading from the side of the bottle. "Cure for every sickness that is known."

"What's that?" asked Laura, returning with a pan and some beans.

"I found it here by the springs," said Tom. "It's supposed to be medicine. Powerful medicine at that."

"It's spring water," said Laura, taking the bottle. "Whoever sells it must fill the bottles right here."

Laura bent down and scooped up a handful of the hot water.

"That hot afternoon sun gave me a little headache," she said. "Maybe this water will cure it."

Laura put the water to her mouth and tasted it. "Oh!" she cried, throwing the rest of the water on the ground. "This tastes terrible. I can't believe Dr. Horsefeld really sells this."

"Many people believe that medicine has to taste really bad to be really good for you," said Tom.

“Well, if medicine that tastes bad really does work the best, I believe Dr. Horsefeld’s Spring Water must be the best medicine in the world!” laughed Laura.

As the sun began to sink into the plains, Laura and her dad built a fire and cooked the beans.

“I hope you don’t mind beans,” said Tom, placing a spoonful on Laura’s dish. “We’re going to be eating a lot of them on this trip.”

“I don’t mind them at all,” said Laura, raising her spoon to her mouth. “In fact . . .” Suddenly, Laura froze.

“Dad, don’t move,” she whispered.

A worried look crossed Tom’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s a rattlesnake right behind you,” said Laura. “It must have been attracted to our fire.”

Tom sat perfectly still. “How close is it? I’ve got to do something,” he murmured.

“Don’t move,” said Laura, watching the snake come even closer to her father. “You’d better stay right where you are. If you move one hair on your head, that snake will strike.”

Chapter 3:

A Wrong Turn

The rattlesnake inched closer and closer. Then, just as the snake was about to bite Tom's leg, Laura threw her spoon against a nearby rock. When the startled snake whipped its head around, Laura yelled, "Dad! Quick! Now's your chance! Get away!"



Tom jumped to his feet and half tumbled, half ran to the other side of the fire. Frightened by the noise, the snake slithered away.

Laura watched the rattlesnake slip between some rocks. "I think that snake was as scared of us as we were of it," she said.

"I don't think that snake was as scared as I was," said Tom, wiping the sweat from his brow. "For a minute there, I thought it was all over."

"It's lucky I was holding that spoon," said Laura.

Tom put his arm around Laura. "It was," he said. "You and that spoon saved my life."

That night Laura and Tom chose to sleep in the wagon.

"I hope that old rattlesnake can't climb into our wagon," said Laura, as she spread out her blanket.

Tom stretched out on the front seat. "Relax and go to sleep. The snake can't get into our wagon," he said.

"I can't wait to fall asleep. We had a long day," yawned Laura.

"Good night, Laura."

"Good night, Dad," said Laura. "See you at sunrise."

The next day Laura and Tom were up early. After a quick breakfast of biscuits and jam, they hitched their horses to the wagon. Then they climbed up into the front seat.

"Here, Laura," said Tom, handing the reins to his daughter. "Why don't you drive today?"

"Golly," said Laura, looking down at the reins. "You've never let me drive the wagon before."

"Yesterday, you saved my life. I realized then that you were no longer a little girl," said Tom. "You're a grown-up now. That means you can do grown-up work. What do you say? Do you want to drive?"

"Yes, sir!" said Laura, smiling at her dad. "You bet I do!"

Laura called to the horses. She flicked the reins. "Come on, Crackers! Come on, Smokey! Let's go!"

The wagon shuddered and rattled off down the road. Tom looked over at Laura and smiled. He couldn't remember when he'd seen his daughter looking so proud or sitting so tall.

The canvas-covered wagon bobbed across the plains. It was like a wandering ship in a sea of grass. On toward Julian they sailed.

Most of the time Laura and Tom traveled alone, but from time to time they passed other wagons along the way. The wagons were filled with hopeful men and women heading for the gold fields.

"We're all going to be rich," a woman shouted from her wagon. "There's so much gold in California, they pave the streets with it. But, of course, you already know that."

Laura didn't know that, but she had no reason to doubt the woman. After all, there had to be a good reason for so many pioneers to rush across the country to California. Streets paved with gold seemed like a good reason to Laura.

The days ticked by. The grass of the plains slowly began to melt into the sands of the desert.

"It's starting to get hot," said Tom, wiping the sweat from his brow. "The desert's coming up."

For two more days they drove their wagon in the hot sun. They saw no more prospector wagons. Tom and Laura were worried.

"We're too far south," said Tom. "We must have taken the wrong trail. We're not on the Spanish Trail to California."

As they stopped to look around, Laura said, "Smokey is limping."

They stopped in the shade of a large rock on the side of a mountain. Tom looked at the horse's sore leg.

"We can't move until Smokey is better," said Tom.

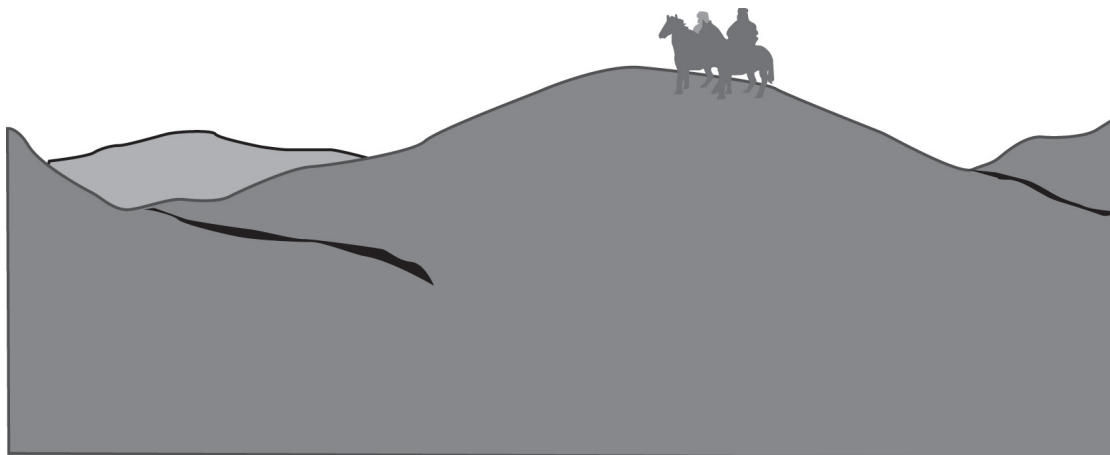
"How long will it take before he is well enough?" asked Laura.

"I wish I knew," said Tom sadly.

The sun was going down, and Tom and Laura prepared to spend the night. Both were worried, but said nothing.

As the light faded, Laura said, "Something is moving on that mountain. I hope it's not a mountain lion."

Tom peered up. "No," he said, "it's two people on horses."



Two Apache warriors rode up to the wagon. They said nothing. They looked at the horses that pulled Tom and Laura's wagon. One warrior stepped down and examined Smokey's sore leg. Though he had difficulty understanding the two men, Tom felt they meant to help.

The warriors were Tsoe and Bylas from the White Mountain Apache Tribe. Tom knew, then, they were too far south.

"We must be in the Arizona Territory," said Tom.

They were on the trail to Mexico, not California! Tsoe and Bylas indicated that they would be back. They rode away as the sun was setting.

Laura was up early the next morning and was surprised to see three people, on horseback, riding toward the camp from the south. "Wake up, Dad," said Laura.

Tsoe and Bylas were back. The third person was a woman dressed in the most beautiful, leather-beaded dress that Laura had ever seen.



"I am Lozen. I have medicine for your horse," she said. Lozen stepped down from her horse. She held a leather pouch in her hand.

"You speak English," Laura said.

"Yes, and Spanish," Lozen replied.

"Lozen has all the weapons of an Apache warrior," whispered Tom.

"I know. Isn't it great!" said Laura.

"I guess," said Tom with a quiver in his voice.

Thirty minutes later, Lozen and Laura had rubbed the medicine on Smokey's leg and wrapped the leg with a wet cloth.

"In another day your horse will be well," said Lozen.

"Where are we?" asked Tom. "Where is the oasis they call 'The Meadows'?"

Lozen smiled. "Yes, The Meadows. The Spanish call it Las Vegas. First, you must go to Horsehead Crossing. There, they will tell you how to get back on the trail to Las Vegas," she said.

Tsoe pointed at a tall mountain to the north, and Lozen said, "Horsehead Crossing is there."

"Thank you," said Tom.

"We are happy to help you keep moving west," said Lozen, with a slight smile.

Lozen pointed south, to a high mountain topped with white cliffs. "We have far to go. Our wickiups are near Cibecue Creek."

Lozen handed Laura more herbs from her leather pouch, with careful instructions for their use. Tsoe, Bylas, and Lozen then turned to the south and rode away.

"I don't think they wanted us to stay here," said Tom.

"Well, Dad, it is their land," said Laura.

Two days later, Tom and Laura rode into Horsehead Crossing. They received directions for the journey to Las Vegas. Late the next afternoon, they saw other wagons headed west and knew they were back on the Spanish Trail to California. Later, in the afternoon sun, they could see the roofs of Las Vegas far in the distance.

"That must mean we're very close to Las Vegas," said Laura.

"That's right," said Tom. "We should reach Las Vegas sometime tomorrow."

"It will be nice to be in a town again," said Laura. "I've almost forgotten . . ."

Suddenly, Laura stopped. "Look!" she said, pointing down the road. "Is that Snake Snaxon's wagon?"

Tom shaded his eyes and looked down the road. "By golly, I think you're right," he said, giving the reins a flick and urging the horses to run faster. "No one but Snake has red canvas on his wagon."

Tom and Laura cut a dusty trail toward the wagon. As they got nearer, they could see that the wagon had wandered off the road. One of its wheels was broken. There was no doubt that the wagon belonged to Snake. His name was plainly written on the side.

"Looks like Snake and Speedy Sim have gotten a little bit of their own medicine," said Tom, as they pulled up to the wrecked wagon. "Hey, Snake! Having a little trouble?"

"He's asleep," said Laura, pointing to a sleeping figure beside the wagon. "Should I wake him up?"

"Sure," said Tom. "I've been waiting for this moment for a long time."

Laura jumped down from the wagon and shook the sleeping man.

"Oh," yawned the man, slowly rolling over. "Who's there?"

Laura was ready to start laughing at Snake. When she saw the man's face, her laughter subsided.

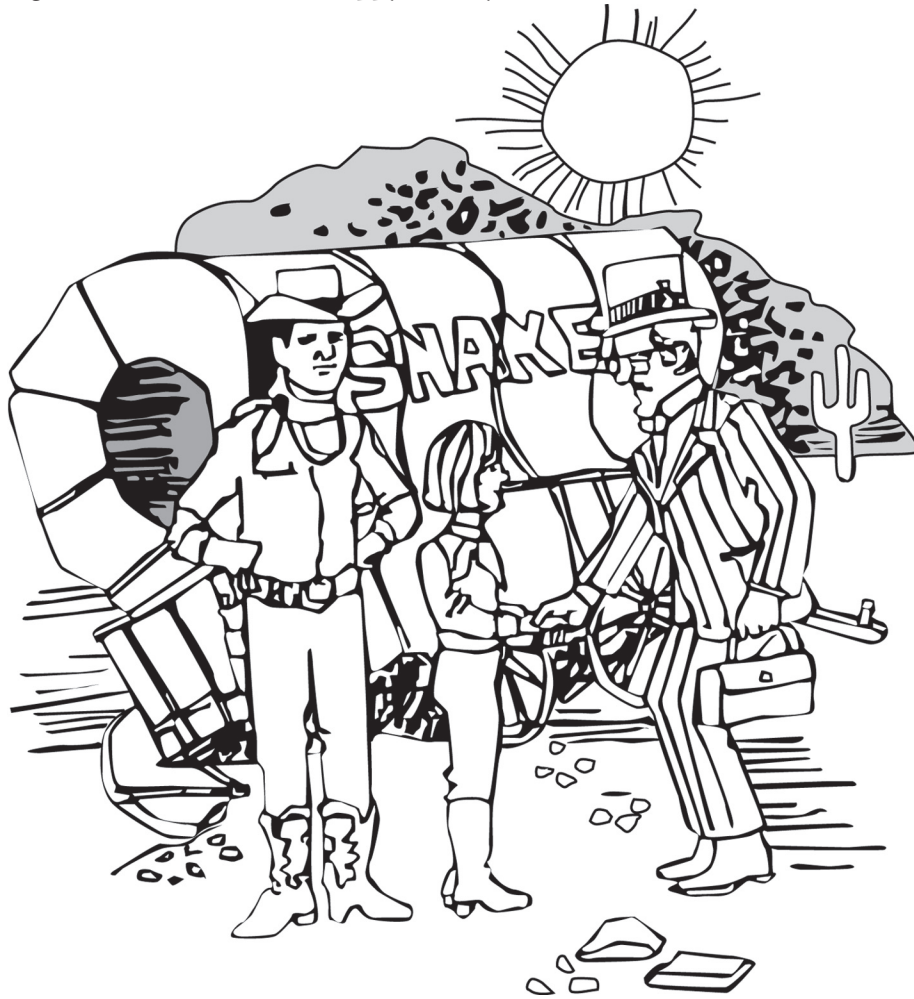
"My goodness," she whispered to herself. "It's not Snake!"

It wasn't Speedy Sim either. In fact, the man was a stranger. Laura had never seen him before!

Chapter 4:

Doctor Harold H. Horsefeld

The stranger got to his feet and stuck out his hand. "Allow me to introduce myself," he said. "I'm Dr. Harold Humphrey Horsefeld, a world-famous doctor of medicine. I am the bottler of a wonderful cure for whatever you have. It's called 'Dr. Horsefeld's Spring Water Cure,' and am I happy to see you."



"Oh, yes," said Laura, shaking Dr. Horsefeld's hand. "My father and I came across one of your medicine bottles at the hot springs."

"I was the one who left it there," said Dr. Horsefeld, working Laura's arm up and down constantly, as if it were a pump. "Of course, that spring water is just one of the things I put in my medicine. There is also a little swamp root and pepper tree bark in it. That's what gives it such a wonderful taste."

"I can imagine just how wonderful," thought Laura, feeling her stomach turn over.

"My name's Tom," said Laura's father, coming to the rescue. "I'm Laura's father."

"Glad to meet you," said Dr. Horsefeld. "If you've stopped by for some medicine, I'm afraid you're out of luck. My supply has just been wiped out. A pair of scoundrels took my wagon. They took all my medicine along with it."

"Tell me," said Tom. "Was one of the men a tall, thin fellow with a bushy mustache?"

"Why, yes, he was," said Dr. Horsefeld.

"And was the other one kind of stout, with wild eyes and a beard?" asked Laura.

"You've described them perfectly!" said Dr. Horsefeld. "They're not friends of yours, are they?"

"Hardly," said Laura. "We're racing them to Julian, California."

"Good," said Dr. Horsefeld, "because those two are the dirtiest, sneakiest, fastest men I've ever met. After I was nice enough to stop and help them with their wagon, they were mean enough to turn around and take mine. 'Would you take a look at that broken wheel?' the skinny fellow asked. And, being a neighborly man, I did. Then, while I was on the ground, the two of them jumped into my wagon. They took off, leaving me with this wreck."

"Why don't you ride to Las Vegas with us?" said Tom. "If you can't find your wagon there, you can always get a new wheel for this one."

"You're very kind," said Dr. Horsefeld. "It will be my pleasure to ride with you."

Tom and Laura climbed up onto the front seat. Dr. Horsefeld got into the back of the wagon. With Tom at the reins, they started off toward Las Vegas. Along the way, Dr. Horsefeld kept up a constant stream of conversation.

If he wasn't talking about the road, he was talking about the weather. If he wasn't talking about gold, he was talking about medicine. His mouth never seemed to stop.

"Yes, sir," he said at one point, "those two wagon robbers got themselves a wagon full of good health. If they drink up all the Spring Water Cure in that wagon, they just might live to be a thousand."

"Really?" said Laura, her eyes growing wide.

"I wouldn't lie to you," said Dr. Horsefeld. "That spring water is the most powerful medicine known to man."

Laura shook her head. "Wow!" she said, rolling her eyes. "And to think you share it with everybody!"

"Helping people to better health is my life's work," said the doctor with a wave of his hand. "It's a tough job. But someone has to do it."

The doctor was getting ready to go on talking. Just then, Tom rounded a corner, bringing the wagon to the outskirts of Las Vegas.

"It's not exactly my idea of a town," groaned Tom, looking down the main street.

"The whole place looks like it's about to fall down," said Laura. "All the buildings are leaning sideways."

It was almost as if the entire town had been bent by the wind. All the shops leaned sideways. Many of them looked as if they couldn't remain standing much longer.

"I wouldn't want to be here the next time a wind comes through," said Dr. Horsefeld. "This place would be downright dangerous in a big blow."

There was nothing to worry about that day. The air was as still as the town itself. Not a person could be seen on the street.

"I wonder where everyone is," said Laura.

"They're probably all inside, staying out of the heat," said Tom. He looked up at the cloudless sky and wiped his brow. "I wouldn't mind getting out of the sun myself."

Dr. Horsefeld pointed to a large sign on one of the leaning buildings. "I don't know about you two, but I've worked up a powerful thirst. I'm going into that Lonesome Cowboy food place over there," he said.

Dr. Horsefeld climbed down from the wagon and headed for the broken-down eatery.

"Dr. Horsefeld has the right idea," said Tom, getting down from the wagon.

Laura and Tom left the wagon in the street and walked to the Lonesome Cowboy. They were just about to go in when Dr. Horsefeld hurried out.

"Don't go in," he said. "It's horrible in there."



“Why, what’s wrong?” asked Laura, edging away from the door.

“I can’t tell you,” said Dr. Horsefeld. “I become ill just thinking about it.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Tom, pushing the door and letting it swing open. “I’m going to see for myself.”

Chapter 5:

Empty Streets and Aching Heads

Dr. Horsefeld was right. The inside of the Lonesome Cowboy eatery was a horrible sight. The place was full of people. All were either holding their stomachs or holding their heads. Everyone was in terrible pain.

"What's wrong?" asked Tom, going up to the nearest cowboy.

"I'm sick," was the only answer the cowboy was able to moan.

Tom turned to a woman who was holding her head. "Where's everybody else?" he asked.

"They're all sick," groaned the woman. "There's not a healthy person in this town."

By now, Laura and Dr. Horsefeld had slipped into the Lonesome Cowboy.

"Everyone in this town is mighty sick," said Tom. "It's horrible."

"What we need is a doctor," said Dr. Horsefeld. "Where can we find one?"

"Aren't you a doctor?" said Laura.

The question caught Dr. Horsefeld off guard. For a moment he was silent. "Well now, I guess I am," he finally said, scratching his chin. "I suppose I ought to do something."

"If only you had your Spring Water Cure," said Laura. "Your elixer cures everything."

"It's what we need all right," said the doctor, placing his hand on the woman's forehead. "As I feared, these people are suffering from Turner's Fever, a terrible disease. My cure is their only hope."

"Maybe Snake and Speedy Sim are still in town," said Laura. "If they are, we can get the doctor's medicine, so we can cure these folks."

"I'm sorry to trouble you," said Tom to the woman with the headache, "but I need some information. Do you remember seeing a wagon come through here in the last couple of days? On the side of the wagon it said something like, 'Dr. Horsefeld's Spring Water Cure.'"

"Yes, I remember the wagon," groaned the woman. "There were two men in it. They camped by the well."

"Are they still there?" asked Laura softly.

Between moans, the woman said that the men and the wagon had left, heading west.

"We're too late," said Tom.

"Maybe we should walk over to the well," said Laura. "Perhaps they left some medicine behind. Maybe there's a bottle or two there. Anything's better than nothing."

"Fine idea," said Tom.

"I agree," said Dr. Horsefeld. "Let's go."

Dr. Horsefeld turned to the moaning, groaning people of Las Vegas and spoke with conceit. "I'm on my way to the well to try to locate a bottle of my famous and wonderful Spring Water Cure," he said. "If I can find even one bottle, I'll be able to cure you all."

"Please hurry," begged a man, lifting his head off a table.

"Please, doctor," called a woman from the back of the room. "You're our only hope. Save us!"

"You can count on me!" shouted the doctor as he backed out the door. "There's nothing my spring water won't cure."

The well was in plain sight, at the far end of town. They walked toward it. Each time they passed a shop or home, they could hear the moans of those inside.

"There doesn't seem to be a healthy person in this town," said Tom.

"That's understandable. That's the way it is with Turtle Fever," said Dr. Horsefeld. "It strikes down everyone in sight, young and old."

"Turtle Fever?" said Laura. "I thought you said it was Turner's Fever."

"Oh yes, yes," said Dr. Horsefeld stammering, his face turning bright red. "Indeed, it was Turner's Fever. A silly, but understandable, mistake. I have the name of every disease that is known right here in my head. Sometimes, when you have that many diseases in your head, it's hard to keep one straight from the other."

As the three neared the end of town, they were surprised to see a little girl sitting next to the well. Incredibly, the girl didn't seem to be sick. In fact, she appeared to be the picture of health.

"Well, hello," said Tom. "How are you feeling today?"

"Just fine," said the little girl. She took a gulp from a bottle of orange drink she held in her hand.

"What's that you're drinking?" asked Laura.

The little girl held up the bottle for Laura to see.



"It's orange drink," replied the girl. "It's all I ever drink. I can't stand water, and I don't like milk."

"Have you ever had a drink of this well water?" asked Laura.

"Never!" said the girl. "I told you, I can't stand water."

"That gives me an idea," said Laura. "Dad, hand me that bucket. I want to see how this water tastes."

"What are you hoping to prove?" asked Dr. Horsefeld.

"I'm not sure," said Laura. "I hope it will lead to a cure for these folks."

"Well, if you're going to do any curing, you'd better get on with it," said Tom, looking down the street. "Here come the people of Las Vegas. They must be after the Spring Water Cure that Dr. Horsefeld said he hoped to find."

Laura looked up to see a crowd of people slowly moving toward the well. Their moans and groans sounded just like a graveyard chorus of ghosts. Laura dropped the bucket into the well. "I hope I find something down there," she said, starting to pull on the rope. "Those people want a cure, and they want it now."



Chapter 6:

The Doctor Leaves Town

Laura pulled the bucket out of the well. She sniffed the water. It had a very unpleasant, but familiar, odor. She passed the bucket to Dr. Horsefeld and Tom.

"I think this water has some kind of poison in it," she said. "That would explain why this girl didn't get sick when everyone else did."

Dr. Horsefeld passed the bucket back to Laura. "I think I've run into that odor before," he said. "I just can't remember where."

Laura dropped the bucket back into the well. "I think I've smelled it, too. Try to remember," she said. "It's important."

While Laura was bent over the well, fishing around in the bottom with the bucket, the people of Las Vegas reached the well.

"Doctor, have you found your medicine?" whispered a woman, grabbing Dr. Horsefeld's arm.

"Not yet," said Dr. Horsefeld. "But the girl here may have found the cause of all your sickness. She thinks the well may be poisoned. She's hoping to be able to fish the source of the poison out with the bucket."

"So there's no Spring Water Cure?" said a man, a pained look crossing his face.

"Sorry," said Dr. Horsefeld. "We'll have to find another way to cure you. Those wagon robbers wanted all that medicine for themselves. They didn't leave a drop behind."

"That's not entirely true," said Laura, pulling two bottles labeled, "Doctor Horsefeld's Spring Water Cure," from the bucket. "I just found these in the bottom of the well."

"For goodness sake!" shouted Dr. Horsefeld. "Let's get everyone lined up. They'll be cured in just a few seconds."

"I don't think you want to give your Spring Water Cure to them," said Laura.

"What?" said Dr. Horsefeld, holding the bottle up in his fist. "Would you have me keep this wonderful cure from the fine people of Las Vegas?"

"Indeed, I would," said Laura. "I think your medicine may have poisoned the well."

"No!" thundered Dr. Horsefeld.

"Perhaps not," said Laura calmly, holding up the bottles she fished out of the well, "but it's very strange that the well is full of bottles of your medicine."

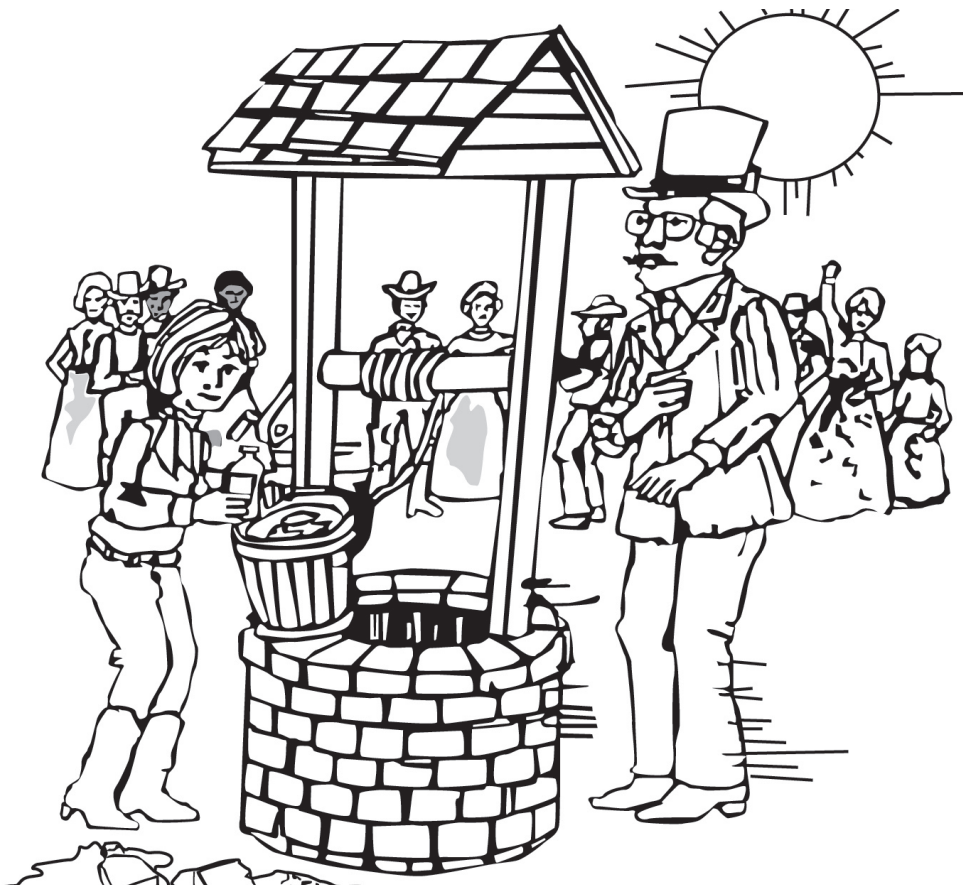
“What?” said the doctor. “How could that be?”

“Maybe Snake and Sim took one drink of that Spring Water Cure and got sick. Rather than carry your medicine all the way to California, they decided to get rid of it. It would lighten their load, too. The well was close, so they tossed all of it in there. Some of the bottles were smashed. The medicine got into the water and made everyone who drank it very, very sick.”

Laura’s words began to sink in. The moans and groans of the crowd began to turn to loud shouts and curses.

“So, it’s your medicine that made us sick!” shouted a woman. She forgot her stomachache long enough to shake her fist at Dr. Horsefeld.

“Let’s lock him up,” groaned another man, as he held onto the well to keep from falling down.



"Good idea," agreed another man, who was obviously in pain.

"These folks can get their drinking water from the river instead of the well. Then they'll make a quick recovery," whispered Tom to Dr. Horsefeld. "If I were you, I'd leave town quickly."

"I was just about to suggest that myself," said Dr. Horsefeld nervously. He backed away from the people of Las Vegas. They were an angry, moaning crowd. "The climate around here seems to have taken a turn for the worse, rather suddenly--especially for me!"

"I noticed a good wagon wheel at the side of the blacksmith's shop," said Tom. "If you put it on Snake's wagon, you can leave right away."

Dr. Horsefeld ran for the blacksmith's shop. "Thanks for the suggestion," he said.

"Good luck, Doc!" shouted Tom and Laura.

A few minutes later Dr. Horsefeld emerged from the far side of the shop. He was rolling a wagon wheel. Laura and Tom watched as he scrambled out of town. Finally, he disappeared over the hill and was not seen again.

"I hope he makes it safely out of the territory," said Laura.

"Don't worry," said Tom. "Anyone who can sell things the way Dr. Horsefeld does will always survive."

Laura watched the people of Las Vegas. They slowly moved off to the river for a drink of water. "I guess you're right," she said, "but I do hope he stops practicing medicine."

The next morning Laura and Tom loaded the wagon with drinking water from the river. A man came out from the town.

"Good morning," said the man. "I just wanted to say thank you for your help. The entire town is grateful."

"I'm glad everyone recovered quickly," said Tom.

Laura and Tom climbed up onto the front seat. "Good luck with that race!" said the man.

"Thanks," said Laura, flicking the reins. "We'll see you in a few months. Come on, Smokey! Let's go, Crackers!"

The wagon shuddered and headed slowly out into the desert. It was early morning, but it was already hot.

Tom squinted and looked out at the dry, empty desert. "This next part of the trip isn't going to be easy," he said.

"I know," said Laura, tightening her lips, "but we'll get through. We have to."

Chapter 7:

Rabbit in the Sky

Day after day the sun pressed down on Laura and her father. It was so hot that the land itself seemed to be on fire. Not a drop of water or another wagon could be seen.

"It's lucky we took on extra water," said Tom. "This would be a bad place without it."

"It's not exactly a great place, even with water," said Laura, wiping her brow. "I'll be glad to get out of here."

Just then, Laura and Tom heard someone yell.

"Hello," shouted a voice.

Tom reined the horses to a stop. Laura shot to her feet.

Laura moved her eyes across the desert in search of the voice. "Didn't someone just yell?" she asked.

"Perhaps all this heat is making us hallucinate," said Tom.

"Hello," came the voice again. "I'm up here."

When Laura and Tom looked up, they saw a huge balloon floating just fifty feet above their wagon. Beneath the balloon in a little basket was a man, standing beside a fire.

"It's a hot-air balloon," said Tom. "I haven't seen one of those since the Rock Island Fair."

"Are you going to California?" yelled the man, tossing a stick onto his fire.

"Yes, we are," said Laura. "Where are you headed in that balloon?"

"California," replied the man. "I'm going to get rich."

"Are you a miner?" asked Laura, shading her eyes from the sun.

"No," answered the man. "I sell Hungry Rabbit Candy Bars. I plan to make a pile of money selling them in the gold fields."

"We wish you the best of luck," shouted Laura.

"And the same to you," said the man. He threw more sticks onto his fire, and the balloon rose into the blue desert sky. "See you in California!"

Laura and Tom watched the balloon sail away. On the side of the balloon was a picture of a gigantic rabbit. The rabbit was munching on a chocolate bar. Below the rabbit were the words, "Hungry Rabbit Candy Bars. Worth Their Weight in Gold."

For the rest of that day, Laura and Tom followed the balloon as it floated over the desert. In the late afternoon, a lone vulture appeared and circled the balloon.

"I wonder where that vulture came from?" said Laura.

"From over there," said Tom, pointing out a flock of vultures in the distance. The birds were circling high above the desert. All together, they looked like a black whirlwind. "That means someone is in trouble."

"In trouble?" said Laura.



"That's right," said Tom, speeding up the wagon.

"A flock of vultures doesn't circle unless something is in trouble. Whoever or whatever is down there is probably just about dead."

"I hope we're not too late," said Laura.

Laura and Tom weren't the only ones who had seen the vultures. The man in the balloon had also seen them. He, too, was heading in the direction of the main flock.

The vultures saw the balloon and became very excited. Floating their way was what looked like a nice, big rabbit. At once, they turned their attention from the ground to the sky. Quickly, the balloon was lost in a cloud of ugly, screaming vultures. They whipped around the balloon like bees around a hive.

"Get out of here!" yelled the man, waving his arms at the birds. "You're going to puncture my balloon!"

Every few seconds, a vulture bit into the canvas. Little holes appeared all over the balloon. It began to sink toward the desert floor.

"Help!" yelled the man. "I'm going down!"

As Laura and Tom watched, the balloon disappeared behind a hill, crashing into the desert.

As soon as Laura and Tom reached the top of the hill, they saw the deflated balloon. It had landed near a covered wagon. Three men--the man from the balloon and two men from the wagon--were talking.

"Dr. Horsefeld's Spring Water Cure," said Laura, reading from the side of the wagon.

Tom let out a low whistle and smiled. "Well, what do you know! It looks like we've finally caught up with Snake Snaxon and Speedy Sim."

"Are you going down there?" asked Laura.

"Of course," said Laura's father, starting down the hill. "As mean as those two are, we can't leave them out here. Besides, that peddler with the balloon needs a ride."

Chapter 8:

The New Rider

Tom guided the wagon down the hill toward the battered balloon.

"What a mess," said Laura, looking at the torn cloth.

"It'll never fly again in that shape," said Tom.

"You're right," moaned the balloon's owner. "You can't fly a hot-air balloon that has a torn top."

"We're terribly sorry about your balloon," said Tom. "By the way, my name is Tom Johnson. This is my daughter, Laura."

"Glad to meet you," said the man. "My name is Pat Greenwood. I guess I'm not as bad off as I could be. Those men over at the other wagon are in worse shape. They're out of water."

"Snake must have cut back on his water to keep his wagon light," said Laura. "It looks like his plan didn't work."

"Do you know those two?" asked Pat.

"We do," said Tom. "We're racing them to California."

Tom climbed down from the wagon and shook his head. "Come on, Laura," he said. "I guess we'd better see how our thirsty friends are doing."

Laura, Tom, and Pat walked over to the red and white wagon that had once belonged to Dr. Horsefeld. Snake and Speedy were stretched out under the wagon, trying to avoid the sun.

"Looks like you finally caught us," said Snake, speaking through dry, cracked lips.

Tom looked up at the still-circling birds. "Better us than those vultures," he said.

Speedy Sim lifted himself up on one elbow. "Can you spare some water for us and our horses?" he asked. "My throat is as dry as a desert breeze."

"Yes, I suppose we can spare a little," said Tom.

Laura filled a bucket with water and gave it to Snake and Sim. Then she filled another bucket and gave it to Snake's horses. Sim and Snake went after the water just as starving dogs would go after a bone. The horses did the same.

"Well," said Snake, finishing off the water and tossing the bucket to the ground.

"That should be all the water we need to get us to the mountains."

"Yes, let's get out of here," said Speedy Sim, wiping off his chin. "We've got a gold pan to deliver."

"Say, I wonder if you fellows could give me and my balloon a lift to California?" Pat asked. "I have no money now, but as soon as my balloon and I get to California, I'll make plenty of money."

"Your balloon!" screamed Snake. "Do you mean to tell me you want us to haul your balloon across the mountains?"

"I need my balloon to advertise my Hungry Rabbit Candy Bars. I'll be rich!"

"You must think I'm crazy," said Snake, jumping into the driver's seat. "I'm not about to weigh down my wagon with your broken-down balloon. Let them take you."

Then, Snake charged his horses, and his wagon shot away in a cloud of hot dust.

"We can't let them get a lead," said Tom. "Come on, Pat and Laura. Let's go."

"What about my balloon?" asked Pat. "I need it."

"I'm sorry," said Tom. "We won't stand a chance with your basket weighing us down."

"Please," begged Pat. "I've come so far."

Tom looked at the wagon disappearing across the desert.

"Oh, all right," he said. "Load it in the back, but make it quick."

"Someday, I'll return the favor for this," said Pat.

Pat loaded the basket into the wagon. Then, with Tom at the reins, they took off after Snake Snaxon. Tom chased Snake all day and all night. With the heavy basket weighing them down, they slipped farther and farther behind their competitors.

The first light of dawn found the Johnson's wagon entering a rich, grassy plain, peppered with many small lakes. The desert was behind them at last. Before them now stood a mighty chain of mountains, and beyond the mountains, Julian, California, was waiting.

Tom reined the horses to a stop. He let them drink from a tiny stream. "So, we're here at last," he said.

"And so is Snake," said Laura, pointing to a tiny-looking red and white wagon at the top of a steep, mountain pass. "He's gained quite a lead."

Just then, a low, rumbling sound rolled down from the mountain.

"Landslide!" yelled Pat, watching a cloud of dust rise from the top of the pass.

"It didn't bury Snake and Sim," said Tom, shading his eyes and looking up at the mountain. "They planned it so that it wouldn't touch them."

"You mean they planned a landslide?" asked Laura.

"Those two blocked the pass by starting a landslide. There's no way we can win now. In fact, we'll be lucky to get to California at all," said Tom.

"Oh, no," said Laura.

Tom put his arm around Laura. "I'm afraid we've reached the end of the line."

Chapter 9:

Over the Mountains

Without saying a word, Laura climbed into the back of the wagon and sat down.

She thought, as she sat gently on Pat's balloon basket, "I want to win. And I want to see California."

Laura stood up suddenly. She told herself, "Oh dear, I don't want to break Pat's basket. He'll never be able to fly the balloon again . . ." Something about the word "fly" made her stop and think.

"Fly," she said, turning the word over in her mind. "Fly. Why, that's it! Dad, Pat!"

"Don't the rules of the race say that we just have to deliver one pan to win?"

"Yes, that's right," said Tom.

"Then it doesn't matter if the wagon gets there, does it?"

"I suppose not," said Tom. "What are you thinking, Laura?"

"It's a way to win the race," said Laura. Her voice shook with excitement. "We'll fly across the mountains . . . in Pat's balloon."

"But my balloon's worthless without a top," Pat answered quickly.

"That's just it," said Laura. "We've got a top right here. Look at our wagon."

"Of course! The canvas on the wagon!" shouted Tom.

Pat ran his hands along the canvas. "It's a little heavier than the cloth I use," he said, "but it's worth a try. Let's get it off the wagon."

In no time, pieces of the bright blue canvas had been stitched into Pat's torn balloon fabric.

"Pat, you start the fire," said Tom. "Laura, you get the gold pan out of the back of the wagon. I'll turn the horses loose. There's plenty here for them to eat. We can pick them up on the way back."

Pat started a fire in the gondola. As the hot air rose, all three of the stranded travelers carefully brought the cloth balloon over the fire, keeping it a safe distance from the flame. Finally, it had expanded enough to lift the whole rig off the ground. They all held the gondola ropes tightly. Pat pinched the fabric. It was not loose. It was tighter than a new pair of shoes.

"Hurry," he yelled. "I think this old balloon's about to take off!"

Laura and Tom jumped in just as the balloon began to rise.

"We did it!" yelled Laura, watching the wagon grow smaller and smaller as they rose into the bright blue sky. "California, here we come!"

"Look," said Laura, pointing down to the top of a tall, rocky mountain. "There's Snake and Speedy."

Pat let the balloon float to within a few feet of the ground near Snake Snaxon's wagon.

"See you in Julian," yelled Tom, waving an Andrews Gold Pan.

"Hey, what are you doing?" yelled Snake with a worried look.

"We're going to deliver this pan," said Tom.

"You should have let that balloon fellow come with us," hissed Speedy Sim, turning to Snake. "We could have been the winners."

"You were the one who didn't want to bring him," yelled Snake. "It wasn't my fault."

"Yes, it was!" screamed Speedy Sim.

"No, it wasn't!" hollered Snake.

"Let's have more fire," said Tom to Pat. "We have a race to win!"

Pat put more wood on the fire; the balloon, like a puff of smoke, rose into the sky.

The last Laura saw of Sneaky Snake Snaxon and Speedy Sim, they were still arguing.

A few hours later, the balloon slowly descended into the center of the crowded mining town of Julian, California. Tom grabbed the Andrews Gold Pan and jumped out of the basket, with Laura following close behind.

"Laura and I have some business to take care of," said Tom.

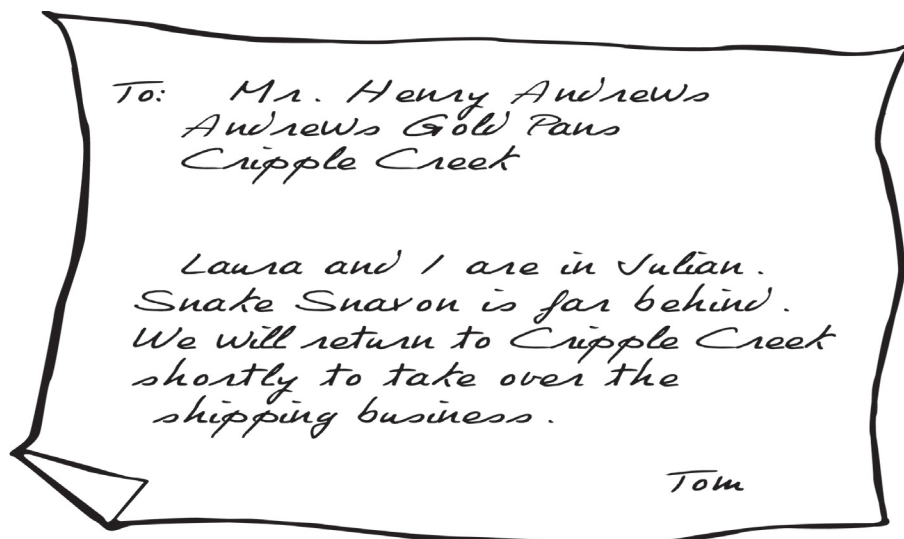
"Okay," said Pat. "I'll meet you later at the hotel."

As Laura and Tom hurried down the street, they rushed past dusty miners and wood-framed shops until they came to a sign that read, "Telegrams sent here."

"We want to send a telegram to Cripple Creek," Tom said.

"Fine," said the woman. "Write your message down here." She handed Tom a piece of paper.

Tom wrote:



"I'll send it immediately," said the woman, taking a dollar from Tom.

"Thank you," said Tom. "Now let's go over to the hotel and rest. It's been a long, hard trip."

It had been a long, hard trip, but it had been worth every second. Laura felt closer to her dad than she ever had before. That felt good, very good.

As they walked out of the telegraph office, they heard, "Hey!" It was a bearded miner. "Do you want to sell that fine gold pan?"

"Thanks, but not right now," said Tom. "I'll be back with a wagon full of them."

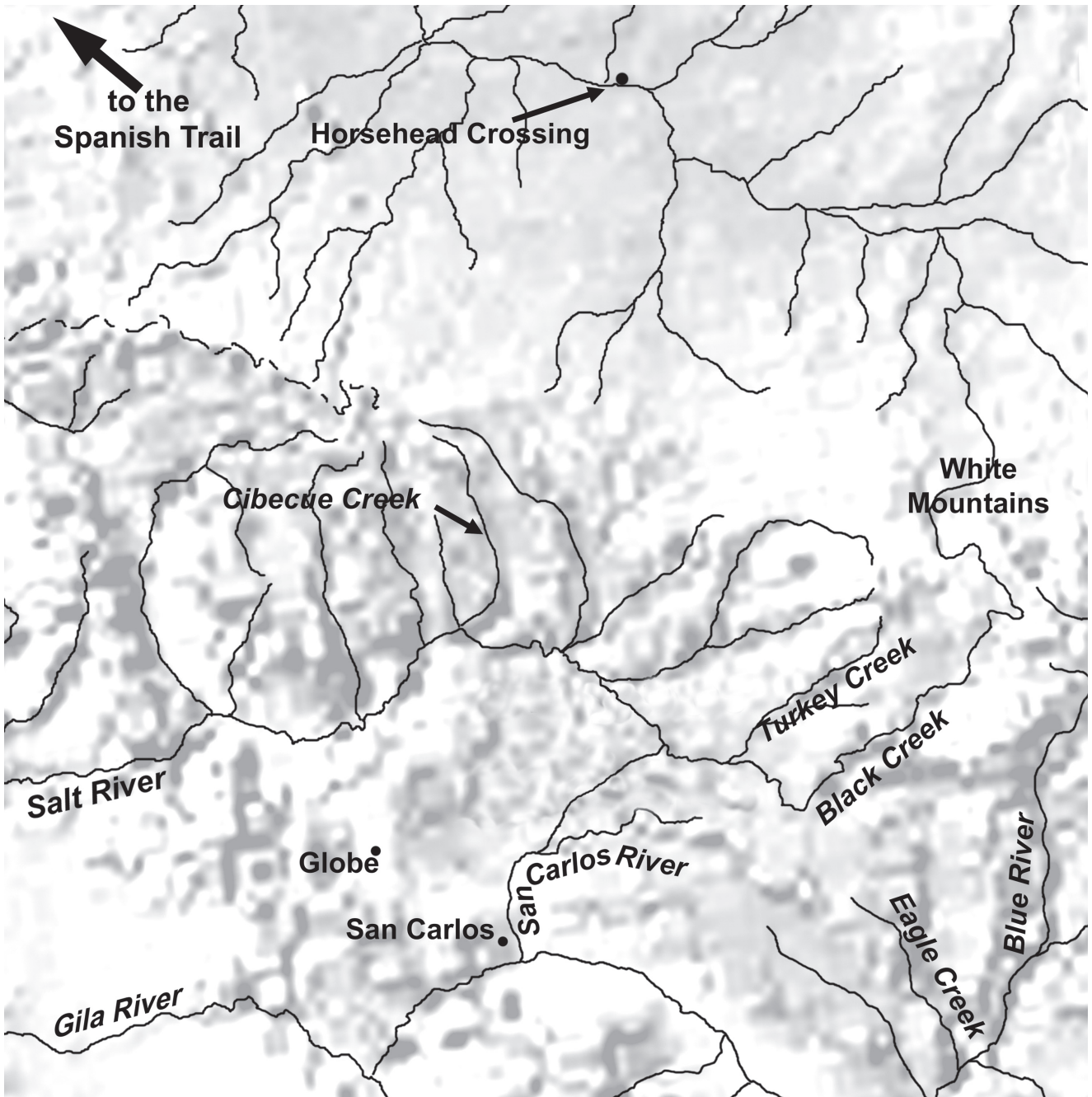
"Great," said the miner. "We need all you can bring."

Tom smiled. "We've just started a great business."

"Yes, we have," said Laura, looking up at her dad. "And I can't think of a better partner to be in business with than you."

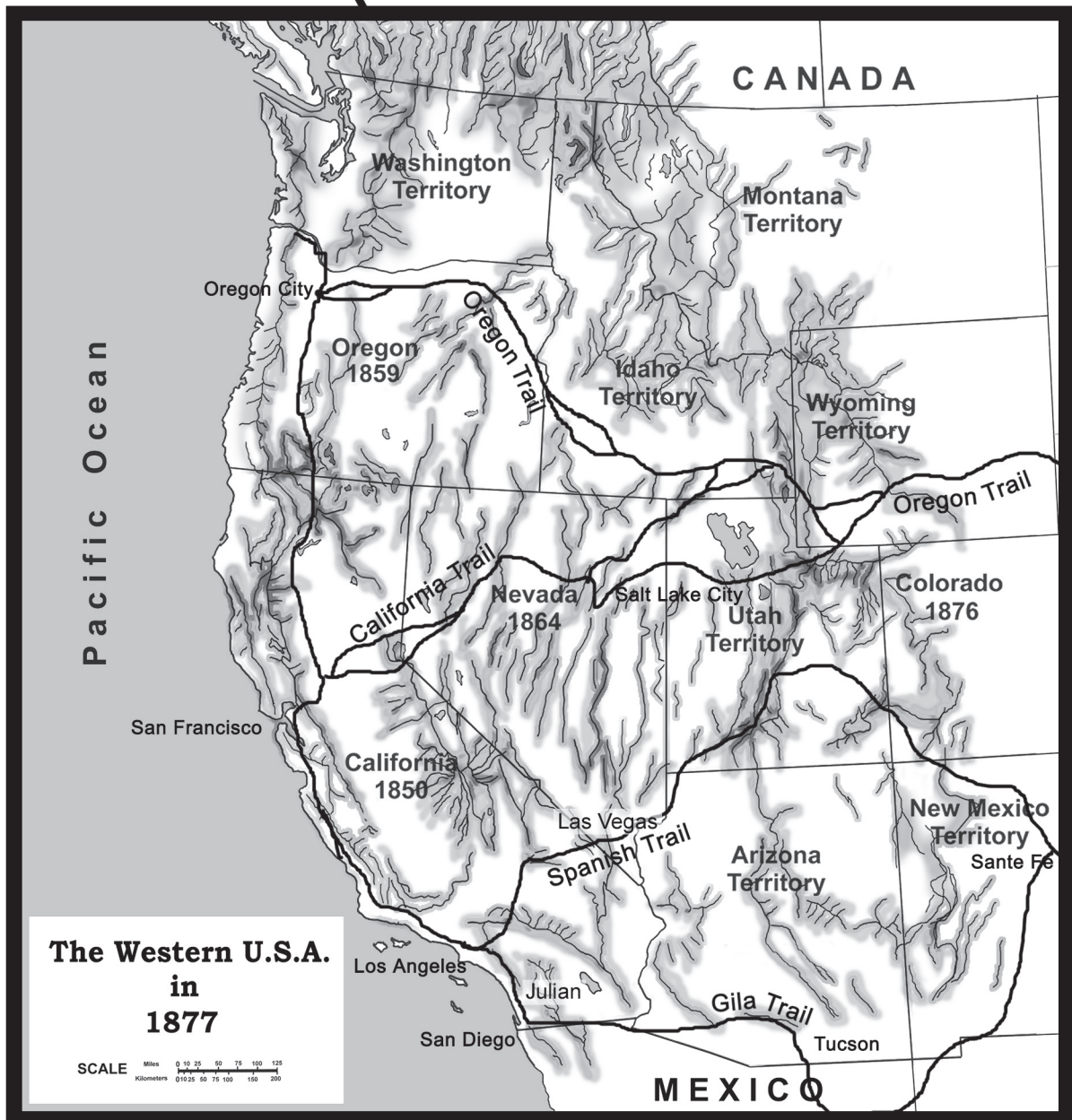
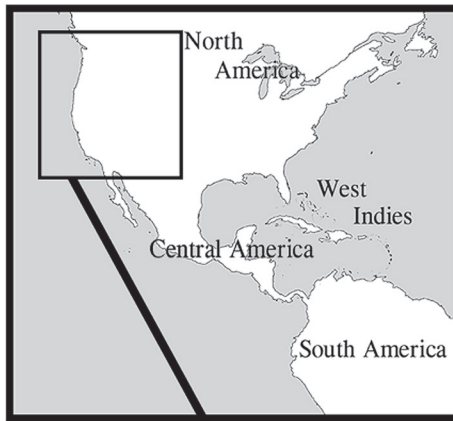
"I feel the same way," said Tom, putting his arm around Laura as they started down the dusty main street. "That, my young lady, is an honest-to-goodness fact!"

"Yes," said Laura. "We'll do great things together."



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Reading for All Learners -- Fluency Builders Series This map may be copied for non-profit purposes.

“Fluency Builders”

Model Lesson Plan Summary: Fluency, Vocabulary and Comprehension

Step 1. Review of Vocabulary from the Previous Chapter (approximately 2 minutes). The instructor reviews the 10 most difficult words from the previous chapter. See Step 7 of this Lesson Plan for more information. Any very difficult words should be added to the Step 7 list for further review.

Step 2. Overview and Vocabulary Check for the Chapter (approximately 5 minutes). Students read the chapter and prepare their own written list of words they cannot pronounce, decode, or understand. The instructor discusses and explains these words. Students demonstrate their understanding of difficult words by using the word in a sentence in another context. Building on the discussion of the vocabulary, the teacher asks questions to elicit the main ideas of the chapter and generate a summary of the actions, major characters, or concepts. This discussion should serve as a brief, introductory overview of the chapter.

Step 3. Fluency Practice in Speed and Accuracy (approximately 10 to 15 minutes). The instructor should model the appropriate fluency skills by reading the first paragraph at an appropriate pace. That is, approximately 120 words per minute and with appropriate expression. The instructor should “randomly” select students to read a paragraph aloud. To ensure active participation by all students, the instructor should occasionally stop the student reading in mid-paragraph and ask another student to finish the paragraph.

Step 4. Comprehension Instruction (approximately 5 minutes). Assign each student to prepare a comprehension question for the group. Students should be assigned to prepare either a “how,” “what,” “why,” “when,” or “where” question. Each student should then pose a comprehension question to the group; the answer should be discussed by the group.

Step 5. Oral Comprehension Check (approximately 5 minutes). This is a discussion session that explicitly applies comprehension concepts to the chapter. The teacher should generate questions to elicit such issues as “What is the main idea?” “What was the motive?” “What was the sequence?” “What happened first? Last?” “Summarize the chapter.” The instructor should ensure that students have practice with literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension questions. The discussion for Step 5 should serve as a gentle, yet firm, reminder that students are accountable for reading with understanding.

Step 6. Reading with Expression (approximately 5 minutes). Students should practice reading individual paragraphs with expression. This should be a fun experience. Focus on expression, not on speed and accuracy. Students may practice using different voices for different characters, changing intonation to indicate a question, and reading with pauses to build interest and anticipation. Each student should be given an opportunity to read at least one paragraph to the group.

Step 7. Prepare a Vocabulary Review List for the Chapter (approximately 3 minutes). The teacher and group should prepare a list of the chapter’s most difficult words to decode and understand. This should be a 10-word list based on difficult words encountered in the lesson. Each student should be required to review this list of 10 words as a homework assignment and be prepared to read and use each word in a sentence to demonstrate understanding. This review will be done as Step 1 of the next lesson on the next chapter.

Step 8. Individual Rate and Accuracy Assessment (approximately 5 minutes). Using “Assessment Step Sample” for the chapter, assess students on rate and accuracy. Record data for each student for each chapter. Check to see that students continue to meet the assessment standards from chapter to chapter. Do the reteaching when needed for individuals or the group.

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