

Little House in the Big Woods

Pa and Uncle Henry traded work. When the grain got ripe in the fields, Uncle Henry came to work with Pa, and Aunt Polly and all the cousins came to spend the day. Then Pa went to help Uncle Henry cut his grain, and Ma took Laura and Mary and Carrie to spend the day with Aunt Polly.

Ma and Aunt Polly worked in the house and all the cousins played together in the yard till dinner time. Aunt Polly's yard was a fine place to play, because the stumps were so thick. The cousins played jumping from stump to stump without ever touching the ground.

Even Laura, who was littlest, could do this easily in the places where the smallest trees had grown close together. Cousin Charley was a big boy, going on eleven years old, and he could jump from stump to stump all over the yard. The smaller stumps he could jump two at a time, and he could walk on the top rail of the fence without being afraid.

Pa and Uncle Henry were out in the field, cutting the oats with cradles. A cradle was a sharp steel blade fastened to a framework of wooden slats that caught and held the stalks of grain when the blade cut them. Pa and Uncle Henry carried the cradles by their long, curved handles, and swung the blades into the standing oats. When they had cut enough to make a pile, they slid the cut stalks off the slats, into neat heaps on the ground.

It was hard work, walking around and around the field in the hot sun, and with both hands swinging the heavy cradles into the grain and cutting it, then sliding it into the piles.

After all the grain was cut, they must go over the field again. This time they would stoop over each pile, and taking up a handful of the stalks in each hand they would knot them together to make a longer strand. Then gathering up the pile of grain in their arms they would bind it tightly around with the band they had made, and tie the band, and tuck in its ends.

After they made seven such bundles, then the bundles must be shocked. To make a shock, they stood five bundles upright, snugly together with the oat-heads up. Then over these they put two more bundles, spreading out the stalks to make a little roof and shelter the five bundles from dew and rain.

Every stalk of the cut grain must always be safely in the shock before dark, for lying on the dewy ground all night would spoil it.

Pa and Uncle Henry were working very hard, because the air was so heavy and hot and still that they expected rain. The oats were ripe, and if they were not cut and in the shock before rain came, the crop would be lost. Then Uncle Henry's horses would be hungry all winter.

At noon Pa and Uncle Henry came to the house in a great hurry, and swallowed their dinner as quickly as they could. Uncle Henry said that Charley must help them that afternoon.

Laura looked at Pa, when Uncle Henry said that. At home, Pa had said to Ma that Uncle Henry and Aunt Polly spoiled Charley. When Pa was eleven years old, he had done a good day's work every day in the fields, driving a team. But Charley did hardly any work at all.

Now Uncle Henry said that Charley must come to the field. He could save them a great deal of time. He could go to the spring for water, and he could fetch them the water-jug when they needed a drink. He could fetch the whetstone when the blades needed sharpening.

All the children looked at Charley. Charley did not want to go to the field. He wanted to stay in the yard and play. But, of course, he did not say so.

Pa and Uncle Henry did not rest at all. They ate in a hurry and went right back to work, and Charley went with them.

Now Mary was oldest, and she wanted to play a quiet, ladylike play. So in the afternoon the cousins made a playhouse in the yard. The stumps were chairs and tables and stoves, and leaves were dishes, and sticks were the children.

On the way home that night, Laura and Mary heard Pa tell Ma what happened in the field.

Instead of helping Pa and Uncle Henry, Charley was making all the trouble he could. He got in their way so they couldn't swing the cradles. He hid the whetstone, so they had to hunt for it when the blades needed sharpening. He didn't bring the water-jug till Uncle Henry shouted at him three or four times, and then he was sullen.

After that he followed them around, talking and asking questions. They were working too hard to pay any attention to him, so they told him to go away and not bother them.

But they dropped their cradles and ran to him across the field when they heard him scream. The woods were all around the field, and there were snakes in the oats.

When they got to Charley, there was nothing wrong, and he laughed at them. He said: "I fooled you that time!"

Pa said if he had been Uncle Henry, he would have tanned that boy's hide for him, right then and there. But Uncle Henry did not do it.

So they took a drink of water and went back to work.

Three times Charley screamed, and they ran to him as fast as they could, and he laughed at them. He thought it was a good joke. And still, Uncle Henry did not tan his hide.

Then a fourth time he screamed, louder than ever. Pa and Uncle Henry looked at him, and he was jumping up and down, screaming. They saw nothing wrong with him and they had been fooled so many times that they went on with their work.

Charley kept on screaming, louder and shriller. Pa did not say anything, but Uncle Henry said, "Let him scream." So they went on working and let him scream.

He kept on jumping up and down, screaming. He did not stop. At last Uncle Henry said: "Maybe something really is wrong." They laid down their cradles and went across the field to him.

And all that time Charley had been jumping up and down on a yellow jackets' nest! The yellow jackets lived in a nest in the ground and Charley stepped on it by mistake. Then all the little

bees in their bright yellow jackets came swarming out with their red-hot stings, and they hurt Charley so that he couldn't get away.

He was jumping up and down and hundreds of bees were stinging him all over. They were stinging his face and his hands and his neck and his nose, they were crawling up his pants' legs and stinging and crawling down the back of his neck and stinging. The more he jumped and screamed the harder they stung.

Read the excerpt from chapter 11 of Little House in the Big Woods and then answer the questions below.

1. What were Pa and Uncle Henry doing? _____

2. What tools were Pa and Uncle Henry using and how were they using them?

3. Why were Pa and Uncle Henry working quickly without taking a break?

4. Why was it important that the bundles be standing up? _____

5. How do you think the bundles were used after they were harvested? _____

6. Who is Charley and what part did he play in the story? _____
