

# the Christmas tree

## Chapter Three by Kay Hively

At breakfast the next morning, everyone was excited. Mrs. Drake had cooked sausage and eggs and made an extra large batch of biscuits. As Mary Jo poured gravy over her biscuit, she heard her father coming in the back door. He had been to the barn, hitching the mules to the wagons. He also had loaded the cotton sacks and a can of water into one of the wagons.

While Mary Jo and her brothers finished their breakfast, Mrs. Drake made sausage and biscuit sandwiches to take to the cotton patch. Carefully she packed the little sandwiches in a tin bucket.

Mary Jo helped clear the table and then, with their coats buttoned up against the cold, the family climbed onto the wagons and headed to the cotton field.

The sun was just peeking over a distant hill.

As Mary Jo rode in the wagon, she watched sunlight creeping across the rows of white cotton. In the days ahead, the cotton would be picked and the white fields would slowly become brown again. All the white fluffy cotton would soon be hauled to the gin, pressed into big bales and shipped away.

Mary Jo wondered what the cotton might become when it went to the factory.

Only a few minutes after the little family had left the yard, Mr. Drake pulled on the reins and the two mules came to a halt beside the first row of cotton. It was time to go to work.

Mrs. Drake helped the children get the straps of their cotton sacks over their heads. Mr. Drake picked out a row for each of the children. Mary Jo had a row between her parents. Her brothers took the outside rows.

Picking cotton was hard work, but no one complained. As the family moved slowly down the rows picking cotton off the dry stalks, everyone talked.

The boys chattered about what they would buy with their money. Mary Jo's dad said how happy he was to have a cotton crop. Mrs. Drake told funny stories. Mary Jo just liked to talk. Talking made time go faster. It also made her forget about her backache and about the scratches on her hands.

Her mother told her to wear gloves but Mary Jo would rather pick bare-handed.

After everyone had made one round, up one row and down another, it was time to empty their cotton sacks. Mary Jo took the heavy sack off her shoulder and let it fall to the ground. One by one, Mr. Drake weighed the sacks on a scale that hung on the wagon. Then he held the sacks upside down over the side of the wagon and shook them. Cotton came tumbling out into a pile on the wagon bed.

While Mr. Drake emptied the sacks, everyone else rested. The sun and hard work had warmed them so they all removed their coats. Mary Jo's mother folded the coats neatly and put them under the wagon seat. Then Mrs. Drake filled a dipper with water from the can. When it was her turn to drink, Mary Jo was careful not to spill any water.



Author Kay Hively and Illustrator Billie Gofourth-Stewart are both of Neosho, Missouri. Produced in partnership with this newspaper and the Missouri Press Foundation with support from Verizon Foundation. Copyright 2002.

### Classroom Extensions

Things to Think About and Do –

- A. Who was Eli Whitney? What is a cotton gin?
- B. What did Mary Jo have for breakfast? Was it a good breakfast? Make a list of all the things that would be good for breakfast. Now make up a good breakfast menu.

**Next Week: Chapter Four – Stranger on the Porch**