

The BIG Ditch

Chapter Five – by Kay Hively

A lovely woman named Maria met the Taylor family in their new home. Maria said she was the housekeeper and cook. Mrs. Taylor said it was wonderful to have help around the house and with shopping in the local markets, since many shopkeepers spoke only Spanish.

After the family unpacked a few things, they cleaned up and put on fresh clothes in time for dinner. Doug had not eaten anything since breakfast on the ship that morning. He could hardly use good table manners because he was so hungry, and Maria's food was so good.

Tired from their long journey, the entire family went to bed early. There was no glass on the windows in Doug's room. Instead, they were covered with two layers of fine wire mesh. Doug could hear the sounds of the jungle. For a long time he laid awake and listened to the strange noises, wondering what each was.

The next morning, Dr. Taylor hurried away after breakfast. He was eager to go to the hospital and meet Dr. Gorgas. Doug and his mother worked all day, getting their trunks unpacked and settling into their new home. Several neighbors came to visit, and Doug even met a few other boys who were about his age.

Dr. Taylor left early each day and did not return until dark. Each night at dinner he talked about his work. He explained what the medical staff was doing to prevent malaria and yellow fever. The doctors and nurses took care of the sick and supervised hundreds of workers who were trying to get rid of the deadly mosquitoes.

One evening Dr. Taylor invited Doug to visit the hospital. The next morning Doug went with his father to the hospital and

met the famous Dr. Gorgas. He spent the day watching his father tending the sick. Doug had never seen so many sick people. Most were in beds surrounded by mosquito nets.

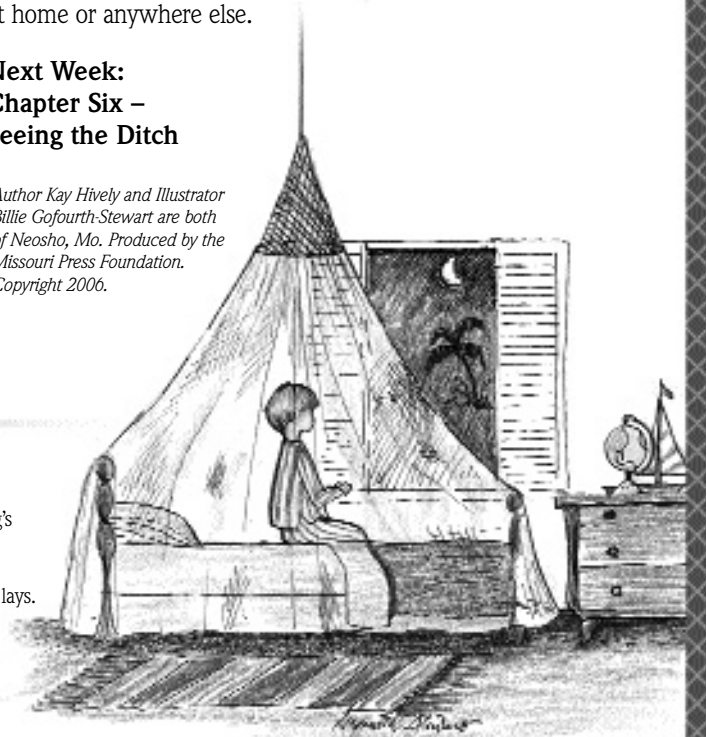
Everyone in the hospital was working to clean things and to empty anything that held water. Because it rained almost daily, any container that could hold water was filled all the time. Water stood in roads and yards, in empty tin cans and in flower pots and barrels. Everyone was ordered to empty water from anything they found. Dr. Taylor said that millions of mosquitoes could be hatched out of a small flower pot.

Each day hundreds of workers went out through the towns and along the canal route draining ditches, pouring oil on swampy land and burning brush and debris where mosquitoes lived. Doug was fascinated at this army of men who went out every day to fight the tiny mosquitoes.

He also learned that little work was being done on the canal because so many workers were sick. Dr. Taylor told Doug that his job was to remove standing water wherever he found it – at home or anywhere else.

Next Week: Chapter Six – Seeing the Ditch

Author Kay Hively and Illustrator Billie Goforth-Stewart are both of Neosho, Mo. Produced by the Missouri Press Foundation. Copyright 2006.



Things to Think About and Do

- There are at least two reasons why there was no glass on the windows in Doug's bedroom. Can you name them?
- Read about the life cycle of a mosquito. Write a short report on the mosquito, telling how it lives, why it bites people, and how many eggs a female mosquito lays.
- Mosquito nets and eliminating standing water were keys to fighting malaria in Panama, and Doug saw an "army of men" out working to fight mosquitoes each day. Find examples in the newspaper of community workers helping make where you live a better place.