



It Happened a Long Time Ago

Sophia, the daughter of Augustin Grignon (pronounced Green-yo), and her friend Sadie, whose father was a freed slave, had picked blackberries since mid-morning, but their pails weren't full yet.

"Mama said to fill these pails 'til the berries fall off the top," Sophia said.

Sadie reached deep into a bush and nimbly fingered three berries into her hand. "My mama says there'll be no blackberry cobbler this winter if I don't fill my pails."

"I ne'er seen so small a nubbins," Sophia said. "We'd better find bigger ones if we want to fill these pails."

"I'd sure miss that cobbler."

Sophia pointed across a small stream toward a thick patch of berry bushes. "I'm tired of picking here. Let's eat our lunch over there. Maybe the berries are bigger in that patch."

They jumped across the stream at a narrow point. Sophia sat on a strand of grass near the water's edge and fished a sandwich from her big pocket. Sadie took her sandwich out, but before taking a bite, she kneeled and pointed into the mud at the stream's edge. "See that?"

Sophia bent and looked closer. "A paw print."

"A bear paw print, and it looks fresh."

The girls stood and looked around.

"I don't wanna face a bear," Sadie said. "We better git while the wanna's good."

"Daddy says to make lots of noise." Sophia grabbed a stick and beat it against her pail. "He says that bears won't hurt you if they can avoid it."

"They will if they have cubs." Sadie looked down at the partly-filled pails. "Or if they're hungry."

They'd crossed the stream above the big berry patch. Sophia and Sadie lifted their pails, dropped their sandwiches into their pockets, and slowly made their way around the patch, staying as far from the thicket as possible.

Sophia continued to bang on her pail. "Stay in the open, away from the bushes."

They were halfway around the berry patch when Sophia heard a noise, a grunting sound coming from the thicket. "Listen!"

The girls froze and Sophia could see by the look on her face that Sadie was as frightened as she was.

Then a bear cub ran out of the thicket toward them.

Sophia wasn't sure whether to stand still or run.

But when a big, black, mama bear crashed through the bushes and headed their way, Sophia didn't think any more. Her feet moved without commands from her brain, and Sadie was already running out front.

"Throw your sandwich," Sadie called back as she fished hers from her pocket and tossed it over her shoulder. "Maybe she'll stop for that."

And the cub did stop to sniff the food, but mama bear kept coming.

"Head for Dad's cornfield," Sophia shouted ahead to her friend. "Get across the fence. Maybe that'll stop her."

Sadie didn't answer but she swung her pails as she ran. And so did Sophia. Mama had said to bring berries home, or else.

The girls were good runners, and they ran fast, but mama bear kept coming, gaining by the second. Sophia ran faster and saw the rail fence ahead, but she could hear the bear huffing at her heels. She knew she could clear the fence with her hands empty, but she'd always jumped over by pushing off the top rail. Sophia saw that Sadie was near the fence now, but how could she possibly get over with those pails in her hands. But Sadie didn't drop the pails. Sophia was about to shout ahead to her friend when she felt a tug and heard a clang as the bear's big paw whipped a pail from her hand. She looked ahead one last time and hoped that Sadie could make it home.



Butte des Morts, Wisconsin is an old community. Located eight miles northwest of Oshkosh and three miles east of Winneconne, it overlooks the Fox River, a river that played an important role in America's exploration and settlement.

Almost four hundred years ago, French missionaries and traders journeyed from the Atlantic Ocean to Green Bay, Wisconsin, a city located

near the top of the Great Lake Michigan. And from there they traveled up the Fox River to Portage, carried their canoes across a strip of land, and lowered them into the Wisconsin River. They paddled down the Wisconsin River to where it joined the Mississippi River at Prairie du Chien, and then down that big river all the way to New Orleans. Some daring explorers left the Mississippi and turned up the Missouri River, then paddled west toward the Rocky Mountains' riches and dangers.

Years later, pioneers traveled this same route, and Augustin Grignon sold them the supplies they needed for the long trip. Augustin had established the first permanent trading post in Winnebago County near Butte des Morts in 1818. About twenty-five years later he built a wood frame hotel and trading post near the center of town. That building still stands in Butte des Morts today. The Trading Post sits high above Lake Butte des Morts, a large, shallow lake. But before the state built a dam at Neenah, turning that part of the Fox River into a big lake, the Trading Post overlooked the Fox River's meandering waters. Unlike most of our country's waterways the Fox River flows northward, from Portage into Lake Michigan at Green Bay.

Before the Civil War more than one hundred slaves escaping the South made their way up the Illinois River or the Rock River into Wisconsin. Some escaping slaves traveled to Racine and were hidden away on ships that took them through the Great Lakes to Canada. Others escaped through Janesville, Milton, and Ripon to Green Bay and, there, boarded ships to Canada. Because helping slaves escape was illegal, many of the stopping places were kept secret. Butte des Morts' Trading Post is believed to be one of those stopping places.