

I dedicate this book to my mother Erma “Bobbie” Stiter. She loved to tell stories about growing up in Stevensville, Montana, with family that had come across the plains in a covered wagon.

Using some things I remember from her stories, I have made a story of my own for children to read or have read to them. This is the first chapter.

Penny Candy

by

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CHAPTER ONE — TWO STOWAWAYS

Stevensville, Montana — 1914 — School was out for summer...

Dad finished hitching Buster and Paddy to the wagon. Now was my chance. If my plan worked, in just a few minutes I would be headed to Oregon. I squeezed myself underneath piles of blankets and between bags of flour and sugar. My big black tomcat Licorice was next to me packed in a heavy cardboard box with breathing holes. I rubbed my lucky coin hoping Dad wouldn't find our hiding place until it was too late to turn around to bring us back to Grandma's.

Outside I heard the scrunch of footsteps. Dad was coming back to the wagon. I held my breath.

"Ouch," I felt a tug as Dad grabbed hold of my foot. Pots and pans clattered out onto the floor of the wagon. I tried to wiggle my foot out of his grasp.

"Just what have we here," he asked, "a stowaway?"

I backed out of my hiding place.

“Please, please -- let me come with you this summer,” I begged. “I can ride behind Len on Lucky.”

“Slow down, Sis. I know you want to come with us, but a lumber camp is no place for a nine-year-old. You’re staying in Stevensville with Grandma and Grandpa. That’s final.”

“It’s not fair. All winter I’ve been here in town going to school. Summer’s the only time I can be with you. Len’s going and he’s only twelve. Why do I have to stay here in Montana when my brothers get to be in Oregon with you?”

“Your brothers are old enough to work. Charlie’s already a lumberjack. Len can help me repair harnesses.”

“I’m never old enough to do anything.”

Dad shook his head. “That’s not so. You’re old enough to know that your job this summer is to stay here with Grandma and Grandpa. The rest of us will be working at the lumber camp. We need money to keep the ranch going.”

The ranch was a good two hours’ ride from the school in town, so most of the year I lived with Grandma and Grandpa.

This summer I was counting on being with Dad on the ranch. At Grandma’s my cat has to stay outside. At the ranch he can be in the house. In the evening on the ranch Licorice purrs on my lap while Dad tells stories. I help Dad dig in the garden. At dinner time he ties a big apron around me and we cook together. He never worries like Grandma does about spots on my dress or makes me wear ugly, long black stockings.

When Dad heard there was big money to be made working in Oregon lumber camps, he sent Charlie ahead to find a job.

Now Len was riding Lucky beside the wagon and going to Oregon with Dad. Me, here I was -- left behind.

All summer with Grandma -- that was too much!

“Don’t - Don’t - Don’t,” that’s all I heard from Grandma. “Don’t tear your stockings. Don’t let the cat in the house. Don’t get that dress dirty.”

Every morning Grandma pulls my curly brown hair back so tight that my eyes water. She makes two braids that she loops behind my ears. When I beg to brush my own hair and tie it with a ribbon, she sniffs, “A sensible hairdo is best. No silly curls in this house.”

Dad must have read my thoughts because he said, “Listen here, Sis. I know that Grandma gets after you. She’s had lots of grief and hard life. There’s no cause that we should add to her burdens.”

My name is Erma. “Sis” is what Dad and my brothers call me.

“Child” is what Grandma calls me. She says, “Child, you make more mischief than all the eleven children that I’ve brought into this world.”

I know Grandma’s had tough times. No matter how hard I try, I always do something that makes her purse her lips, scowl and say, “Gracious, child, won’t you ever learn?”

I blinked back tears as Dad swept me off the ground and gave me a last hug.

“I know it’s hard for you to stay behind this summer, but be a good girl and don’t give your grandma cause to fret.” Dad kissed me goodbye.

Grandpa and Grandma came out of the house to see Dad and Len off. Grandpa took my hand. As the wagon headed toward the corner, I remembered my cat Licorice. He was still in the box on the wagon.

”Wait!”

I pulled my hand from Grandpa’s and ran toward the cloud of dust kicked up by the wagon.

“Erma, stop!” yelled Grandpa.

”Child, get back here this minute,” called Grandma.

When Dad stopped the team before turning onto Main Street, I caught up.

“The cat - the cat.”

Breathless, I could say nothing else.

“What are you talking about?” Dad said. “Catch your breath and tell me what’s going on.”

After my chest stopped heaving, I told him. “Licorice is in a box on the wagon.”

Dad gave a worried shake of his head as he handed me the box. “Don’t disappoint me this summer,” he said. “Do what Grandma tells you to do and don’t cause her any extra headaches.”

“I’ll be good, I promise.”

Grandma was at the screen door when I returned with Licorice.

“Keep that cat outside,” she said. “I have enough to do without cleaning up cat hairs and having him underfoot meowing for a saucer of milk.”

Later that morning Grandma started on what she expected me to do this summer.

“With your dad away all summer, I don’t want you running wild like you do on the ranch. Here in town you’re to keep your clothes clean and do your chores. You need to bring in wood for the cook stove and hang out clothes on wash day.

“You better not be tearing around getting into mischief with the Ellis children.”

My heart sank. “But Annie Ellis is my best friend.”

“Annie’s all right, though she doesn’t have much sense for an eleven-year-old. It’s that brother of hers. The trouble begins when the two of you gang up on him.”

“It’s not our fault. Marvin is a pest, always making up rhymes and spying on us.”

The good thing about having Annie for a friend is that she is eleven years old. We do a lot of things together that I’m not allowed to do alone. The bad thing about having Annie for a friend is her brother Marvin. He’s just my age and in my class at school. He teases me and calls me names. Then I get in trouble when I try to get even.

“You promised I could go to Annie’s today,” I said.

“That I did, child. First do your chores. Just remember, you get into mischief and you’ll be spending your summer all by yourself sitting on our front porch.”