

The Farm Mystery Series

Book also has a prologue.

Chapter One

“Would you look at this!” exclaimed ten-year-old Andy Nelson to his twelve-year-old brother, Jason. “It says here that this Hoover dam in Arizona is more than 700 feet tall. Imagine a dam that’s over 70 stories high!” For someone living in a small, rural town where the highest building was two stories, that’s very impressive.

Jason put down his pencil and walked to Andy’s desk a few feet away. “Let’s see that. Wow! Look how tall that is. That’s lots bigger than the dam we saw in Chattanooga. And look at all that water backed up behind it,” he said, pointing to another picture.

“I know. It says somewhere in this article how much water is in the lake behind the dam . . . Where was that? . . . Oh, here it is. Here are how many gallons of water there are. You won’t believe it. You ready? One zero comma zero zero zero comma zero zero zero comma zero zero zero comma zero zero zero gallons of water! How would you say that? Ten billion? No. It’s more than that.” Andy counted the zero’s again carefully. Mom had just taught the boys a few weeks ago the order of numbers. “Is that ten trillion gallons? Yes, I think it is! Wow! Ten trillion gallons! Imagine how many boats we could float in that lake.”

“I wonder why they need a dam that big?” Jason asked, perplexed. “Seems way too big to me.”

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Andy was in-the-know on this issue. Mom had assigned him the topic of “Dams: Why We Build Them and What We Do With Them” and Andy had been reading in the encyclopedia about different dams. “They’re used to control floods, store water, and make electricity. They also make it easier to move up and down the river in boats most of the year. By the look of that lake, I would think you could put the biggest ship from the ocean in it!”

“Hey, Cathy. Have you ever seen a picture of the Hoover Dam?” Jason called over to his older sister, who was studying American History at her desk.

Cathy, nearly sixteen, walked over and looked at the picture. “Sure guys, I’ve seen pictures of that dam. It’s one of the largest in the world. The electricity they make there is sent all over the southwest. I think I remember that it is even sent to Los Angeles, which is far away.”

“Yes, the electricity is sent out over big wires. About 250 miles away,” Andy confirmed, looking at the book. “And the water is piped a long way too: over 200 miles.”

Cathy moved behind Andy so she could read the entry more easily. “Hey look, it says that they used so much concrete to build the dam, that you could pave a highway from New York to San Francisco with the concrete. That’s from one end of the United States to the other end.”

And so the discussion and exclamations continued for a little while as the three poured over the pictures, diagrams, and related articles.

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Homeschooling certainly worked well for the Nelson family of southeastern Tennessee. The freedom to explore interesting topics in depth, the way the children all shared their knowledge and skills with one another, and the relaxed atmosphere resulted in a near-perfect environment for learning to take place.

“The base of the dam is 660 feet thick,” Andy noted. “That’s pretty thick. I know I’m only five feet tall. What would 660 feet look like?”

Cathy walked to the window. “Do you see that large oak tree at the edge of the field?” Andy was looking in the wrong direction. “No . . . see the one by the dead pine tree? Yes, that one over there.”

Andy finally seemed to target the tree Cathy was referring to. “Well, the distance from here to there is how thick the Hoover Dam is at its base.”

Andy and Jason whistled softly, visibly impressed.

“I suppose you boys need to get back to your compositions though, don’t you?” Cathy suggested kindly, moving back toward her desk and reaching for her book. “I think I heard Mom say that she wanted to see a draft before lunch?”

“Thanks for reminding us, Cathy,” Jason said sincerely. “I’ve got mine about half done. I just need to think of a better ending for my story.”

“What’s your story about?” Andy asked. Andy was always ready for a diversion from writing compositions. Although he had looked up some articles on his topic, he had done little more than write down a title for his composition on his pad of paper. Who knows? Maybe hearing about Jason’s would give him some inspiration or direction for his own

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composition.

“It’s about a young man during The Great Depression of the 1930’s, who goes to work at a Civilian Conservation Corps Camp - they were called the CCC as a shorter name. You remember, those were camps set up to help unemployed men make some money to send back home? Well, anyway, my composition is about a man who went there because his family had no money. The work was very hard and mostly done by hand, not machines. You want to hear it?” Andy nodded, so Jason began:

The Camp

I bent over and scrubbed my face. Beside me I heard James saying: “It sure does feel good to get this sweat washed off.” I wanted to agree, but I knew that if I did, I’d get a mouthful of bubbles.

As I washed my face, I was busy thinking. I thought, *I’ve heard that the CCC is hard, but I never knew that it was this hard. All of last week we dug a pond, now we’re making a stone bridge. When I first came here, they had just finished making these buildings! Out of bricks! They had to transport those bricks twenty miles. They at least could have used stones, since there are so many around here.*

I quickly dried my face and put on a clean shirt. The dinner horn began making a terrible roaring and we went into the big low mess hall. After a full meal of steak and baked potatoes, we were given a half hour of rest. One hundred boys went out under the shade trees near the barracks. All too soon the foreman came out of the headquarters and called,

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“Time to get to work!” I got up and joined the men who fitted and laid stones. We went to work rolling stones to the bridge, chipping them to shape, spreading mortar on them, and laying them in place. By six o’clock, the bridge was finished. We hurried back to camp for supper, showers, and then bedtime. As I lay in bed, I thought: “Tomorrow I’m going to quit and become a . . . a rodeo rider.”

Andy laughed when Jason said that last line. “That’s a neat story, Jason. I see what you mean about the ending, though. It’s kind of hard to believe that he could just quit and be a rodeo rider. If he could, why would he ever go to the CCC camp anyway?”

“I know,” Jason laughed. “I wasn’t really going to keep it that way. But it came into my head and I liked that ending. It was fun writing it down. Do you have any suggestions?”

Andy thought for a minute, drumming his pencil on the desk. “Why not have the man say that, even though the work was hard, he had the satisfaction of being able to say ‘I helped make that bridge.’ Then he can fall asleep or something.”

“I like that,” Jason agreed. “Dad is always telling us to learn to get pleasure out of finishing a job and seeing the results. Even if the job was very hard to do or not much fun. Yes, I think I’m going to use your ending for my story. Thanks!”

Jason started working hard on his composition. Andy, finally thinking of a neat way to start his composition, began to slowly write a few

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sentences. He kept stopping to sharpen his pencil, adjust the lay of the paper on his desk, look out the window for inspiration, and scratch his nose.

A while later, Mom stuck her head in the doorway. “You guys can take a fifteen minute break from school,” she offered. “I need to run to Mrs. Claymore’s for a minute. She is going to give me some scrap wool from her sheep for a project I’m working on. Do you need anything before I go?”

The boys shook their heads. “Okay. Well, Cathy is here if you need anything. I’ll be back in five or ten minutes. I’m taking Leah, Matthew, and Ben with me.” She hurried back out of the room.

Ben was six years old and one of the healthiest boys ever seen. He tried his best to keep up with his older brothers and enjoyed the same things they did. Since Mom and Dad had adopted two children from Russia recently, Ben had a new playmate. Matthew, three years old, although shy at first in the Nelson home, took to Ben right away. Ben and Matthew were practically inseparable. Leah, a little over a year old, was still very much a baby and had come to America with several health problems.

“What do you want to do with our free time?” Andy asked Jason.

“I don’t know,” Jason answered. “Why don’t we go outside?”

Enough said. The boys first spent some time throwing sticks for their dog, Ranger, to fetch. Then they enjoyed riding their bikes in the driveway and over a little jump they had created using some bricks and a piece of wood.

“Look at me, Jason,” Andy called, riding

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toward the ramp of wood again. “I’m a policeman, in a hurry to where a wreck has just happened . . . Oh no! The bridge is washed out! There’s only this small piece sticking up left of the bridge. Can I make my car jump to the other side safely? I just have to try. People up the road need me desperately. Here goes! . . . Zoom . . . I made it!”

Now that he was safely on the other side of the ‘bridge’, Andy called on his imaginary radio. “Car 45 to Headquarters! Car 45 to Headquarters! Come in Headquarters! . . . Yes, this is Car 45. We have a terrible accident here. Can you please page Car 87 to the scene? I know that Officer Jason has a winch in his patrol car. We’re going to need that to get the people out of the car. Please call the rescue squad also.”

“This is Car 87 to Car 45,” Jason replied from his bike. “I’m en route to the scene. Officer Andy, can you give me the exact location of the accident?”

“Car 45 to Car 87. I’m about five miles west of Daisy Street on Highway 16. There is a bright yellow van that ran into a red pick-up truck. Some people in the van are trapped . . .”

And so the break was filled with fresh air, excitement, and exercise. Mom came home shortly and Andy and Jason helped her by unloading the car, while Cathy took Leah inside. The fresh sheep’s wool had a distinctly earthy aroma that was really pleasant.

“Where do you want this stuff?” Andy asked.

“For now, let’s put it in the basement. And guys, I thought of something else you can do for me,” Mom stated. Before she could continue, she heard

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Leah crying in the back bedroom. Cathy was trying to change Leah's diaper and didn't seem to be having an easy time of it. "I'll be back in a minute."

The boys deposited the wool in the basement and then walked slowly to the living room. "I wonder what Mom is going to make with the wool?" Andy mused.

"Maybe she'll make us an army blanket," Jason hoped. "They're made out of wool."

"Say, that would be neat," Andy replied, looking for something to do until Mom returned. "I wonder what Mom wants us to do for her?"

A few minutes later Mom walked into the room. "Guys, I have a new job I need you to take over." The boys were standing by the couch, taking turns twirling a pencil. It wasn't an ordinary pencil. No, it was a tremendously fat and long pencil that Aunt Ruth had sent them as a souvenir from a recent trip she took. The pencil, almost two feet long and nearly 3/4" thick, with the words "The Grand Canyon" embossed on the sides, apparently wasn't meant to be used to write with. Since it didn't fit into the pencil sharpener, Jason and Andy had improvised, and turned it into a toy to be tossed, rolled, drummed with, and most recently, to be twirled. Andy had just succeeded in twirling it nonstop while Jason counted to thirty-four when Mom walked into the room.

Mom looked tired, balancing the baby on one hip while carrying some laundry in her other hand. It was obvious that little one-year-old Leah was taking a lot of Mom's time and energy. While Leah's outlook and personality had improved greatly, thanks to the medicine that the doctors had prescribed and a

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lot of loving care, Leah still only felt comfortable when she was in Mom's arms. As a result, Mom had not been able to get much done around the house and farm for the last few months.

"What kind of help do you need?" Jason asked sympathetically.

Mom smiled. She was so grateful for the cheerful attitude of her children in most situations. They weren't perfect, but they usually had a pretty good attitude about chipping in when things needed to get done. "I need you two guys to take over sweeping."

"You mean, all the time?" Andy asked, cautiously. "Forever?"

Mom laughed. "Well, Andy, forever seems like a little bit longer time frame than I was thinking of. But for the foreseeable future, yes, I want you two to take this on as an added everyday chore."

"Sure, Mom, we'd be glad to. Right, Andy?" Jason piped up.

"Sure," Andy agreed, wondering why Jason was so enthusiastic to add to his list of daily chores.

"Thanks, guys," Mom sighed. "Cathy has about all she can handle already, and I can't help but worry about all the little dust balls and scraps of paper lying around. You'll help me feel even better about the time I am having to spend with Leah." Mom kissed her little girl. "You're worth every minute of it, darling," she said, snuggling close to Leah's face.

When Mom left the room, Andy asked, "Say, why are you so happy about doing the sweeping, Jason? With that look on your face, I thought you might even ask if we could add a few more chores."

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Jason looked at his younger brother of two years, and gave him an older-boy-to-a-younger-boy look. “Andy, Mom needs us. We should help her because it’s the right thing to do.”

“Yes, I know we should . . .” Andy started, but was interrupted.

“Besides, we get to use the vacuum cleaner, Andy!” Jason interjected with enthusiasm.

Andy hadn’t considered that. The vacuum cleaner had pretty much been off limits to the boys. It was the private domain of Mom and Cathy. The brand-new tool, expensive and somewhat elaborate, was ordered by the doctor to help cut down on the dust mites in the house, something the doctor had hoped would help Leah’s coughing condition. Once or twice since they had gotten it a month earlier, Jason or Andy had been allowed to merely push it back and forth a few times. But that vacuum was powerful, with wands, brushes, and other attachments that the boys really did want to try out.

Andy liked the sound of the news. Still, he was uncertain. “Are you sure Mom will let us use it?” he asked. But his question wasn’t answered by Jason. About that time Mom was walking back through the living room and heard some of this conversation.

“Yes, you boys can use the new vacuum cleaner,” Mom assured them. “But please do be careful with it. It was very expensive and it needs to last a long time.” Both boys pledged to be as careful with the vacuum cleaner as they were with everything else. For some reason, Mom seemed to still have her doubts, but walked on through the living room, muttering something under her breath about Leah being worth it.