

Bee Tree

“Papa will smile,” Jim said. No one was close by. No one could hear him. But Jim said out loud, “Papa will smile.”

Papa had not been happy in a long time. He used to joke and sing a lot. But it had been a long time since Papa had acted that way.

Last year had been very hard. Papa and Mama and Jim and the baby had come to live in a new place. It was far from the city of St. Louis, where they had lived.

They had traveled for many days in a wagon pulled by oxen. Papa and Mama had talked each day about how good it would be to live on their own land. Then they would talk softly about how hard it would be for the first year in their new home. Sometimes they seemed happy. Sometimes they didn't.

Their new home was in a place called Arkansas. There was no city. There were only trees and rivers.

Papa said, “We have a lot of work to do, and a short time to do it.” They built a shelter for the family out of limbs and brush.

Papa cut down trees and made an open space to grow corn and beans and pumpkins. Late one evening, Jim saw some deer that had come to the clearing. He was happy to see deer so near their camp, and ran to tell Papa. Papa did not smile. “The deer will eat our beans,” he said.

Papa used the trees he cut down to build a small cabin. Mama helped to move the logs into place. Jim helped as much as he was able. They used mud and small pieces of wood to fill the spaces between the logs.

When they moved into the cabin, Mama was happy, and so was Jim. Papa even smiled a little, but not for long. He said, "Time is short, and we have to build a barn for the oxen and the milk cow before winter." Papa seemed to worry all the time.

Then, in the winter, came the worst thing of all. The ground shook. It shook very hard. And it shook for days and days. The barn was almost built, but most of it fell. The cabin did not fall, but some of the mud fell out of the spaces between the logs.

Jim helped Papa find the oxen and the cow. They had run away when the ground started to shake. Papa had to tie them to the logs of the barn to keep them from running away again. Mama said that when the ground shook like that, it was called an "earthquake."

One night, Jim heard Papa talking to Mama. He said that he had seen a family who was leaving. Their cabin had fallen down during the earthquake, and all their animals had been lost.

"They told me what happened to some other people," Papa said. "In some places land had sunk. It just dropped right down and filled up with water. In other places, fires had started in the woods."

“I guess we are lucky,” he said. But they both seemed to worry even more.

One day, Mama said to Papa, “The ground didn’t shake this week. It didn’t shake last week. Maybe it’s over.” She was smiling. Papa didn’t smile, but he did nod as if to say, “maybe.”

That had been a few weeks ago. By now, Papa had planted a new crop of corn. The little, green bean plants had started to grow as they had the year before.

The wild plum trees had small, white flowers on them. That was where Jim first saw the bees. Bees were landing on the flowers. They moved from one flower to another. Then they flew off – all going the same way.

Jim followed the bees. They all flew into a hole in an old gum tree. Bees were all around the hole, and bees were flying in and out. Without even looking into the hole, Jim knew what he had found.

It was a “bee tree.” It was a place where the bees were making honey. They were taking a kind of syrup called nectar from the flowers on the plum trees. They took the nectar back to the tree. In a way that only the bees knew, they turned the nectar into sweet, golden honey.

Jim ran to the cabin. He was happy thinking about the sweet cake that Mama could make, using the honey from the bee tree. Mama and Papa liked

to put honey in their tea. Mama might even put some honey in the baby's milk. After such a hard year, a little honey would make all of them feel better.

Mama laughed when Jim told her about the bee tree. "Go find Papa," she said. "Take him with you to the tree."

Jim ran as fast as he could to where Papa was working. Papa was clearing more land. He stopped and listened. Between gasps for breath, Jim told Papa about the bee tree.

"Show me," Papa said. Jim ran off toward the bee tree with Papa close behind him. As they got closer to the tree, they saw more and more bees flying toward it. When Papa saw bees flying in and out of the hole, he knew Jim was right.

"Can we take some honey right now?" Jim asked.

"Let's wait a few weeks," said Papa, "Let them store up a lot of honey. Then we'll find a way to take some of it."

"Well, I can just about taste it now," said Jim as he licked his lips.

Papa smiled.

Bee Tree Assessment Page

Reading

When the ground shakes, there might be

1. A tornado
2. An earthquake
3. A change in the season
4. A frost

The bees took nectar from the blossom of the

1. Wild apple tree
2. Red Clover
3. Honeysuckle
4. Wild plum tree

Papa didn't want deer near the house because they might

1. Eat the bean plants
2. Scare the baby
3. Make a mess on the lawn
4. Make too much noise

Open-ended response

In the story, Papa always seemed to be worried and he was always in a hurry. What do you think the reasons were for him to be that way?

Scoring Rubric

4. Student describes the range of work that was necessary to ensure the family had food, shelter, and a chance to live well in their new country, perhaps adding tasks that aren't mentioned in the story. Student shows understanding that the family had to be self-reliant.
3. Student describes most of the survival tasks mentioned in the story and shows a connection between getting them done and getting through the coming winter.
2. Student lists some of the survival tasks Papa needed to do.
1. Student shows a minimal understanding of the story.
0. Response is totally incorrect or irrelevant.