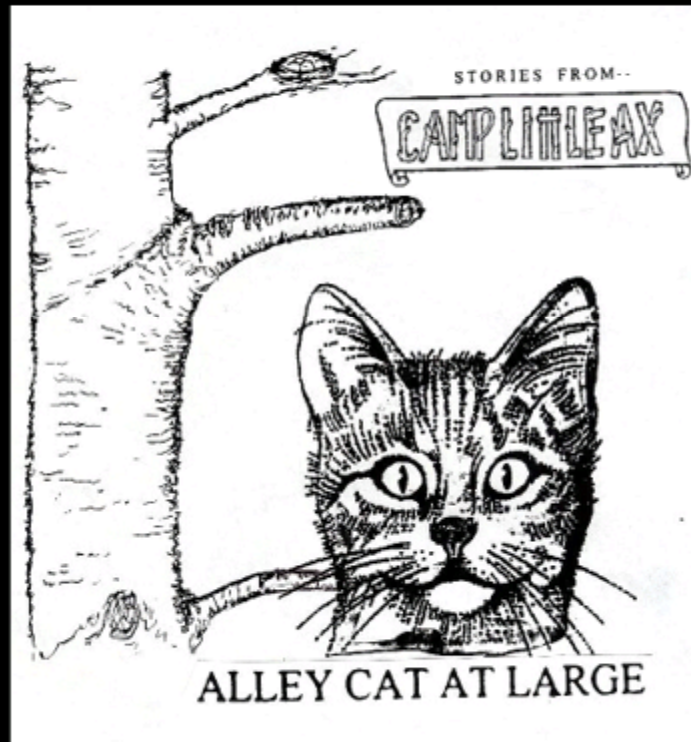


Joann Klusmeyer



STORIES FROM--

CAT LITTLE AX

ALLEY CAT AT LARGE

Alley Cat At Large

by Joann Klusmeyer

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Alley Cat At Large

There was a very good reason why Afton Robison carried her portable hamster cage as she boarded the green van with the name "CAMP LITTLE AX" painted on its side.

Afton's mom had told her, "Afton, you have to decide what to do about your hamsters for the summer. You remember Grandma's operation will have me away from home, your brother is going to be away at camp at the same time, and your dad has too much to do to be bothered with taking care of them. You just have to find a place for them." Several calls proved no help at all, and even the pet store didn't want to be bothered with boarding them. A call to the summer girl's camp assured her that she was free to bring them with her, but she must be totally responsible for them, for their safety and care.

So that's why Afton carried the hamster cage.

When she came aboard the van, Afton saw a number of girls already aboard, waiting to be taken from the Oklahoma City Bus Station to the camp, twenty miles away. One girl sat alone on the front seat of the van and she smiled and motioned for Afton to sit beside her.

"Hi," the girl told Afton. "My name is Joy and I have hamsters, too. I didn't know we could bring them along."

"Hello, I'm Afton, and I didn't intend to bring mine. There just wasn't any place to leave them, and the people at the camp said I could bring them if I took care of them, and didn't hold them responsible for anything that might happen. So here they are. Joy, meet Humphrey and Annette."

Joy waggled a finger through the cage wires and Humphrey sniffed, delicately, tasting her finger with his tiny pink tongue.

"Oh, look, he likes you!"

Joy nodded, "Or he likes the way I smell. I've been playing with my hamsters this morning, saying 'goodbye'."

Afton opened the cage and put her hand inside. Annette climbed aboard. From Afton's shoulder, the furry creature worked its way through the blond, curly hair to the top of her head. There she sat on her little tan haunches, looking around, wriggling her nose and whiskers and rubbing her ears with her tiny, furry fingers.

"Oh, she's so cute! Could I hold Humphrey? I'll be careful."

Afton turned the cage door toward her new friend and Humphrey climbed onto her fingers. In no time, he was on Joy's head, nosing around in her red, curly bangs and sniffing at the butterfly-shaped barrett holding Joy's long, red, pony-tail hairdo.

What followed next, was a scream from the back of the van.

"EEEEK! A mouse! Get it out! Get it out!"

Another girl yelled, "Where? Where do you see a mouse?"

"In that girl's hair! Look!"

"Oh, that's not a mouse. That's a hamster. Didn't you ever have a pet hamster?"

"No, and I don't know why I'd ever want one. They scare me!"

"Well, you don't have to worry, then. Hamsters don't stay around people who don't like them."

"How do you know that?"

"I don't know. I just heard it somewhere."

Joy lifted her hand to the top of her head and Humphrey stepped daintily on it, and she lifted him down to her lap. "I think they have such sweet little faces."

"I do, too. I just know they're going to be mad at me."

"Why?"

"They'll have to stay in the cage. At home, I let them out a lot. Actually, they get out any time they want to, because I usually left the cage door open."

"Are they hard to catch?"

"No, because sooner or later, they get hungry and come to someone, wanting to be fed."

They rode along together for a few miles.

Afton asked, "Have you ever been to this camp before?"

Joy shook her head. "No, but the brochure sounded like it would be a lot of fun. It sounds like we don't have to do anything or learn anything, like so many of the camps."

All they want is for us to have fun. I like the way they furnish our play clothes, and it seemed like they had a lot of fun crafts to do."

Afton agreed. "I know. There are camps for swimming, riding, learning the computer, and I even saw a ballet dancing class. What is the world is a dancing camp? I'm not going to be a dancer."

"I know what you mean."

"And anyway, I'll bet none of them would let me bring Annette and Humphrey."

Joy agreed that they probably would not.

The green van turned off the main highway and followed the long driveway up to a house with a pointed roof and a sign that said, 'WELCOME CENTER'.

"Here we are," pointed out Afton.

"Yes, and we'll soon see if we made a good choice."

A smiling lady, wearing a name tag that said "Mrs. Counselor", met them and took them to a supply room where piles of clothes filled the shelves.

"I see the young lady who had to hamster sit! Hello, Afton, and the young lady with the beautiful red hair must be Joy." She looked on the shelves and found a stack of camp clothes for each of them. It was easy to tell who the clothes belonged to because every garment was stenciled with the camper's name. What a good idea! It made it so much easier to get acquainted.

"Afton," the lady said, "Go in the dorm and you'll see the fishbowl where Jaws lives. You can leave your pets on the shelf there with him, Jaws isn't dangerous. Then you girls may choose a cot. Pick any empty one that you want."

"Jaws" turned out to be a two-inch long fantail goldfish with a wide, gaping mouth and long, flowing fins.

"Just look at that, fellows." Afton told her pets. "You aren't alone. Someone else has to stay here, too."

Humphrey squeaked loudly to tell Afton to check the latch on the cage, but there was so much talk and excited laughter from the bunch of campers, that Afton didn't hear him.

Alley Cat smelled the hamsters the instant the door to the green van was opened. It was a wonderful, tantalizing smell, almost like a mouse or a rat, only better. It was like smelling hamburgers that were so good, they smelled like steak.

He darted to the door of the WELCOME CENTER and saw the cage carrying the delectable morsels, as it disappeared inside the door. Now, Alley Cat was no dummy, and he had not lived, year around, at the girl's camp without knowing there was more than one way to get into a room. He also knew that most everyone who went in the door to the WELCOME CENTER sooner or later came out the door to the dorm.

There was not a window in the whole camp that Alley Cat had not looked into, and he knew that the great herd of the two-legged animals would soon be everywhere, and mostly in the room with all the beds. He had seen the fish bowl, but he had figured a two inch fish was nothing to get excited about, especially when the ponds and rivers around the camp were teeming with bugger fish than that, but those hamsters, now, they were worth a bit of effort.

Alley Cat hunkered close by the dorm door and when someone opened it to go out, he shot inside, quick as a yellow and orange striped arrow. He zoomed across the floor and ducked under one of the beds before anyone realized, or cared, that he was in a forbidden place.

Once inside, he knew where the wonderful smell was, and he didn't even need his eyes to tell him. There they sat, the dumb stupid little creatures, just waiting to be eaten, and the cage door was not even fastened.

He saw the cage being placed on the low shelf and he heard the frightened squeak. He saw the girls turn to go. Perfect! He leaped onto the shelf and batted his paw against the tiny door making it swing wide open.

One of the tempting rodents squealed and chattered, and leaped up to the play swing in the top of the cage, but Alley Cat's quick, sharp, curved claws caught the other animal around the ribs and flung him from the cage. Up in the air, he sailed.

Even as the tiny victim flew through the air, Alley Cat was behind him in a deadly leap. The cat pounced on the hamster, clamping his teeth around its succulent back bone. He darted for the door, just as a camper opened it to go out. He sprang between her feet, overbalancing her and causing her to land on the floor in a heap.

The camper yelled at him, but Alley Cat had slipped through the door with his prize. He could already taste the delicious morsel, but just then the little beast squealed a high-

pitched 'SQUEEK!' and kicked suddenly with its powerful back legs, delivering a nasty scratch over Alley Cat's eye.

The scratch itself was not so bad, but the unexpectedness of it caused Alley Cat to relax, for an instant, the grip of his teeth. With another kick of the clawed feet, the wicked little monster had flipped out of the cat's mouth and gone sailing out into the grass.

Joy had just opened the door of the dorm when a yellow ball of fur darted between her feet, tripping her and making her fall flat.

Afton yelled, "What was that? A cat?"

And Joy, from her position on the floor, screamed, "It's got your hamster." Whereupon both girls, followed by others in the room, darted after the cat, screaming and waving their arms. The cat crossed the yard in flying leaps, then stopped and looked around. He started running again when he saw the herd of two-legged animals running after him, waving their arms and screaming. The last that was seen of the cat was his yellow heels and tail, disappearing into the woods.

"Do you think he might have dropped him?" Joy asked, hopefully.

"Maybe," answered Afton, though she knew it couldn't have happened. Alley Cat had such a big mouth and Humphrey was so small, he could be chewed up and swallowed in a minute.

Big girls don't cry, and Afton knew that, but she was very close to doing it. She sat huddled on her cot, stroking her remaining pet, with Joy and others hovered around her, trying to consol her.

Joy told her, "I know it wouldn't be the same, but I have hamsters and I can share with you. That won't keep Annette from being lonely, but I can have my folks bring one when they come to pick me up."

Afton thanked her. It was true, another hamster would not be the same as Humphrey, but she appreciated the unselfishness of the offer. It would have been hard for Afton, herself, to offer one of her pets to consol a friend she had just met. Mostly, Afton was angry with herself for not checking the cage door. It was her own carelessness, really, that caused him to be lost. She wouldn't do that again, she promised herself as she returned Annette to the cage, fastening the door carefully

The girls washed up and went to the Cookshack for dinner. Wonderful smells had been coming from the little building, setting by itself in the yard, and the smells had not been deceiving. The creamy macaroni and cheese would have been heavenly if it had not followed the loss of her pet.

Humphrey was still trembling with fright and anger after the wild abduction by the yellow and orange striped cat. He now strained to lick his back where the horrid cat had punctured the skin and there was a bit of blood on his tan fur. His rib hurt, too, and maybe it was cracked, but he was not thinking of that. He was just thankful to be alive.

Being sharp-witted, Humphrey remembered to give the powerful kick that he always used when he was somewhere that he didn't want to be, like when someone picked him up against his will. Handlers must be trained to invite him onto their hands, rather than grabbing him just because they wanted to pet him. Hamsters have rights, too. Anyone who didn't know that, didn't deserve to get to pet him.

That powerful kick of his had been handy and effective a number of times. Using the kick and a fast scramble, he could get himself out of a lot of close scrapes, but in the excitement of the moment, he did not remember to use it until the horrible beast had gotten him outside, totally out of the sight of Afton and his cage.

Humphrey peeked out of the clump of grass, trying to determine the best place to hide, and that's when he saw another cat sitting by the door of the small house where Afton had gone. It was plain to see, he should not go that direction, at least not yet. But what to do, now?

He looked around as best his two inches of height would allow, and saw a flowerpot near the building. He darted swiftly to it, and began to claw furiously at the dirt at the base of the pot. He noticed with alarm, that it was a lot more difficult to dig in the hard dirt, than to dig in the loose shavings of his cage at home. Fright, however, save him strength, and for a moment the dirt flew. When the hole was big enough, he crept inside, knowing it was only a temporary refuge. If the big cat found him, and he would very soon, he would be gone in a minute, back between those sharp, evil teeth.

So Humphrey crouched, trembling, in a hole that was no bigger than a lemon, watching for a chance to better himself. He knew it was only a matter of time until the cat would be back.

Afton ate her dinner in the Cookshack with the crowd of noisy, excited girls, all looking forward to a summer of fun at the camp. All she could think of was Humphrey. Poor Humphrey! Also, silent beside her, was Joy, and when their eyes met, she would read the sympathy in her friend's eyes. Even the hot, delicious food did little to cheer her up.

On the way back to the dorm, they saw Alley Cat sitting by the Coorshack door, licking his lips and washing his paws. He was acting as any cat would act after having a tasty snack of small, furry rodent. The girls made no comment to each other, but just looked quietly away from the cat.

The first thing to do was check the Work Detail schedule. One of the few requirements at the camp was to put in two hours each day performing some chore. There was Kitchen Detail, Stable Cleaning, Landscape, Animal Feeding and Dorm cleaning. Three other girls would be in their group and there they stood, also looking at the schedule. Marsha, Lottie and Kandi would complete their work detail.

It seemed that they would be on Dorm cleaning, tomorrow. Not a bad job, because, how dirty could a dorm get on it's first day?

Later the evening in the dorm, there was a lot of getting acquainted with each other, and several games suggested. Afton forced herself to enter into the lively game of charades, and the noisy game continued until Lights Out time.

When the lights were out, however, Afton lay on her cot with all her thoughts again turning to her pet. Tears welled up in her eyes, in spite of her efforts to keep them away. A big, splashy tear rolled from her eye into her ear. She angrily wiped it away.

"Now, Afton", she told herself, sternly, "what's happened has happened and no amount of tears on your part will change it. You can't let this spoil the fun you've been looking forward to, and if you mope around, it will spoil Joy's fun, too." So, with the edge of her bedsheet, she rubbed her eyes hard and blinked them quickly.

"Now, Afton," she continued, "You go to sleep. You're a big girl. Bad things can happen to anyone, and this time it happened to you. Remember, you still have Annette. So, Goodnight, Afton." And after firmly scolding herself, she made herself go to sleep.

The rooster's screeching crow startled the girls awake before daylight on their first day at camp. The feathered beast stood outside their dorm window so closely that every syllable of his serenade could be clearly heard. Afton spoke to herself again. "Now,

Afton," she began, "remember what all was said last night about whining and crying. You will have fun, today, and you will not mope around and spoil your vacation and maybe that of Joy as well. Just be grateful you have a new friend who understands and sympathizes with you." So, having given herself orders for the day, she went about getting dressed.

After breakfast, they spruced up the dorm, dusting and cleaning the fluffy bedside rugs. It didn't take long, as there were no dirty camp clothes to launder.

Afton and Joy used the time to explore the camp, and decide what would be fun to do.

"Have you ever shot a bow and arrow?" Joy asked.

"No, but I read about it in the brochure and thought about it. The brochure said every archer needed a buddy to work with, and I didn't know if I would find one. Does it sound like fun, to you?"

"Yep, and I can tell you, you just found a buddy."

Alley Cat was not happy. He was not happy, at all. He had been forced to content himself with two grasshoppers and some left-over sausage gravy for his morning meal when what he really wanted was that delicious little rodent he had let get away. He was very angry with himself for doing that, but who would know that such a tiny thing would have such a powerful kick or have such sharp claws? The thing had looked like a mouse, but no mouse he ever knew, had packed such force as that one did. So now he had a project for the day. He had to find the little beast and gobble him up.

He had sniffed the grass and found where the rodent had been. He had followed his nose and tracked him to the flowerpot. He even saw the little hole the beast had dug, but it was now empty. He sniffed along the grass, again, and had tracked him to the Cookshack door, and that was where the trail had ended..

Alley Cat knew, now, what he must do. He would have to get inside of the Cookshack, somehow, so he could track down that exciting bite of food. The only trouble was, he was not allowed indoors, and he had been shooed away from the door many, many times. A few times he had gotten past the door, but he had been chased into a corner and caught, then heaved outside again. He needed to think up a clever way of getting in when no one was looking.

That was what he was doing now, sitting in the sun and washing his face, while watching the door. He had been sitting here all day, and now it was late and everyone had left the building except for the cook. She had gathered up a load of dish towels and other things for the laundry and had come through the door with her arms full. The screen door had swung closed behind her. Now was his chance.

With his strong claws, he dug at the edge of the door and opened it just enough to get his furry paw inside. Farther into the door he shoved his leg until the door was wedged open enough to get his nose inside. Ahhh! Victory was close!

Alley Cat knew the cook would be coming back, so he hid quickly behind the stove. Sure enough, here she came back in, but she picked up a few things and left again, carefully closing the door behind her. That meant she would not be coming back.

Alley Cat congratulated himself that his timing had been perfect! Here he was, inside a building with the hamster, and he had all night long to find it with no one to bother him or chase him out. He almost smiled to himself as he stroked his whiskers in anticipation. A good, long whiff of air through his sensitive nose confirmed that the hamster was close. Now where was he?

Ah, there he was, the stupid little tan animal. He thought he could hide on the tan floor mop.

Alley Cat crouched into his most menacing pose and stalked carefully, quietly along the wall. He could squeeze in behind the case of foam cups and slip up behind the hamster, snatching him off the mop before he knew what hit him.

Humphrey realized the evil cat was in the building with him, and the cat no doubt knew all the hiding places there were. His whiskers began to twitch, as they always did when he was nervous, and his nose began to wriggle. He couldn't seem to make them stop. He eased slowly onto the strings of the tan colored floor mop, knowing it to be the same color as his fur, and maybe it would provide a bit of camouflage until he thought of something safer to do.

There he crouched, still as a hamster, but he was sure the sharp eyed cat had already seen him. He could tell by the way the cat's eyes glistened and the way his pink tongue delicately licked his lips.

The cat moved out of his sight, but he was sure the danger was not over. He thought he should probably run, but where to? In anticipation of having to run somewhere, anywhere, he lifted each foot in turn, to make sure it would be ready to carry him quickly. That was when he discovered his toenail had caught in the thready strings of the mop. Horrors! He wriggled the foot to release it, but it was still tangled.

Then he saw the cat. Its ugly head was easing around the big box and it was not two feet away from him. One good leap from the cat and he, Humphrey Hamster, would be history.

The hamster knew he didn't have a chance, unless.....

When he saw the cat lower himself into a crouch, preparing to pounce onto him, he stared at the cat, waiting for the exact right moment. His trick probably wouldn't work again, but what could he lose?

When he saw the cat lashing his tail back and forth, he knew it was now or never. He opened his mouth and let out his most fierce "SQUEAK!" and kicked hard against the mop strings, trying to leap over the cat. His giant leap did not take him over the cat, but brought him back down on the mop because of his tangled toe.

The cat, however, did not know this, and was determined not to be surprised again. He answered the "SQUEAK!" with a loud "GROWL!" and leaped up to catch the hamster as it sailed past, over his head.

When the cat was in mid-leap, he realized there was nothing there, and twisted in the air and turned back, just in time to bump the broom handle which leaned against the wall. The broom handle slid down the wall and hit the dustpan which popped off its nail and hit

the mop handle. The cat ducked quickly away from the falling dustpan and hit the handle of the floor scrubber, which also hit the mop handle.

Alley Cat watched as the mop handle banged against the box of foam cups and flung its mop-strings into the air, pitching Humphrey across the room. After a flying arc, Humphrey landed in a garbage can with a lot of empty cans, wrappers and other things. His feet landed on an empty orange juice can which rolled over and dumped him, making him slide between a lot of other cans, finally reaching the bottom.

In a split second, he knew the cat was also in the garbage can, but could not slide down between them, as Humphrey had, and was having a lot of trouble trying to stand up on the unstable cans. His feet kept slipping into the cans and they rolled about, making a noisy clatter.

So, here he was, sitting in the mess at the bottom of the can while Alley Cat was trying to dig down to him. What a situation! Orange juice, pork and bean sauce and bits of leftover sandwich were all around him. Well, at least he wouldn't have to die hungry. Not that he could eat anything, now. He was much too busy trembling.

After a few minutes of listening to the racket above him, Humphrey began to realize the cat could not dig down into the cans...they kept falling around him. With that comforting knowledge, he nibbled a bite of bread and crawled into a juice can for a nap. Finally, the scrambling above him stopped, and the garbage can shook as the cat finally managed to reach the rim and jump to the floor.

Humphrey knew the cat was still there...he could smell him, even above the smell of the garbage. He also knew that the cat knew where he was, because the cat could also smell. In addition to that, he knew he was perfectly safe until someone moved the garbage can, so he decided to get rested up now, and be ready to fight or run when that time came.

He snuggled against the back of the juice can and went to sleep. The next sound he heard was the cook, yelling angrily.

"Alley Cat, how did you get in here? Scat on out of here and don't come back, I say. You know you don't get fed in here."

With a scratch and a scurry, and the bang of a door, Alley Cat was gone.

Afton and Joy joined with several other girls for the swimming try out. It was a camp rule that no matter how well you could swim or how many lessons you had, you still must swim around the shallow pool, called the "Puddle", to prove your swimming ability before going into the big pool. The water seemed icy at first, but sunshine and activity soon took that away. Both girls qualified to use the big pool, but several others were retained for more training by the swimming instructor.

The man called Mr. Fixit, was preparing for the archery class by piling bales of hay onto each other, making a high, straw wall. With a can of spray paint, he drew colored circles on the side of the hay wall to serve as targets.

He explained to the campers that archery was a "buddy" sport and to participate, everyone must have a buddy for safety reasons.

Six girls showed up for the class.

"Six is the perfect number," Mr. Fixit told them, "and that makes three pairs. Each pair will have a shooter and a holder, and after several shots, they will trade places. There are certain rules to be followed. The shooter will never turn her back on the target while she is holding the bow. She will never turn around. Repeat after me, 'the shooter will never turn around'."

The six girls giggled and repeated, "THE SHOOTER WILL NEVER TURN AROUND"

Mr. Fixit continued, "The camper holding the arrows will never step in front of the camper with the bow. Repeat it."

The girls repeated, "THE CAMPER HOLDING THE ARROWS WILL NEVER STEP IN FRONT OF THE CAMPER WITH THE BOW".

"Good," he complimented. "Now, the holder will give the shooter one arrow."

Joy took an arrow from her holder which Mr. Fixit had called a quiver, and handed it to Afton. It was a strange arrow, just a slim stick with plastic fins on one end.

"Now I know there is no point on your arrow, but it will still stick into the hay bales if you can shoot it that far. So, shooters, put your bowstring into the groove of your arrow. Raise the bow even with your shoulder, now pull back on your string. Now release."

All three shooters let their arrow fall down on the ground at their feet.

"Now, shooters," he told them, "you've had lesson number one. It isn't as easy as it looks. Pick up your arrow and fit it into the string. Raise your arms high and point the arrow at the barn roof. Slowly lower your bow until you see the hay bales over your knuckles."

The three shooters lowered their bows.

"Now release."

Finally all six campers had managed to get the arrow to leave the bow, but it could hardly be called shooting.

"That's all for today. You will have sore arms tomorrow, but if you want to learn to shoot, you must come back every day."

The two girls joined in the water fight being waged beside the hydrant in the yard. A triple nozzle furnished water to three spraying hoses, and all the girls were soon soaked and out of breath.

Afton decided it was time to write home.

"Dear Mom and Dad. I'm fine but something bad happened. It know it was my fault but I lost Humphrey. I had him out of his cage in the van and didn't fasten the cage door good enough. I forgot about cats, and I guess I didn't know a cat would be smart enough to open a cage door. Anyway, the big yellow cat that lives here got him out and ate him.

"It made me very sad but I've decided I have to put it out of my head so I can have fun. Crying won't bring him back after he's been eaten. My new friend, Joy, who was in the van with me, has hamsters, too. She said she would give me one of hers, but I can't take it. It wouldn't replace Humphrey, and she would have to give up a pet she likes. I cried last night, but I'm better, now.

"My friend, Joy, has red hair. It's so long that even when she has a pony-tail, it hangs to her waist. She says it's a pain to take care of. We just had a water fight, and we're in the sun, now, waiting for her hair to get dry. She says if she makes a pony-tail while it's still wet, it smells funny.

"What's funny is, though, her grandpa told her if she wouldn't cut her hair until she was sixteen years old, he would pay for her college education. Joy thinks he's joking, and would pay her tuition anyway, but she's afraid to test him. Anyway, it's really pretty and she has short, wavy bangs. She lets her hamsters get on her head, like I do, and Humphrey rode in her bangs on the way to camp. I have to quit thinking about Hunphrey.

"We had fun with the bows and arrows. It's harder to shoot than it looks. Mr. Fixit painted circles on hay bales for a target, but none of us six girls could even hit the hay bales, much less the circles. We still wanted to practice longer, but the teacher made us quit. He said we would have sore arms and shoulders, and he was right.

"The food here is good. Love to you both, Afton."

After being shooed out of the Cookshack, Alley Cat stayed close to the door. He knew that everything that went into that building would have to come out, sooner or later. He knew that the garbage can would come out sometime, and that was when he would catch that hamster.

Now was the time. He saw Mr. Fixit push open the door and maneuver the big garbage can out to the porch. Immediately, Alley Cat could smell the exciting aroma of hamster. He scampered across the grass with Mr. Fixit as the can was being carried to the Burn Bin. Crash, rattle and bang went the cans and all the other garbage, into the bin. The juice can containing Humphrey rolled and tumbled with the rest, flinging the hamster around inside.

The cans had hardly stopped rolling, when into the Burn Bin jumped Alley Cat, right in the middle of everything. He knew the pesky little rodent was there, and he must not be allowed to get away again.

He scrambled with his claws to sort through the cans but he stirred up a lot of ashes, instead. The grey cloud of ash dust floated up and Alley Cat began to sneeze. Over and over he sneezed until he was forced to jump out of the bin to get a breath of fresh air.

Humphrey heard the scrambling of cans and then the sneezes. He heard the cat jump and then he heard more sneezes from farther away. Now was the time.

He crept carefully out of the juice can and eased his way slowly through the ashes and garbage to the edge of the bin. He burrowed quickly but silently under the wall of the Burn Bin and had just reached the outside when he heard the cat jump back into the bin and resume searching among the cans.

Wonderful! Humphrey risked a leap into the air to get his bearings. The closest building was not far away, and it looked to be big enough to have a number of good places to hide. He saw a pile of hay blocks which might also be good, but he turned them down in favor of the barn.

Silently, he ran through the grass, remembering to crouch as low as possible to avoid rippling the grass blades. He could still hear the noise in the Burn Bin, but he knew the cat would soon realize that he was no longer there.

At the threshold of the barn, Humphrey leaped nimbly inside and raced for a dark corner. There were a lot of interesting smells in the barn. He could even smell grains of food, like the corn and wheat Afton brought him to eat. How he would like to see Afton right now! She would cuddle him and put him in her pocket, or maybe on her shoulder. Afton always smelled so good, especially up in her fluffy, curly hair that was almost the same color as his fur.

Oh, well, that was a long time ago. Right now, he must decide how to stay away from the evil cat until he could find her, again.

Afton, Joy and the three other girls of her group had fun in the dewy, wet garden pulling the onions (don't pull them up by the tops or they break off in your hand), the radishes, (be careful because those radish tops can make your arms itch) and the tomatoes, (don't be afraid of the big, green worm because it doesn't bite, but we have to get it off before it eats up the whole vine.)

They washed the vegetables at the water hydrant in the yard, and delivered them to the Cookshack. Lottie and Marsha wanted to go to the barn to pet the horses, while Kandi decided to stay and help Mrs. Cook make the brownies for desert at lunch.

Afton and Joy were walking around to see what was going on. There, coming across the yard, was a pair of goats hitched to a tiny cart and it had another cart hooked on behind it. It looked like a little train, with the goats being the engine and the carts were the boxcars. There were four girls in the front cart and two in the back. A camper whose shirt said she was MERRY KATE and another named DORIS, called to them.

"Come for a nature ride. We have two seats left."

So Joy and Afton stepped inside the tiny cart. It was so small that when each girl had a corner and drew up her knees, their toes almost touched.

Mr. Instructor walked ahead and led the goats as they started down the nature trail.

Past the garden, through the trees and up into the orchard they went, jiggling and joggling as the carts bumped over rocks and grass clumps. They stopped under a huge apple tree with golden yellow apples hanging all over it. Mr. Instructor picked enough apples to fill the two bags he had brought along, and the girls picked some to eat, rubbing them clean on their clothes.

He told them, "You can do that with these apples because they have never been sprayed with insecticides. Don't ever eat apples you don't know about, until they have been washed. However, on these apples, you need to watch for worms. If you see a worm hole, toss the apple away and get another one."

He tucked the full bags into the carts by setting them on the girls' feet, and told them they were the apple pies for supper.

This seemed to be a good day for terrapin turtles, so the girls picked up several for the race to be held later in the day.

They stopped the carts for a while to watch a pair of red-tailed hawks carry food to their babies in the top of an old tree. One bird came to the nest with a small, flopping rodent just about the size of Humphrey. Afton knew it was not her pet, but her eyes began to sting, anyway. She looked away and blinked quickly to hold back the tears. Big girls don't cry.

The goat cart jogged and wobbled down the trail and into a small stream of water where the goats stopped for a drink, then up the trail they came, back to camp.

Alley Cat was a sticky mess before he convinced himself that the hamster was no longer in the Burn Bin. He was covered with dust and ashes and had sticky paws. His eyes burned from the dust and the sneezing, and, to make matters worse, he was very hungry. The other cats had waited at the Cookshack door and they had a good meal, but by the time Alley Cat realized food was being served, the chickens had pecked the cat food dishes clean.

Maybe fresh hamster would have tasted better than leftover gravy and scrambled egg, but now he didn't have either one.

He sat in the sun and cleaned his fur with his tongue, wincing at the bitter taste of the ashes. He rubbed his paws against his face, eyes and whiskers until he had removed the itch and smell of the garbage. Now, to find that hamster.....

Back to the Burn Bin he went, because that was the last place he had smelled him. He knew his quarry was no longer inside the Burn Bin, so he carefully circled the wall. Sure enough, there was the tunnel dug by the nasty little rodent, and the smell was still fresh.

Alley Cat nosed through the grass, following the scent. He reached the stack of hay bales and circled it several times. The scent was very strong, here, but he felt sure the animal was no longer in the pile.

He was right. The scent trail led away from the hay bales and into the barn. Ah, Ha! This was good news! There was no place inside the barn that Alley Cat had not been. There was no hiding places he did not know about. Many a rat had been caught in that big barn, and he knew he could catch many more. Now that the hamster was in the barn, he was as good as caught. He licked his pink tongue over his lips and nose, in eager anticipation. Hunting him down was a lot of trouble, but the taste of him would be worth it.

The cat paused inside the door to listen carefully. He knew exactly what sound to listen for. Tiny toenails against wood, that's what he listened for first. Silence.

Next, he listened for digging. This creature was very good at digging holes....Alley Cat already knew that. Once more there was only silence.

If there was no digging, then there might be scuffling and rustling of hay. Mice and rats liked to get in the hay and burrow inside, and maybe hamsters did, as well. A sharp-eared cat like himself could hear it, if any rustling happened.

He could hear the barn swallow in its nest, chirping as it fed its babies. He heard a horse snort outside the barn, and in the meadow behind the barn, he heard the baaa of a mama sheep. Ah! There it was!

Directly above him, he heard the scuffling of tiny feet. The animal must be in the hay loft.

Across the floor of the barn he bounded, leaping up the steps, two and three at a time. He was in mid air between the fourth and sixth step when he realized he should have crept quietly, instead of pouncing.

Probably the little beast heard him, but no matter, he knew where it was, now, and the minutes of the hamster's life were now numbered. He could taste him, already.

Once inside the barn, Humphrey knew he would have to hide quickly. He had leaped silently across the floor to the steps and had hopped his way up them, one at a time. Surely, he could find a tiny place, way up high, where the cat could not reach him.

The little hamster crept silently under a stack of straw to rest a minute and take stock of his surroundings. He had always exercised when he was with Afton, but not this much. He had been on the move all day, and had nothing to eat. If he had not been trying so hard to stay away from the cat, he would have realized he was hungry, but now he was only tired and frightened.

He was trying to catch his breath when he heard the "thump-thump-thump" on the wooden steps to the loft. His heart skipped a beat and he knew his rest period was over.

Under and through the straw stack he skittered, over to the edge of the loft. There before him, was only empty space. He had a choice. He could jump off the loft to the floor of the barn, with the cat certainly jumping after him, or he could walk out on the 2 by 4 board which held up the floor of the loft. Which to do?

He hadn't finished thinking when he saw the cat and saw that the cat had seen him. Out he went on the 2 by 4. It was like being a tight rope walker in the circus and he didn't even have balancing poles. He didn't know if the cat would follow, but he thought it probably would.

Yes, there is was behind him. About midway out on the board, Humphrey turned to face the cat. He looked into the cat's face. He was grinning and licking his lips, his tail lashing, hungrily.

Humphrey knew it was risky to use the same trick three times, but it was either that, or be lunch for a cat. He waited until the cat was ready to snatch him with his clawed paw and he went "SHREEK!", loudly into the cat's face. Humphrey did not leap this time, because there was no place to leap.

The unexpected squeak in his face startled the cat and made him jerk back his head. The jerk, the tail lashing and the fact that the 2 by 4 board was very narrow, caused the cat to lose his balance. In a flurry of feet and tail, Alley Cat flipped off the board, his wildly waving tail catching Humphrey and flipping him off the board, as well.

Through the air they flew, the cat and the hamster, and landed in a barrel of shelled corn, used to feed the horses.

Humphrey hit the loose corn in the barrel and he knew what to do. Like a tiny whirlwind, he burrowed to the bottom of the barrel, deep under two feet of loose corn. He could hear the cat scratching in the corn, trying to dig, but as fast as he made a hole in the loose grains, the sides of the hole fell in. After several minutes of scratch, scratch, scratch, the cat gave up and jumped up to the edge of the wooden barrel.

Humphrey knew he had not gone away, but he also knew that he, himself, was safe for a while. He could not get out, but the cat could not reach him, and he had a chance to get something to eat. Here he was in a barrel of corn. Food was all around him and there was at least two feet of it over his head. He sighed a long sigh, and began to nibble on a grain of golden corn.

After he he had eaten his tummy full of corn, Humphrey settled down to take a nap. He knew the battle was not over because he could hear the faint scratching of the cat's feet on the wooden edge of the barrel. He also knew that when he got a chance to get out of the barrel, he would need all the food and sleep he could get, so he settled down in the bottom of the corn barrel and slept.

Afton's mom opened the letter.

"Dear Mom and Dad. I'm doing fine and having a lot of fun. Joy and I rode a goat cart to the apple garden to get apples for the cook and we picked up turtles on the way back. We had a turtle race but my turtle wouldn't run. It wouldn't even walk, so I didn't win.

"I just love the craft classes. Mrs. Nurse teaches them. Her real name is Mrs. Allen, but her name tag says Mrs. Nurse so we'll be sure to remember who to go to if we have an accident.

"Well, the craft teacher had a lot of plants that make different colors when they are put in hot water. We dipped things in the colored water and it made them change colors. She said there were some leaves that made a tea that people used to drink to cure illnesses, or maybe just because they liked the taste. Some of the leaves smelled like peppermint and some smelled like spearmint, and she said she would make us some tea, sometime. Joy and I wondered if we could get seeds and grow some at home. It would be fun to grow real tea!

"We did a neat thing with eggs, too. We took raw eggs and punched a tiny hole in each end. Mrs. Cook had a air tank she uses to blow up balloons, and she forced air in one end of the egg shell and the insides of the egg ran out the other side. She said she would make pound cake with the egg stuff, to serve with strawberries and whipped cream, and that we could have the shells.

"We washed the shells in warm, soapy water but we had to be really careful not to break them. We broke four of them before we learned. Then we set them on their ends to drain and dry.

"We had easter egg dye and we dipped them and made a lot of colors. Sometimes we pasted designs on them before we dipped them, then took the design off and the egg shell was still white, underneath.

"It was a lot of fun, and when we got the shells the color we wanted them, we let them dry, then we glued a tiny button on each end so the shell wouldn't break around the hole. When the glue got dry, we took a very long needle and stuck it through the holes in the button and through the egg and made a loop so we could hang it up.

"Teacher said some people like to make Easter Egg Trees like Christmas Trees. Or sometimes they hung the eggs on a bare limb. I think I'll try it. She says we can empty

eggs without a balloon blower if we blow on one end. She said the stuffing that came out would make good cat food if we scrambled it in a skillet. I want to make some when I get home. I'd need a lot of eggs to decorate a tree.

"We took a wagon to the garden and picked cantaloupes and dumped them in the pond to get cool. We cut them in halves and filled them with vanilla ice cream for desert after lunch. Guess what we did with the seeds? We washed them off and dried them to make seed pictures next week. We have a lot of colors of seeds to glue on the boards.

"I get to ride on a horse, today, and I'm a little scared but one of the girls in my Work Detail, named Lottie, has been riding horses since she was three years old. She has even gone to summer camps where they teach you how to ride. I thought that if you didn't fall off the horse, you were riding, but I guess there's more to it than that.

"Joy is yelling at me to come on because the horses are saddled. Bye now and I love you, Afton"

Alley Cat was very hungry. He missed breakfast and hadn't had anything to eat all day. Also, he was tired of sitting on the edge of the wooden barrel. He didn't want to leave because he knew, for certain, positive, that the hamster was in the barrel and that sooner or later, he would have to burrow up to the top and get out. That's when he, Alley Cat, the Vicorious, would pounce on him and gobble him up. He knew he was going to a lot of trouble for one small hamster, but surely it would be worth it.

That where he was when a two-legged animal came in the barn and shooed him off his barrel.

"Get out of the way, Alley Cat. What are you doing in here, anyway? You don't even like corn and I have to get some for the horses."

Alley Cat didn't want to leave, but those two-legged animals got mad at you if you didn't obey, so he ran outside the door and waited.

The two-legged animals brought the big stupid horses into the barn to be fed and petted and it was dangerous to get underfoot, so it was just as well that he was outside.

Humphrey heard the girl yell at Alley Cat to go away, and he felt the vibration as the cat leaped from the barrel to the ground. He heard heavy footsteps on the ground and he heard a lot of voices. Best of all, he heard Afton's voice. She was coming after him!

Humphrey began to climb upward through the grains of corn like a deep sea diver swimming to the surface for air. He popped his head out just as a big dipper scooped him up. He looked up into the face of a girl who was not Afton, and the girl screamed and threw the dipper, the corn, and Humphrey, across the barn.

Humphrey landed, thunk! against a wall and fell to the ground, dazed. He didn't hear Afton yell, "What's the matter, Kandi? Did you see a snake or something?"

Neither did he hear Kandi answer, "No, I think it was a mouse. It scrambled right up out of the corn and looked in my face. I thought it was going to jump on me."

Slowly, Humphrey began to regain his senses and he knew he must do something fast, because here he was, totally unprotected. He was still too dazed to remember he had heard Afton's voice.

What to do? Humphrey was a good digger, so he began to burrow under the barn wall beside him, and was surprised to find himself outside the barn and in the grass, once more. Before him, he saw the stack of hay bales. He had thought about them before he went to the barn, and maybe they might be the best idea. He looked carefully both ways and saw no sign of the cat, so he eased himself through the grass, slowly, carefully until he reached the blocks of hay.

Through the wadded stalks of hay he crawled, biting some of them apart and pushing others aside. Farther and farther he crawled into the hay, knowing the cat could not reach him if he crawled far enough. Finally, he nibbled out a nest and huddled down to rest.

Alley Cat had waited outside the barn door until the two-legged animals had taken the stupid horses and gone, and he dashed back into the barn, the very instant the hamster had tunneled to the outside.

The cat jumped into the barrel and he could still smell Humphrey, but not as strongly as before. He knew the hamster was no longer under the corn. He sniffed the edge of the barrel and all around the floor beside the barrel and it was a long time before he realized the hamster must have jumped a very long way. He finally picked up the smell of it at the

wall, and in minutes, he had found the tunnel. He dug a few swipes at the mouth of the tunnel, then raced outside to the exit. Ah, fresh smell!

Seconds later, he traced the smell to the hay bales. Alley Cat grinned to himself with great satisfaction. He had the creature trapped, now, and all he had to do was wait. He leaped on top of the bales and settled onto the straw to wait.

Afton and Joy, along with the other two pairs of girls, stood twenty feet from the stack of hay bales. Alley Cat was lying on top of the stack.

"Shoo! Get away, Alley Cat. You might get hit with the arrows"

Alley Cat really did not want to leave the hay blocks. That was strange! Usually, he was glad to leave because he really didn't like to be around people. Finally, he jumped down and went a little way across the yard, only to lie down again, and stare at them.

Afton held her bow and arrow, and Joy stood behind her with the rest of the arrows in the quiver. They now used arrows with points, and they came in neat colors. Those assigned to Afton and Joy were pink, and the other girls had yellow and blue.

Mr. Fixit told them, "Repeat after me, the holder never steps in front of the shooter."

The girls repeated, "THE HOLDER NEVER STEPS IN FRONT OF THE SHOOTER."

Mr. Fixit continued, "The shooter always gathers the arrows."

The girls responded, "THE SHOOTER ALWAYS GATHERS THE ARROWS."

"Good," complimented the teacher. "Now let's see what you remember."

He blew on his whistle, and shouted, "Ready!"

Each of the three shooters fitted the groove in their arrow to the string of their bow.

"Point!"

All three shooters lifted their bows, so that their arrows were pointing to the roof of the barn.

"Aim!"

All three shooters lowered their bows, smoothly and slowly, watching for the black painted circles of paint to show over the knuckle of their straight arm.

"Fire!"

"Pfff," whispered the arrows as they left the bow.

All three of the shooters could now make an arrow reach the bales of hay, but they could not make them stick.

"Attention, you shooters with lazy arms. You have to draw your bow tighter. I don't care if your arms are still sore, PULL ON THOSE BOWSTRINGS. Now, what are you going to do?"

"PULL ON THOSE BOWSTRINGS!"

"Yes, so here we go again. Ready."

Joy took a pink arrow from the quiver hanging from her shoulder. Afton fitted it into the bowstring.

"Point!"

The arrow was pointed high.

"Aim!"

Down came the bow, slow and steady, and Afton pulled hard on the bowstring, causing the bow to curve, deeply. She ignored the sharp pain in her arm and shoulder. She watched just above her knuckle for the black circle.

"Fire!"

"Pfff" went the arrows and "Thunk" they hit the hay bales and stuck there, with their shafts wobbling from the force.

"Very good job, shooters. Repeat after me, VERY GOOD."

Six voices yelled, "VERY GOOD!"

"All right. One more shot and we change partners."

The girls had been swimming in the pond and had washed their hair at the outside hydrant. They were now waiting for Joy's long hair to dry, and that made it good time to write letters.

Afton wrote, "Dear Mom and Dad. Guess what! I can shoot an arrow twenty feet and make it stick in the hay bale! I can't hit the target, yet, and neither can Joy, but Mr. Fixit said we were doing a lot better. He thinks we'll be really good. I think I may want to have a bow and arrow of my own, sometime.

"Guess what we did in craft class! We picked a lot of tiny pink and blue flowers and we spread them on sheets of plastic mesh, between sheets of tissue paper. We put them out in the sun to dry out. We had to bring them in at night because the teacher said the dew might make them mold if they didn't dry out fast enough.

"After we left them there for two days, we looked at them and the flowers looked like they were made out of paper. We had to be careful or the petals broke off, but we could get more if they did. Teacher showed us how to spread glue on a little square board and lay the flowers on it to make a picture. When the glue dried, we sprayed clear paint on them about a hundred times.

"After a while, it looked like the flowers were put on under a sheet of glass or plastic, except they didn't look squashed. Joy and I had an idea about using the flowers to decorate the the hollow easter eggs I told you about, and teacher said the other girls were going to do some other things, but if Joy and I wanted to decorate eggs, we could, and she would help if we needed her. We didn't need her.

"You know what? They let us do almost anything we want to. I think they only have three rules. We have to do chores, but they're fun, and we have to see what the craft class is doing before we decide not to attend. Who wouldn't want to go to craft class? The other rule is that we can't talk after Lights Out. I'm always so tired, I'm ready for lights out, and if we watch a movie, sometimes I go to sleep before then. All except that night I was sad about Humphrey. I had trouble going to sleep that night.

"I wanted to remind you about the Unbirthday Party. It's for everyone, no matter when their birthday is, and we will have a big party with ice cream, cake and presents. You can send a present if you want to, but if you do, you have to send 25 of the same thing. Don't bother, if it's too much trouble, but something really small would be easier to mail. Thanks.

"Guess what? They let us eat any time we want to. It doesn't matter if it's almost dinner time, we can still eat. The trouble is, when Joy and I get hungry and go to the Cookshack for a snack, usually something is cooking that smells so good, we decide to wait until meal time. Every night we have popcorn and hot chocolate. They have a big popper like the movie theaters have, and it makes a lot. That's good, because we eat a lot. We string up the leftover popcorn in craft class. If we don't want popcorn, we can make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

If camp lasted a year, I think I might weigh two tons before I came home. Mrs. Cook is going to give us her recipe for gingerbread men cookies. I'll need a cutter.

Joy's hair is dry, now, so we're going to go look at the emu. He looks like an ostrich, but he isn't. They say he's mean, and we can't get in the pen with him because he bites. I love you, Afton."

Humphrey was very frustrated. He heard Afton's voice very close by, but every time he thought he would burrow through the hay to get closer, a "thunk" would hit the bales, vibrating them. He couldn't imagine what the noise was, but it sounded dangerous. Surely, it was not some new trick the cat was trying to pull on him.

He was also not happy with his hiding place, but it was the best he had found, so far. Inside the hay were plenty of grass seeds to eat. Maybe they were not as good as hamster food, but they were not bad at all. He did get thirsty at first, then he realized he could slip out of his tunnel at night, and lick up a few drops of dew off the grass nearby. Then he would zip back into the hay before the cat could tell where he was.

His hope was, that if Afton came once, surely she would come again, and he would find a way to let her know where he was. The biggest problem with being inside the hay bale was that he could not see where the cat was. So there was nothing to do but wait.

It was after craft class that Mrs. Counselor told the girls. "I believe some of you are interested in trying the herb tea that we can grow in our gardens. If you want to stay here after class, we'll do that, now."

Afton and Joy looked quickly at each other. It was their turn to ride the horses, but the tea sounded more exciting, and there was always someone who would like to take their turn riding the horses. Three other girls decided to stay with them.

Teacher took jars from a cabinet and put them on the table. The jars appeared to be filled with dried weeds that looked a lot like the dye plants they had played with earlier.

She told them, "Now, we have four kinds of tea leaves. There are a lot of others, but most people think these are the best of the ones we can grow in the garden. These are peppermint leaves, and these are spearmint, you can tell by the smell. This one is a clover called Alfalfa. The other one is bramble leaves and strawberry leaves. There are some doctors who say that if you didn't have vitamins to take to be healthy, you might consider drinking alfalfa tea because it has a lot of nutrients that are good for you. Now for the taste."

On the little hot plate, the tea kettle of water was bubbling merrily. Five china cups were filled with hot water to warm them up. (No, we can't use foam cups. It changes the taste of the tea.) Each girl took a cup and emptied the water and put a small handful of leaves in the bottom. The cups were filled with the bubbling water from the tea kettle. Immediately, the craft room smelled like a candy store.

"Now, girls, we have to let the tea steep, to bring out the flavor. Some people like to recite the alphabet because they think that's the right length of time to wait, but some people like to wait a little longer to make the taste stronger."

Together the five girls sang the Alphabet Song, and picked up their cups for a sip. Hmmm, the taste was different, unlike anything they had ever tasted. The steam smelled like the meadow after a rain, or the vegetable garden early in the morning.

Teacher mentioned, "Some people used to drink Strawberry leaf because they thought it would help them from getting sick from colds. Later, we learned that it has a good amount of Vitamin C, which some doctors prescribe for a cold, as well as making a good, hot drink."

"Does it make ice tea?" Joy wanted to know. "My mom makes it all summer."

"It surely does. It needs to be steeped with hot water and then cooled. If you like the taste of it when it's hot, you'll probably like it cold, as well."

"I want to know how I can grow it." Afton decided. "Can we get seeds?"

"Yes, you can buy seeds at most seed stores, but I have some here. I have a lot of plastic foam egg cartons which make good seed flats. We take a little potting soil and fill each depression. That makes 12 pockets. You can plant different seeds in each depression, or you can plant them all alike and use as many egg cartons as you like."

The colorful egg crates were filled with soil and seeds were pressed down in the dirt, then they were watered with a little squeeze bottle that sprayed a fine mist. With a felt marker, the girls labeled their gardens. The crates were then closed and set on a high shelf in the craft room.

"This is a good place to keep your seed flats because you'll be in here every day, and you'll remember to spray mist on the soil to keep it damp. Of course, when the seeds sprout, we'll have to move them so they can get some sun."

When the girls left the craft room, it seemed that the most activity was coming from the big swimming pool. On closer inspection, they saw a group of campers noisily choosing sides for a contest. What contest?

There was Mr. Instructor with a large tub filled with water-filled balloons. It seemed they were going to play water-balloon volley ball. A net had been stretched across the center of the pool. After the choosing, the sides seemed to be uneven. Eight on one side and nine on the other. Can't have the sides uneven, Mr. Instructor said.

Someone suggested, "Why not ask Heidi? She's probably up in the treehouse, reading. She'd even it up."

So with Heidi in the pool, there were nine to the side.

"Listen up, Campers," Mr. Instructor told them. "I have 25 water filled balloons. The object of the game is to catch the balloon as it comes over the net and toss it back. There are three main rules. If you toss a balloon out on the bank, you leave the game. If someone slips and falls down, the game stops until she's standing again. You must never touch the net, or you leave the game. Now, here's how the game is scored. A score is made when a balloon breaks or sinks in the pool. The team on the south side of the pool is the South Team, and the one on the north is what?"

"THE NORTH TEAM!"

"Right! If the North Team breaks a balloon or if they let it sink, the South Team scores a point. Understand?"

"YEAH!"

Then someone asked, "What's the prize for winning?"

"Good question. The losing team must pull the winning team back to the dorm on the wagon I brought the balloons down here on. Each side gets a starting balloon and two balloons will be in play at all times. When one breaks, the game stops until I issue a replacement. Understand?"

"YEAH!"

The starting whistle shrilled.

Instantly, it became a colorful mess. The bright sunshine, the sparkling water, the flying balloons and eighteen brightly colored swimsuits mingled together. It was also a noisy mess, due to the laughs, squeals, howls and moans of despair when a point was lost, followed by shouts of victory on the other side.

It was a hard-fought war, but Afton and Joy were on the losing side. The nine girls from the winning team piled aboard the tiny wagon, and with a lot of heaving and pushing, the debt was paid, and the winners were deposited at the dorm door.

Joy had fallen down in the water several times, just like everyone else, and now her red pony-tail drooped and dripped, soggyly.

She shrugged and told Afton, "I guess you know what I have to do, now?"

"Sure do," Afton told her, "and I need to write a letter, anyway."

"Dear Mom and Dad. How is Grandma? I hope you aren't getting too tired from taking care of her.

"Thanks for the necklace chains you sent for the Unbirthday Party. It was such fun, and everyone got so many gifts, it was almost like Christmas. Birthdays are more fun when everyone gets gifts. We all made really big stockings out of heavy cloth and we sewed them up on a sewing machine that doesn't use electricity. It has a really big pedal at the bottom and you move your heels and toes up and down and the needle sews. You can make the needle go as slow as you want, but teacher didn't want us to go fast because she said sometimes we might forget and sew up our fingers. The big stockings are to hang up for presents.

"We made the neatest puzzle in Woodworking. They gave us a foot square piece of wood, and we traced flower pictures on it. Then we went over the lines with an electric woodburning pencil. It made smoke and our smoke alarm went off. Then we painted the flowers and leaves with plant dye. When it dried, we painted it with clear acrylic paint. We took it to the Woodworking shop and cut it into pieces, in loops and hooks and swirls, and then sanded the edges. It made a really neat jigsaw puzzle!

"We had fried chicken and watermelon for lunch and I ate so much I thought I might pop. It smells like Mrs. Cook is baking cinnamon rolls for dinner, or maybe for breakfast.

"Joy's hair is dry, now, so we're going to climb the treehouse to see the baby bluejays. The nest is low enough to see inside, but we have to climb up to the high platform. Love, Afton."

It was time for the hayride.

Preparation had been going on all day. Big wagons pulled by horses would carry the campers, the food and Grandpa Small Bear and go down to Thunderbird River for a long evening of fun, eating, games and storytelling. Tall trees grew on the bank of the river, making it a cool place for a picnic.

The trip was also part of Nature Walk. The bank of the river was covered with footprints of skunks, turtles and armadillos, and colorful fish flashed in the sun on the water. Those campers brave enough to wade into the cold water were often nibbled by fish, attempting to taste their toes.

Some of the girls begged to help Mrs. Cook with the food. They made potato salad and pasta salad, filling deep bowls and buckets. Deviled eggs were arranged on platters. Tiny red radishes were carved and soaked in water to make them swell and look like tiny red and white roses. Hot dogs and baskets of buns were prepared and watermelons bobbed around in the water of the pond, getting cool and juicy.

They would be using three big wagons for the trip to the river. There would be loose hay in the wagons and the square bales of hay would be used as benches. At the river bank, the hay bales would be the tables to hold the food.

Many kerosene lanterns would be taken because the party would last until well after dark. They would be lighted and hung in the trees along the bank for light, and also to discourage unwanted animals from joining the party.

To help the party to be more organized, each of the twenty-five girls would be in charge of something. It would be disappointing to get all the way down to the river and discover they had no forks, or no cups of ice for their sodas.

It was becoming very hard for the girls to wait until evening.

For the archery class, it was time for a lesson, but it was clear that Mr. Fixit had something special in mind. He had a very smug look as he attached the huge, shiny plastic panel to the side of the Cookshack. Instead of targeting the hay bales, it seemed they would aim at the numbered circles on the panel. It was puzzling.

"Are we going to practice here?"

"Won't the arrows bounce off that target?"

There were a lot of other questions, but Mr. Fixit said nothing, just continued to look smug. With the water hose, he soaked the panel and marked off a line twenty feet from the target board, then he walked away, leaving them standing, staring after him.

In a few minutes, he was back, carrying a pail containing water and which had the colored arrows in it. Instead of the pointed tips, all the arrows had rubber suction tips.

"What are these?"

"Are we going to shoot these?"

"Shall I go get the bows?"

Finally he answered them. "Yes, go get your bows."

Then he explained. "Today we are going to play a game and we'll keep score. You are going to shoot your arrows at the board and try to hit a circle. If you hit a circle, the number painted in that circle is your score for that shot. We have twelve arrows for each team and each shooter gets six shots. There will be three rounds, making a total of 18 shots for each shooter. You may shoot as fast as you want to, but take careful aim and try to make a score."

The archers began to jump up and down and squeal in their excitement, and the other, non-archery, campers began to gather around to see what the noise and excitement was all about.

Afton had sorted out the pink arrows and held them in her hand to be ready, but Mr. Fixit reminded her that the suction tips would dry out in the sun, and might not stick as well. She thought about it a minute, then decided to put them back in the water.

"Joy, you go first this time. You've always let me shoot first, and that's not fair.."

The 'holders' waited breathlessly for the starting whistle, and eagerly pushed the arrow into the hand of the 'shooter' and raced to the bucket for another arrow. The shooters raised their bows, lowered them into position, and fired, "Splat" at the shiny plastic target.

"Splat, splat, splat," and the arrows flew. It seemed that everyone on the camp ground, including Grandpa Small Bear, the storyteller, were gathered behind the shooters, cheering them on.

When the first round of thirty six arrows had left the bows, the count was thirty one that had hit the board and five had hit the ground.

"Excellent," Mr. Fixit complimented, "especially because you have not practiced with the rubber tips. You have been a very good class. We will do better next time. What will we do next time?"

"BETTER NEXT TIME!"

Now the score counting began. All arrows that hit the board but did not land inside a circle were removed. There was a '2' and a '6' for the blue, a '3' and '8' for the yellow, a '5' and a '4' for the pink. There was another '9' and '3' for the blue and so the counting and adding continued. The totals for the round were 63 blue, 77 yellow and 59 pink.

Joy whispered, "On the next round, we have to shoot faster, so we can get to the higher numbers before they do,"

"Yes, and I think we need to get all our arrows out of the water, even if Mr. Fixit says they might dry out. If we shoot faster, they won't have a chance to dry out very much."

Afton sorted out all twelve pink arrows again, and stood behind Joy. They were breathless as they waited for the whistle.

Finally it shrilled, and Afton jabbed an arrow at Joy.

"Quick, quick, hurry!"

"Splat, splat," the arrows hit the board, their shafts wobbling from the force of the impact.

The other teams were also hurrying, and becoming a little careless in their aims. Only 28 arrows stuck to the target. But look! Two nines for the pink. Yea! The total score for the first two rounds was 122 yellow, 143 blue, and 189 pink. YEA!

One more round. By now, the cheering section was hoarse from yelling and began begging to have a turn.

Mr. Fixit shook his head. "Only the archers who came to practice and got sore shoulders get to shoot. It takes training and practice to learn to shoot with a bow and arrow."

The whistle sounded, again, and arrows flew.

Afton and Joy, who had been losers in the turtle race, and had been on the losing side of the water-balloon volley ball, finally won something! They squealed and danced on their toes.

Mr. Fixit handed each of them a pink arrow as their prize for winning, and as a souvenir to take home.

Someone turned on the water hose and sprayed down the winners, thoroughly soaking them until their yellow knit camp suits were plastered against their skin, and their hair dripped.

Joy had wet hair, so it was letter writing time again.

"Dear Mom and Dad. I think this was the most fun day of the whole camp. Joy and I won the archery contest and we get to take home an arrow as a prize. I know for sure I want to have a bow and arrow of my own. It's really a lot of fun.

"Guess what? Did you ever hear of such a thing as a 'hayride'? Mr. Fixit said a long time ago it used to be a big thing, loading hay on a wagon and taking a picnic somewhere, or when boyfriends and girlfriends would go on a hayride in the moonlight and sing songs. Did you ever hear of that? Mrs. Cook said she thought the hay would be itchy, and she would rather have a ride in a suburban.

"Anyway, we get to have one tonight. We've been making eggs and potato salad, and we have weiners and watermelon, and the storyteller is going with us.

"Everybody is in charge of something, and Joy and I have charge of the hot dog buns. There are eight baskets of them so it's just about the biggest job, except for the girls in charge of the watermelons. That's for Miranda and Roxie. Roxie's grandpa is Grandpa Small Bear, the storyteller.

"I have to quit and get busy now, and Joy says her hair is dry enough to tie up. I love you, Afton."

Humphrey was becoming very discouraged. He was very tired of living in the hay bale, knowing he was very close to Afton, and having no way to let her know. The cat stayed on the hay bales all day long, in the hot sunshine and almost all night long. Sometimes he would leave for a few minutes at night, and Humphrey had to be ready to slip out of his tunnel in the hay and lick up a few drops of dew from the grass to keep from dying of thirst.

In addition to that, he was getting a little tired of eating just grass seed. He'd like to have a nice, oily sunflower seed or maybe a crust of bread, just for a change. Even the shelled corn in the barrel in the barn would be nice. Another thing, he'd like to have a nice long drink of water, and not have to try to satisfy his thirst with dew drops, watching for the return of the cat.

Truly, he was very miserable.

Finally it was late afternoon. The three hay wagons, painted green with bright red wheels, now carried a fluffy layer of hay in their floorboards, and the hay bales were being tossed aboard. Cal and Doug Small Bear, Roxie's big brothers, were in charge of the hay bales.

No one had any idea that there was a hamster inside the bales that were heaved up and fell, 'kerplunk', on the loose hay. The bales were shoved against the sides of the wagon, and another row of bales was put on top of them.

Suddenly, like a flying yellow comet, Alley Cat leaped up and over the sideboards and into the wagon. He stood on a hay bale and growled his irritation at having the bales disturbed, and Doug Small Bear yelled at him.

"Scat, Alley Cat. Get out of there."

Alley Cat did not get out, and Doug had to get in the wagon and pick him up and pitch him out. Even then, he stood a little way off, growling menacingly.

The sun was now lower in the sky, and Cal Small Bear brought the horses around and hitched them to the wagons, two horses to each one, and the animals stood patiently waiting, switching flies with their tails.

Afton and Joy loaded their hot dog buns into the third wagon and stood aside, waiting for the watermelons and the ice chests to be loaded.

Heidi and Linsey waited with them, each with their bucket of potato salad, and Victoria and Regina came with the weiners and toasting forks. Finally, they were ready. Down the lane they rode, yelling and singing and very, very hungry.

At the banks of the Thunderbird River they stopped, setting out the hay bales to use as tables.

Dry sticks were gathered and a fire was built for roasting the weiners and by now the sun was dropping below the tops of the trees along the river bank.

Alley Cat was being a nuisance. He threaded himself between the bales of hay, whining and growling, and getting under everyone's feet. Several times he was accidentally stepped on, making him hiss and spit, angrily. This was certainly out of character for Alley Cat, and he was chased away often, but he always came back.

There were hot dogs, roasted hot and dripping from the flame, potato salad and carrot sticks, radish roses and dill pickles. Finishing up the picnic, were watermelons and then marshmallows, toasted over the coals.

Grandpa Small Bear blew the flame from his marshmallow and ate it, soft and creamy, and settled down to tell his story.

"I'm telling you the story the way it was told to me. You can decide if it really happened.

"It was a long time ago, in the land of the first people, and they had just begun to realize how important were the sun, the wind and the rain, and sometimes they needed to call to these elements to remind them of their duty.

"There was a song to the wind. The wind was needed to bring the scent of the buffalo to the noses of the dogs, and to blow the clouds into place when rain was needed. There were special songs to sing, to instruct the wind to do its work.

"The people saw the sun complete its work each day and go to sleep, but during the night, the sun might forget what it must do tomorrow, and if it did not shine, or if it shone too warmly, there were songs to sing to correct this fault and get the sun on track again.

"Also, the rain often gave the first people trouble. Sometimes it poured too heavily, and sometimes it forgot to rain at all. Here in Oklahoma, and in the other southwestern states, the rain often forgot to fall at all, and that caused a very serious problem.

"Many of the first people sang the songs to the rain, but few were as successful at communicating with the rain clouds as their beloved Chief Rainbringer. He was a very good chief, and the welfare of his people was very important to him. He made them a promise that he would never leave them alone, but would be with them, forever.

"This beloved chief wore a headdress which was very unusual to his tribe. This feathered bonnet was dyed in many colors from the berries, herbs and clay, to create a profusion of colors in a halo about his head.

"The chief, wearing his colorful headdress, would go alone into the sacred mountain and plea for the life giving moisture to come down to his people, and always the rain came.

"The chief wore this headdress until his death at a very great age. In deep sorry, his people carried him to the top of the sacred hill where he had often petitioned for rain.

"There was double sadness at his burial. They would miss him because of what he could do for them, but even more, they would miss him because they loved him.

However, in their hearts, they felt that their chief had let them down, for had he not promised he would not leave them? Now he was gone, so where was the good of that promise?

"So the chief was buried, but the people never forgot his promise that he would always be with them, and they were puzzled, for had they not just sent him onto the other world?"

"While they were gazing up into the sacred mountain, wondering about all of this, a brisk shower of rain fell around them, soaking the earth with the precious water. The people then knew this to be the parting gift from Chief Rainbringer.

"They lifted their eyes and looked up to thank him and they saw, there in the clouds surrounding the other world, wide bands of color, forming a halo. This could only be the colorful bonnet of their beloved chief.

"Thereafter, when the rains came and the sunshine followed, so came the colors of the bonnet in the shape of a bow, stretching from one cloud to another cloud.

"People looked at this colorful bow-shaped band of color that appeared after the rain and called it a..."

At that moment, twenty five voices yelled, "A RAINBOW!"

By now, the sun had gone down and the river bank was dark except for the spots of light surrounding the lanterns hanging from the tree limbs. Night insects zoomed around the trees, their wings flashing spots of light from the lantern. Fat, clumsy June bugs banged into everything. A few mosquitos hummed around, trying to get a bite, and had to be shooed away.

It was time to pack up the empty buckets and baskets and toss the hay bales back into the wagons. It was time to gather all the foam cups into garbage bags, and count the toasting forks so none would be left on the river bank.

Alley Cat was still making a pest of himself, tripping feet and generally being a nuisance. He had been fed bites of weiner, but he still whined and growled, and stuck close to the party in a very un-Alley-Cat-like way.

Cal and Doug Small Bear came on horseback to help load the haybales and to guide the wagons back to camp.

Humphrey was still in the hay bale, and he heard the growls of Alley Cat. He also heard Afton, but she kept moving about. He knew the minute he stuck his head out of the bale, he would be cat food.

All through the rough and wobbly ride to the river, he had tried to think and plan what he could do. The hay bale had been chunked onto the ground, and he still had not decided on the answer. Alley Cat would not stay away long enough to let him get out.

Now his hay bale had been tossed back into the wagon, giving him a tooth-rattling jolt.

Then the wagons were rolling along again, and the campers were singing all the songs they knew, and generally making a racket. Humphrey couldn't have heard Afton's voice now, no matter how hard he tried.

He worked his way through the tunnel he had made in the hay bale, until he could peek out into the darkness. The moon was bright and he could see a little bit. What he saw was hay, feet, legs, buckets, pans and baskets. BASKETS! There was something about the basket right in front of him that reminded him of Afton. The smell! That's what it was. Afton had been close to that basket. Could it be....????

He eased his nose out of the hay and immediately he heard the cat growl. Well, Humphrey, he told himself, it was now or never!

With a quick leap, he shot from the hay bale into the basket. It was empty. He looked around quickly and could not see Afton. Horrors! There above him was the evil cat!

Three times he had escaped by use of the surprise attack, and surely it wouldn't work again, but what did he have to lose?

Down he crouched in the darkness of the basket, but he knew the cat could see him as well as he could see the cat.

"Scat away, Alley Cat!" someone yelled.

"Throw him out!" someone else yelled.

"What's the matter with that cat? He's been in the middle of everything, all evening."

"Shoo, go away."

But Alley cat would not scat. He crouched, ready to pounce into the basket, snarling and growling in his throat.

Humphrey pulled himself into a tiny ball and tensed his back legs. His heart was pounding as he stared into the cat's eyes.

The cat's tail began to lash back and forth. Now was the time. The cat was ready to pounce! Through the air came the cat, and 'clunk' into the basket with him. Humphrey even felt the scratch of its claws before he let out his loudest 'SQUEAK!' and he leaped straight up out of the basket. He had no idea where he would land, but any place was better than in the cat's mouth.

There was a squeal, right in the middle of the camp song, as Humphrey came barreling through the air and landed, 'thunk', right on Afton's knees.

"EEEEK!" she squealed and shoved at him, but he was already scrambling up her tee shirt, aiming for her shoulder and safety.

Afton's voice stopped in mid squeal. Only one thing in the world felt like a hamster scrambling up a tee shirt. It was a hamster. Could it be...?? Of course not! But it was!

She grabbed the tiny ball of fur in her hand the very instant that Alley Cat landed in her lap.

Joy, sitting beside Afton, had not figured out what had happened, except that Afton was busy with something in her lap, so she grabbed Alley Cat around his middle and pitched him over the side of the wagon.

Afton knew, in an instant and even in the dark, that the fur ball was Humphrey.

"Hey, everybody," she yelled, "I found my hamster. I've got him right here!"

"How did you find him?"

"Where was he?"

"Are you sure its him and not a mouse?"

"Where has he been?"

"I don't know," Afton answered, "but he's here now."

In camp once more, Humphrey rode in Afton's pocket while she gathered her baskets and returned them to the Cookshack.

In his cage at last, he bumped noses with Annette and settled happily into the wood shavings on his cage floor.

When Joy pitched Alley Cat out of the wagon, he went sailing into the night, landing on his feet as he always did. It could not be said that Alley Cat was dumb, and he now knew that he had lost the hamster forever. Who needed it, anyway? It was too little to make a meal and the hateful little beast probably tasted bad, as well. What he really needed now was something big, warm, furry and filling.

He straightened his whiskers and licked his lips. That always helped him get his bearings. Which way should he go?

The moon was bright, lighting all the hunting pathways he knew so well. He crouched low and crept through the bushes. There were many so interesting smells floating on the night breeze.

He stepped onto the flat rock where he had often waited for the right scent to come along. There in the distance was the faint smell of a skunk. There was the musky scent of a coyote, also hunting, and over all this, was the aroma of woodland flowers.

Ah! There it was! The exciting and unmistakable smell of live rat!

Alley Cat licked his lips and narrowed his eyes to mere slits to better focus his attention. His tail lashed back and forth in silent anticipation. His stomach produced a rolling growl of hunger.

He stood up on the rock to better determine the direction of the rat. Then one soft paw was placed on the hard ground, then another. In the shadows of the low shrubs and bushes, he moved in utter silence. This was the kind of hunting he understood, not wedging himself through doors and waiting on hay bales. He knew exactly how to be successful on this kind of hunt.

His pointed ears twitched slightly, as he picked up a faint rustling sound a few feet away. Carefully keeping in the shadows, he moved closer, hardly daring to breathe..

He listened carefully. Silence. He knew the rat was close, and he knew the rat knew that he knew. The battle lines were now drawn.

One step. Then another. The rat panicked, squeaking loudly and skittering a few feet away.

Victory was close. Alley Cat took a few quick steps on the hard-packed dirt of the woodland path. He could now see the rat.

The rat turned to look at the cat, the moonlight glinting on its tiny, beady eyes. It stood motionless, staring in fear at the cat.

Now was the time. Alley Cat lowered his orange and yellow striped body to the ground, bending his strong legs into their best crouch-pounce position.

With a howl of vengeance, loud enough to strike dread in the hearts of every small woodland creature, the cat flew into the air, landing squarely on top of the terrified rat. The needle-sharp teeth slashed with precision at the neck of the rat, and the rodent was motionless.

An hour later, Alley Cat sat on his favorite flat hunting rock and thoroughly cleaned his face and paws. His stomach was deliciously full, and there would be no need for the breakfast leftovers for him.

Clearly, it was time for him to make his way back to the camp grounds and nap until morning. Then he would climb upon the wooden fence around the goat pen and dream in the sun, watching the noisy, stupid, two-legged animals do their meaningless actions.

Who needed two-legged animals, anyway, and who needed stinking little hamsters? Certainly not himself, and it was well known by all that he, Alley Cat, was, without doubt, the king of Camp Little Ax!

The summer was almost over. After a cool swim in the pond and a hair rinsing at the water hydrant, Afton and Joy were writing their last letters home before their parents would be coming for them.

Afton wrote, "Dear Mom and Dad. I know I don't have to remind you to come and pick me up, but the party may last a long time and I thought you might want to make a hotel reservation in Oklahoma City because we may be very late. We have a lot of songs to sing and we have a Christmas play and then the presents.

"I know I don't have to remind you to bring a present, either. We all have the very big stockings that we sewed, and they will hold a lot of things. I thought you'd want to know.

"I do need to remind you to bring some big boxes, because I have a lot of things to bring home. Love, Afton."

Joy and Afton were gathering their belongings while waiting for the parents. There was the soft stack of knit camp clothes they were permitted to take home. There were too many of them to fit into the suitcase. There was the recipe for the gingerbread cookies from Mrs. Cook, and the pink arrow prize which they had carefully wrapped in tubes of poster board to keep it from getting broken. There were the foam cups of tea herbs that had grown too large for the egg crates. And there was the cage with two hamsters.

The girls sighed with pleasure over the fun of the summer and promised to write to each other. Maybe they would even go to the same college. They sat on Afton's bed with the hamster cage between them, and agreed that this might have been the most wonderful summer of their whole lives.

Annette and Humphrey looked at each other and shook their heads, sadly.

"Not for me," Humphrey thought. "Maybe it was their best summer, but it wasn't mine."

Annette nodded in agreement.