

# **A Long Way from Chicago Study Guide**

**A Long Way from Chicago by Richard Peck**

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## Plot Summary

In the first chapter, Joey is nine and Mary Alice seven. They begin the journey with trepidation, but then get to experience how their Grandma can outwit her neighbors in “Shotgun Cheatham’s Last Night above Ground.” In their second trip they see how their Grandma outwits the town bullies in “The Mouse in the Milk.” The third trip finds them experiencing The Great Depression, feeding the hungry and seeing their Grandma’s soft side in “A One-Woman Crime Wave.” During their fourth trip, they experience the county fair when Grandma Dowdel enters her gooseberry pie in the competition in “The Day of Judgment.” In the fifth trip, Mary Alice makes a friend and helps her run away to elope in “The Phantom Brakeman.” During their sixth trip readers see Grandma fool everyone in town and get Mrs. Effie Wilcox’s house back after it was foreclosed on in “Things with Wings.” Their seventh and final trip happens during the town’s Centennial celebration in “Centennial Summer.” The last chapter finds Joey returning through Grandma’s town on the troop train as he’s heading for Basic Training during World War II.



# Prologue - Chapter 1

## Summary

Prologue: Joey Dowdel, now called Joe, begins to reminisce about the summers he and his sister, Mary Alice went to visit their Grandma. They always went in August to spend their week. Joey is now an old man, older even than his Grandma was. He remembers her as being larger than life. She never changed, but as he and his sister grew up, they saw her as a different woman every summer.

Chapter 1: "Shotgun Cheatham's Last Night above Ground - 1929"

Joey is nine and Mary Alice is seven. They leave Chicago and travel by train to visit their Grandma Dowdel who lives somewhere between Chicago and St. Louis. She lives in the last house in a small town. It seems like a slow place and Mary Alice doesn't like it, mainly because Grandma has an outhouse and an old tomcat that scares her. They soon learn just how interesting the town can be after Shotgun Cheatham died.

Shotgun gains notice after his obituary runs in the paper. No one knows him by any other name, so one bigger newspaper from Peoria sends in a reporter to poke around and see if he can find a story. He heads to the Coffee Pot Café, where the town goes to loaf and gossip. He starts hearing tales about how Shotgun rode with the James brothers or that he killed a man and spent time in the penitentiary. Shotgun was none of these things, just an old man who "lived poor and died broke." He had been given his name as a child when he went out hunting with his older brothers. He got excited, accidentally squeezed off a round and killed a cow. He had been called Shotgun ever since.

The reporter starts going door to door and ends up at Grandma Dowdel's house. Grandma has already found out that Effie Wilcox, the town gossip and Grandma's enemy, has been doing most of the story telling. Joey thinks Grandma will shoo the reporter away, instead she opens the door and steps out on the porch to talk to him. Grandma tells him that the lady he had heard the stories from had just been released from an insane asylum; she is going to tell him the real story. She says that Shotgun got his name during the Civil War. U. S. Grant gave it to him after Vicksburg fell. She says he was a "crack shot" and died penniless because he gave all his money to war widows and orphans. He broke Effie Wilcox's heart and she is still bitter about it. Joey and Mary Alice cannot believe that Grandma is lying to this reporter. She then proceeds to tell him that Shotgun is to be buried with full honors from her house. He will spend his last night above ground in her front room. After the reporter leaves, she walks up to the lumberyard to tell them to bring Shotgun's coffin to her house.

Everyone comes because they cannot believe Grandma is holding an open house for Shotgun. She opens all the windows in her house, because the body smelled; he had been dead a few days before anyone found him. But soon everyone leaves except for



the reporter and Effie Wilcox; both are going to sit with Grandma and the coffin overnight. (At that time, it was tradition to sit up with a corpse through the final night before burial.) Usually, the family tells stories all night, but this isn't a usual time. Everyone is quiet. Then they all start to doze; Mary Alice falls asleep. Suddenly there is a quiet, rustling sound. The gauze hanging over the coffin twitches. Everyone is now alert and staring at the coffin, scared. The gauze ripples again and Grandma goes to grab her rifle. She fires off two rounds. The reporter flies out of his chair, then out through a side window as quick as he can. No one ever saw him again. Effie Wilcox runs out the door screaming. Mary Alice had woken up but was too scared to move; she would have nightmares about this night for years.

Only Grandma and Joey saw her old tomcat streak out of the coffin and through a window when she fired off her first round. She probably saw him climb in and got the idea from there. It was her chance to give both the reporter and Effie a taste of their own medicine.

The Coffee Pot Café talked about that night all summer. It was one of those stories that grew bigger and wilder each time it was told.

## Analysis

While on their first summer trip to see Grandma Dowdel, Joey and Mary Alice experience tall tales, gossip and small towns. They also learn a lot about their Grandma's character. At that time, she seems bigger than life. She's a woman living on the edge of town who is not very popular. She surprises them both when she turns the stories about Shotgun Cheatham around, changing him from a gunslinger to a Civil War hero, even though he was neither.

They don't know what to expect on this first trip and feel like their parents are just dumping them. By the end of the trip, Joey is already starting to see that there is more to Grandma Dowdel than meets the eyes. Mary Alice, who is only seven at the time, still looks toward this trip with dread and trepidation.

## Vocabulary

privy, Prohibition, reprobate, philanthropist, marksman, pauper, lolled, reputation, ponder



## Chapter 2

### Summary

“The Mouse in the Milk – 1930”

Right before their second trip, it occurs to Joey and Mary Alice that this is to be an annual event. They go, feeling like they have no choice. Mary Alice brings a jump rope, Joey a huge jigsaw puzzle. One night, soon after they arrive, they hear a horse clop past, then stop. Suddenly there is a huge explosion and Grandma’s mailbox bounces off the roof of the house.

The next morning, Effie Wilcox comes by. She is a nervous wreck and asks to use Grandma’s privy. The night before, someone had come to her house and flung her privy across the yard. Effie feels like the town is getting too dangerous. “Cowgills” is how Grandma explains both incidences.

The next morning the kids come downstairs to find Grandma’s Winchester Model 21 laying out on the table along with a greasy rag for cleaning. She is talking to a tall, gangly boy, introduced as Ernie Cowgill, wearing an all-white uniform. She is telling him that she found a mouse in her milk from the last delivery. Then she says that she would be gone that night and the next day and won’t need a milk delivery. She is lying to the boy and Joey wants to know why. She puts everything away after Ernie leaves. Joey asks her why she has the shotgun out. “Bait,” she replies.

The Cowgills run the local dairy farm. They have four boys, all big bullies. Ernie is the youngest and smallest and just a bit dimwitted. Ernie usually drives the milk truck and makes deliveries. Their mom and dad do not keep very close reigns on them and the boys usually run wild terrorizing the town.

Later that day, while Joey is weeding, he hears Mary Alice screaming from the kitchen. He rushes to see what the problem is and finds her screaming while Grandma holds up a large mouse in a trap. He watches while Grandma dumps the mouse in an empty milk bottle, then she pours fresh milk over it. Joey does not even want to ask why she is doing this.

That night Grandma hurries them up as they clean up the kitchen. She won’t let the kids play outside or turn on any lights in the house. As they are sitting in the dark, they start hearing noises. Then they hear footsteps and see someone cutting through the screen on the back door. Grandma reaches for something hidden in her sewing basket. She tells the kids to follow her and they creep towards the kitchen. She rolls something across the floor towards the trespassers and there is an explosion, a cherry bomb. The trespassers are the four Cowgill brothers who have come to steal Grandma’s shotgun. When the lights come on, Grandma has her shotgun pointed at the boys. She sends Joey to the Holy Rollers Church to fetch their Maw and Paw.



When he gets there, he can hear loud singing and tambourines coming from inside the small, one-room church. He realizes he doesn't know what the Cowgills look like, but feels relief when he sees Effie Wilcox. He creeps up to her and asks for the Cowgills; they are sitting beside her. When he tells them that Grandma Dowdel has the boys pinned with a shotgun, they all race out of the church and climb in the milk wagon.

Mr. Cowgill tries to diffuse the situation and calm Grandma, but she wants justice. Mr. Cowgill is not going to punish his boys, so Grandma points out the milk bottle with the mouse in it. Mr. Cowgill panics because his dairy prides itself on being clean and sanitary. Grandma says that if he doesn't punish the boys, the whole town will find out about the mouse. That convinces him. He takes all the boys out back and whips them. Grandma returns law and order to a town she says she doesn't care about.

## Analysis

Joey and Mary Alice learn that their summer visit to Grandma Dowdel is to become an annual event. They are not happy and drag their feet before going. They still consider the visit boring and Mary Alice resents having to leave her friends for a week.

Joey still sees Grandma Dowdel as a private person, who doesn't care a bit about her town or the people who live in it. She's a complicated person, but he doesn't see it yet. Through their adventures with the Cowgill brothers, he learns that maybe she does care about her town. She cares enough to make sure it is still a nice place to live and that four bullies do not terrorize her neighbors.

Grandma Dowdel is able to easily outwit the Cowgill brothers. She sets the bait by laying her shotgun out for Ernie Cowgill to see. Then she tells him that no one would be home that night. She knew the boys would be tempted to try to steal the gun. She never really tells Joey and Mary Alice what her plans are, so they have to try to deduce what is going to happen. They still do not know Grandma well enough to figure out what her plans are going to be.

That night she follows through with her trap and when the brothers break into the house, she surprises, then traps them, with her shotgun. She has Joey run to get their parents. She wants them to see what their boys have been up to and to be the ones to administer the punishment. She had prepared the mouse in the milk bottle as insurance that Mr. Cowgill would punish his sons. She wants it to be very clear that the boys stop terrorizing the town. Joey learns that while Grandma Dowdel may not show it in any conventional way, she does care about her small town and her neighbors.

## Vocabulary

privacy, jigsaw puzzle, explosion, jaunt, sneer, coincidence, nightmare, settee, mend, rafter, burglary, pilfering, culprit, evidence, sanitary, justice



# Chapter 3

## Summary

“A One Woman Crime Wave – 1931”

By the time Joey and Mary Alice take their third trip, the country has plunged deep into the Great Depression. They can see signs of it all along their trip, from the men riding the freight trains and others walking along the roads looking for work. A new sign greets them when they arrive at Grandma’s station: “Drifters keep moving, this means you. (Signed) O.B. Dickerson, Sheriff.”

Despite all the changes around them, once they get to Grandma Dowdel’s everything seems the same. Grandma is the same as she always was. The only difference is the stench of very stinky cheese coming from the cob house.

The first morning, Grandma wakes the kids at five a.m. by banging a spoon against a pan. “We’re going fishing,” she explains. There were no poles or bait around, but still they set off carrying a hamper full of food and a gunnysack full of the stinky cheese. They walk past her house and out into the country until they come to a barbed wire fence with a “No Trespassing” sign. It is owned by the Piatt County Rod & Gun Club. Joey has to lift the wire so that Grandma, Mary Alice and finally he can shimmy under it. Grandma tells them to be quiet and follow her as she leads them through the tall grass and backwater to an old rowboat tied up against a tree.

Grandma turns out to be an expert rower and they row quietly down the stream until a snake falls out of a tree and into the boat. Joey faints. They move on down the creek, with Joey feeling both scared of encountering more snakes and embarrassed that he fainted. Eventually, Grandma stops the boat, takes a stick with a hook at the end and plunges it into the water. She pulls up a crate bigger than their picnic hamper. Joey soon realizes there are catfish in the trap. While Grandma empties the catfish into a net, Joey starts questioning her about whether or not it was legal to trap fish. Of course, it wasn’t. Joey was confused and concerned. First they trespassed and then took a boat that didn’t belong to them. Now, they are illegally trapping fish.

The fishing doesn’t take long and they are soon on their way. It isn’t long before they can hear loud singing, then they catch sight of the Rod & Gun Club. Empty whiskey bottles line the porch of an old ramshackle building and there is a group of grown men singing in their underwear. They see Earl T. Askew, president of the Chamber of Commerce and O.B. Dickerson, sheriff. Joining them is about every one of the business men in town. Even though Joey hopes she will turn around, Grandma keeps rowing until they are in sight of the Rod & Gun Club. It takes a little while for the men to notice them, and once they do, Grandma acts like she just saw them for the first time. She keeps rowing as the sheriff shouted after them, “Stop in the name of the law! That’s my boat!” Grandma keeps rowing as if nothing ever happened.





Soon, Grandma pulls into an old dock. They get out and drag the net of catfish and picnic hamper up to an old, dilapidated house. It looks like no one lived there, only someone did, Aunt Puss Chapman. Aunt Puss is the oldest person the kids had ever seen. She is bald as an egg and doesn't have a tooth in her mouth. She talks to Grandma as if Grandma is a young girl. Grandma takes them back to an old-fashioned kitchen and they set to work frying up the catfish, potatoes and onions.

They soon find out that Grandma was Aunt Puss's hired girl before she got married. She had been thrown out of school for stuffing her underdrawers up the flue of the stove and smoking out the schoolhouse. She came to work for Aunt Puss soon after that. Aunt Puss was getting so old that she doesn't even realize that Grandma no longer worked for her or that she is very poor. She also has very little concept of the passing of time.

As they leave Aunt Puss's, Grandma tells the kids to get ready; they are going to fry up the rest of the catfish. When they get home, they work hard frying catfish, onions and potatoes. She has the kids get down every platter she owns. After dark, they carry everything out of the house, across the road and up to the railroad right-of-way. It takes many loads to carry all the food and many bottles of Grandma's homemade beer. They line the beer up along the side of the road. The next thing the kids know, the drifters start walking by. Grandma feeds them the first food and drink many of those men had had in days.

Eventually, they see the swinging lanterns of the sheriff and his deputies. The sheriff tells Grandma that he doesn't want her feeding the drifters; he doesn't want them loafing around town. Grandma tells him she wasn't in the town, but in the county. He says his jurisdiction covers that area as well. According to the sheriff, she is a "one-woman crime wave." Little did the sheriff know that Grandma knew just how to get out of trouble. How were they to charge a woman who threatened to tell the whole town about their drunken escapade that morning? They move on, the drifters move on and Grandma and the kids pack everything up and take it inside.

## Analysis

Grandma Dowdel does not give the kids too much time to settle in before she has them out on an adventure. What starts out as a simple fishing trip, turns out to be a day of questionable activities. Joey feels conflicted all day and in the end wonders if what Grandma did is really wrong after all.

First they trespass, then stole a boat and begin illegal fish trapping. That is the point where they run into the sheriff and almost all of the business men in town. The men are drunk, half-naked and singing at the top of their lungs at the Rod & Gun Club. Joey is confused when Grandma deliberately shows themselves to the men. Why is she doing that?

They then move on to Aunt Puss Chapman's house. Aunt Puss is old, older than anyone Joey or Mary Alice have ever seen. At one time, Aunt Puss was wealthy and



lived in a grand house. Grandma worked for her as a hired girl. Now, Grandma comes by once a week to cook for Aunt Puss keeping her from going hungry. The fish trapping is illegal, but it keeps an old woman from starving. Joey is very conflicted by this.

At this point, they think their day is over, but Grandma has more planned. They go home, fry up the rest of the catfish and cart it all out beyond her house to the railroad tracks. Here they set up shop. Joey is surprised to see that Grandma intends to feed all of the drifters walking through town. She is perceived to be a tough, old woman who doesn't care for anyone, yet here she is feeding people who need it. Joey also finds out why Grandma made sure the sheriff saw them that day. When he comes by with the intention of charging Grandma with several crimes, she threatens to expose his drunken escapades to the town. He leaves without another word. Once again, Grandma surprises Joey by showing him another side of her.

## Vocabulary

drifters, deputies, delicacy, gunnysack, hamper, trespassing, stagnant, sapling, scandalized, kindling, parlor, jurisdiction, larceny



# Chapter 4

## Summary

The Day of Judgment – 1932”

Prior to their fourth trip, Joey and Mary Alice decide that Grandma Dowdel is not a good influence on them. They determined that both their friends and their parents would not understand Grandma the same way they did. This was also the first trip that they didn't completely dread.

When they arrive, the gooseberries are ripe and Grandma Dowdel is hard at work making pies. She puts them to work, as always. While hard at work, there is a knock at the door. It is Mrs. Weidenbach, wife of the banker. She has come to try and convince Grandma to enter her gooseberry pie in the county fair. Mrs. Weidenbach had won every year for her bread-and-butter pickles but thinks that since they are deep in the Depression and bankers aren't looked too kindly on, it would be best if she did not enter this year. But, she thinks that someone should represent their town and bring home the blue ribbon. Nobody can make a gooseberry pie as good as Grandma's, so she should enter. It took awhile, but Grandma finally consents to enter her pie at the county fair.

Once Grandma commits, she is in it all the way. She and the kids set to work the next three days trying to perfect her recipe. It is the busiest three days of Joey's life so far. He goes back and forth to the store and spends hours picking gooseberries. Gooseberries are not the easiest things to pick as they are very spiky to the touch. They are also not the easiest to bake with as they are very sour and take just the right combination of berries and sugar. They bake a pie every four hours those three days until Grandma finally comes up with the perfect pie.

Judging day arrives and Mrs. Weidenbach comes by to pick them up in her Hupmobile; that is the only way they had to get to the fair. Grandma doesn't want to take her pie over to the Domestic Sciences tent right away. "The livestock draws flies," she says. As they are exploring the fair, they soon come in sight of a biplane at the end of the midway. Next to it is a pilot in a leather helmet and a sign that reads, "Barnstorming Bernie Buchanon – Air Ace – Trick Flying and Passenger Rides – Rides 75¢."

Joey's heart sinks. As much as he wants to go, he knows he won't be able to. He doesn't have 75¢ nor did Grandma. As they are looking at the plane, a man from the American Legion makes an announcement. Every blue ribbon winner will win a free ride in the plane. Joey gets excited. Certainly Grandma would win and he knew she would let him have the ride. Mary Alice, on the other hand, thinks a person would be nuts to go up in that thing.

When it was close to judging time, they go into the Domestic Sciences tent and register Grandma's pie. The tent is packed. They walk to Grandma's pie and discover that hers



is not the only gooseberry pie in the competition. There is another one, from Rupert Pennypacker, the best home-baker in the state of Illinois. "I'm a goner," Grandma says. Suddenly there is a pattering sound as Bernie Buchanon takes off in the plane to do his aerial stunts. Everyone in the tent looks up and in that brief moment, Joey thinks he sees Grandma switch the cards around. It is the wrong thing to do and he knows it.

Grandma nudges them away from the pies and over towards Rupert. He is there with this mother, the scariest looking woman Joey has ever seen. She gives him a crisp good luck then they go on their way. The judging seems to take forever and eventually Mary Alice and Joey go outside. He is a nervous wreck. He keeps thinking about how Grandma had switched the cards. He is partly excited because it gives him a better chance at winning the plane ride, but he is also conflicted because he would be cheating in order to win that ride.

They hear a loud voice, then cheering. The prizes are announced, and then people come streaming out. Joey notices Rupert Pennypacker with a blue ribbon attached to his overalls. Grandma has come in second and she is mad. They try consoling her, but it is no good. She did not come to the fair to come in second.

While leaving, Grandma suddenly turns away from the parking lot and heads toward Bernie Buchanon and his biplane. She walks up to him and announces that she is a blue ribbon winner. He does not believe her but she convinces him in her matter of fact way. It took Bernie and three big members of the American Legion to get Grandma in that plane. They have an awful time getting her in and are met with a round of applause once they do. Bernie puts on his goggles and attempts to take off, but try as he might, he cannot get that plane off the ground. It takes all four men to get Grandma back out of the plane and it is twice the task of the last time. But, at last she is on solid ground. Bernie apologizes, but Grandma waves him away. She asks him to take Joey up instead. Joey is in heaven. He finally has his plane ride.

That evening after Mary Alice is in bed, Joey decides to talk to Grandma. He has a few things on his mind. "You never did expect to get the plane off the ground, did you?" No, she replies. And Grandma, Joey asks "I thought you switched the cards on Mr. Pennypacker's pie with yours so you could win with his pie."

"I did," she says.

## Analysis

This is the trip that Joey and Mary Alice begin to gain an understanding of Grandma Dowdel and realize that other people may not understand her and her ways at all. They learn a little about Grandma's pride and also realize that she shows her love for them in a different way.

Grandma doesn't normally participate in the county fair, but this year she let Mrs. Weidenbach talk her into entering one of her pies. She shows determination and pride as she works for days to perfect the recipe. Unfortunately, she also demonstrates how



her pride can go a little too far when she switches her pie with Mr. Pennypacker's. If she would have left the pies the way they were, she would have won first place, instead she comes in second.

Joey dreams of a ride in the biplane the entire time they are at the fair. He is already in love with flying and thinks this is his one and only chance to fly in a plane. Unbeknownst to him, Grandma did recognize just how much he would love a ride. When she is unable to get the free plane ride for winning first place, she marches right over and talks her way into it. It is not until after they return home from the fair that Joey starts to realize just what Grandma has done for him.

## Vocabulary

gooseberry, mission, foreclose, pasture, domestic, temperance, biplane, gratis, rickety, aerial, propeller, cockpit



# Chapter 5

## Summary

“The Phantom Brakeman”

Joey and Mary Alice's father always gave them twenty-five cents apiece before their annual trip to Grandma Dowdel's. They discover that they could buy five Nehis, an orange pop, during their visit. They go to the Coffee Pot Café to buy the Nehis. The kids were 13 and 11 that summer. Mary Alice had discovered tap dancing and was likely to tap dance down the street.

The first afternoon they are at Grandmas, they go down to the Coffee Pot Café to buy a Nehi. There are only a couple of customers, Mrs. Ike Cripe, the proprietress, and a girl working the counter. The girl is skinny and pale as a ghost. When the girl comes by Mary Alice's table, they fall into a murmuring conversation; Joey assumes it is girl talk. Suddenly, they see a woman pull up front riding a mule. She is a tough-looking woman. She storms through the door and goes up to Mrs. Cripe. She is the counter girl's mother, Idella Eubanks. Mrs. Eubanks demands fifteen cents, her daughter's wages for the day. She grabs the money from the girl, Vandalia, and says she will be collecting back wages from her when Vandalia gets home that evening. After Mrs. Eubanks leaves, Mary Alice tries to console Vandalia. Vandalia is seventeen and still living under her mother's rule. Mary Alice thinks she needs a friend.

When they get back to Grandma's, they discover her outside making soap. The kids never knew you could make your own soap until they started visiting Grandma. Grandma and Joey work through the evening even though Mary Alice had disappeared earlier that day.

While they are stirring the melted soap, Grandma starts telling Joey a story about the phantom brakeman. In 1871, during the Great Fire of Chicago, the Wabash tracks were busy. It was a foggy night and a train full of fire fighters headed from Decatur to Chicago ended up on the same tracks as a freight train coming from Chicago. The trains met head on, about half a mile from Grandma's house. The crash killed the brakeman on the freight train and both engineers. It was said that the bodies looked like they had been through a sausage grinder. Grandma says that the brakeman is still seen. On hazy nights, you can sometimes see a shadowy figure swinging an old-fashioned railroad lantern or sometimes you can see a dim yellow light deep in the woods.

Joey has a hard time shaking the image of the phantom brakeman from his mind. Because of this, he has difficulty sleeping that night. He thinks he hears talking and other noises coming from Mary Alice's room. He gets up to investigate since that isn't normal. She tells him there is a puppy in her room, named Skipper. He better not tell Grandma because she wouldn't understand. Joey goes back to bed.



That next morning, he notices Mary Alice putting some of her breakfast down her shirt. She must be smuggling it up to her room. Grandma and Joey go outside to pry the soap out of the pot; it would have hardened over night. They aren't out there long when Mrs. Eubanks comes hurrying past, heading to town. Nearly an hour later, Mrs. Eubanks comes back and stops at Grandma's house. She hops off her mule, which by this time is foaming at the mouth, runs up the porch and starts trying to pry open the screen door. Grandma appears and wants to know what the problem is. Mrs. Eubanks claims that Vandalia is hiding inside Grandma's house and she wants her back. Grandma asks her how she knew. Mrs. Eubanks says that everyone in town saw Vandalia come to her house. Grandma tells Mrs. Eubanks that if she tries to come in her house she will "wring your red neck." Mrs. Eubanks stomps off.

Later that day, Joey encounters a guy in a tight suit out back by the privy, Junior Stubbs. Junior works for his father selling insurance. He is looking for Vandalia and wants Joey to smuggle a note to her. It reads: "Come steal away with me, sweetheart. Let nothing no longer keep us apart. Break yourself free of your mother's rule. She never knew love and she's just being cruel. I love you honey, Junior." He says to tell Vandalia that he will meet her in back of the cob house that night after dark.

At midafternoon, while Joey is still outside working on the soap, a sedan pulls up in front of Grandma's house. It is Earle Stubbs and his wife, Junior's parents. Joey had already snuck the note to Mary Alice to smuggle up to Vandalia. Earle accuses Grandma of sticking her nose in their private business. He knows that Junior is in love with Vandalia and wants to marry her. Earle does not want his son marrying a Eubanks; it will ruin their position in the community. As this conversation is occurring, they hear a loud thud outside. When they go out to check, they see a ladder propped on the house and Idella Eubanks at the top of it, trying to work the screen off a window.

Grandma has enough. She goes over and jerks the ladder off the side of the house. Mrs. Eubanks crashes down onto the ground. The Stubbses leave with one final threat about Grandma's interference. Grandma tells Mrs. Eubanks she doesn't ever want to catch her on her property again.

By 8:00 that night, everyone in town knows what happened. The Wabash Cannonball train is due through town that evening and everyone assumes Junior and Vandalia will elope on it. The Coffee Pot Café is crowded that night, since it has a great view of the depot. The Stubbses are waiting at the depot, hoping to talk Junior out of leaving and the Eubanks are waiting to bring Vandalia back home. But, things don't go according to plan. Junior and Vandalia do not come to meet the train. The Cannonball pulls out and starts out of town. Suddenly, there is a piercing shriek as it hits its brakes. There in the haze is a figure, dressed in black swinging an old-fashioned lantern. As all eyes are focused on the Phantom Brakeman, Junior and Vandalia sneak aboard the train. Then, as soon as it appeared, the ghost disappears in the haze.

That night as the kids come in the house, Grandma tells Mary Alice that the next time she brings in a stray, it had better be a puppy. The kids are shocked that Grandma knew what was going on the whole time. She asks Joey if he had everything squared away



and he nods. He had left Grandpa Dowdel's old black overcoat and old lantern in the cob house before he came in that night.

## Analysis

During this chapter, you see how much Mary Alice is growing up. She is the one who sets things in action this time, not Grandma. She sees Vandalia at the Coffee Pot Café and witnesses the cruelty of her mother. Mary Alice is determined that Vandalia needs a friend and sets out to help her. She also shows her independence by making her plan and executing it. You see how Mary Alice is similar to Grandma and growing more like her every year.

The kids think Grandma doesn't know that Vandalia is hiding in Mary Alice's room, but she's aware the whole time. She's an important part of the kid's ability to keep Vandalia hidden by running her mother off as well as running Junior's parents off. When Mary Alice and Joey find out that Junior wants to marry Vandalia, they set events in motion to make it happen. Joey even borrows from an old ghost story to help the two make their escape. Throughout the story, you get the impression that all three, Mary Alice, Joey and Grandma, are each working separately but by the end of the story you see that all three were crucial in the stories happy ending.

## Vocabulary

poise, lye, horizon, superstitious, insurance, embarrass, sedan, democratic, interference, abdicated, elope





# Chapter 6

## Summary

“Things with Wings – 1934”

For the first time since their initial visit, Grandma is at the train platform when Joey and Mary Alice arrive. She isn't there to greet them though; she is there to see someone off. She helps Mrs. Effie Wilcox on the train, makes sure she finds a seat, and then turns to her grandkids. Her mind is miles away as they walk home. Mary Alice asks where Mrs. Wilcox is going. Grandma replies that she is moving in with her sister in Palmyra. Effie's house is being foreclosed on because she can't make the payments.

They distract Grandma with the story of John Dillinger's demise that summer. They were quite upset that their parents would not take them to see his corpse, which was on display in the basement of the city morgue. After they go upstairs to unpack, Mary Alice mentions that Grandma is already missing Mrs. Wilcox. This confuses Joey; he thinks Grandma would be happy to see her leave town for good. Mary Alice tells him that he just doesn't understand women.

That afternoon, Joey walks uptown by himself. He wants to see Ray Veech at Veech's Gas and Oil. The town is quiet and as he walks by the insurance agency. He sees a handbill advertising the giant farm implement shed that John Deere and Company is proposing to put up on the block where the old brickyard had stood. Next to it was a handbill advertising the rummage sale at the United Brethren Church.

When Joey arrives at Veech's garage, he falls in love at first sight. The most beautiful car he has ever seen is sitting in front. Grandma's town does not have a car dealership, so Veech's will order cars for anyone that requests it. This particular car is a showroom fresh Terraplane 8, the make Dillinger drove to outrun the cops. Joey goes in to talk to Ray. Ray is seventeen and Joey is working hard to get to know him because he wants driving lessons. Ray wants two dollars for the course and Joey just does not have that kind of money.

That night, Grandma takes the kids to the picture show. She is actually the one who wants to go; she is just using the kids as an excuse. Joey and Mary Alice are used to first-run movies at an actual theater. The movies in Grandma's town are put on by the Lion's Club. They put up canvas walls in the park and you sit on benches. Admission is a nickel a head or a can of food for the hungry. They all get in on one of Grandma's quart jars of canned beets. They settle in on the back row since nobody likes to sit behind Grandma. The movie that night is Dracula starring Bela Lugosi. They are all a little spooked that night on the way home. A few years ago, the kids would have thought the movie had spooked Grandma, but now they wonder if she is trying to spook them.



Mary Alice asks Grandma if vampires were real. No, she replies, but if you make something seem real, people will believe it. At that, everyone heads to bed.

The next morning, Joey decides to ask Grandma for the two dollars for driving lessons. She wants to know why he wants lessons since he lives in Chicago. He doesn't know how to explain to Grandma that driving was something that men did. He is yearning to grow from a boy to a man. Grandma also said that he won't have time for driving lessons anyway; she needs him and Mary Alice to go up in her attic and find some things for the rummage sale. She specifically wants them to find an old stovepipe hat that once belonged to a travelling preacher.

The kids go up to the attic to dig around. They find an old buffalo robe, yellowed baby clothes that belonged to their dad, yellowed Farm Journal magazines, old dress patterns and even some old paper Valentines. It shocks Joey and Mary Alice to see that Grandma was once a young woman who had been romanced. The only thing they find for the rummage sale, besides the stovepipe hat, is an old quilt.

That afternoon they carry the items to the rummage sale, which is being held in the church's basement. It is packed with ladies picking over the tables and snatching things up. Everyone is surprised to see Grandma Dowdel. She doesn't usually involve herself in community affairs. Grandma and Joey settle themselves in folding chairs off to the side while Mary Alice peruses the merchandise. Grandma seems to be biding her time.

Suddenly there is a flurry at the other end of the room. Mrs. Earl T. Askew, the strict lady in charge, comes striding over to Grandma. She wants to let her know that Mrs. L. J. Weidenbach has offered fifteen dollars for the stovetop hat. She wants to know if Grandma is positive she wants to part with that hat. Grandma replies that it doesn't belong to her; it was in the stuff Effie Wilcox threw away when the bank ran her out of town. She insinuates that there is other old stuff that goes along with the hat. Mrs. Askew hurries back to the ladies and takes Mrs. Weidenbach's money. Joey starts wondering what Grandma is up to now.

Suddenly, Mrs. Askew comes back with the old quilt in her arms, asking Grandma if she is sure she wants to sell it. Joey leans over and sees initials sewn into the binding that were not there earlier, M. T. L. Mrs. Weidenbach appears then, still clutching the hat, and tries to look at the quilt. Suddenly, she exclaims "M. T. L. Mary Todd Lincoln! And I've got Abe Lincoln's own stovepipe hat. His name's lettered in on the sweatband!"

The next morning, a young man in a seersucker suit knocks on Grandma's door. He lets Grandma know that Mr. Weidenbach would like to see her. Mary Alice and Joey go with Grandma to the bank. Mr. Weidenbach states that certain items, rumored to be from the estate of Abe and Mary Todd Lincoln, have surfaced from a house the bank is about to foreclose on. He asks if she knew what that meant. She matter-of-factly replies that she expects the state will take over that land and restore the house as a museum. He says that the bank has already signed papers with Deere and Company to build an implement shed across that property. This will throw a wrench in the whole plan. He accuses Grandma of falsifying the items. Throwing her in jail would improve the bank's



reputation, she replies sarcastically. Mr. Weidenbach sighs; he is in too deep and has no other way out. Grandma tells him to build a shorter shed and leave Effie Wilcox's house and that he had to give Effie back her house free and clear.

"Mrs. Dowdel, that's not business," the banker says. "That's blackmail."

What's the difference, Grandma asks? Mr. Weidenbach consents, but only if Grandma will confess that she falsified the items. Sure, we can start that rumor now, she says. Effie put A. Lincoln inside the hat to indicate that was the kind of hat he wore and the initials on the quilt were for her cousin, Maude Teeter Lingenbloom. As she was on her way out, she asks Mr. Weidenbach for one more thing, two dollars for each of her grandchildren.

Joey gets his driving lesson, but Grandma and Mary Alice come along wedged in the backseat. Mary Alice holds on to her two dollars; Grandma's thriftiness has been rubbing off on her. Joey is in heaven. To him, the Terraplane is just another thing with wings. His dream of flying is still with him and this drive in the country satisfies his yearning to fly.

Grandma comes to the depot with Joey and Mary Alice the day they leave. She doesn't come to see them off though; she is meeting someone. Mrs. Effie Wilcox is coming home. They turn to wave at Grandma, but she is already deep in conversation with Effie.

## Analysis

During this trip, they see that the Great Depression has effected someone they have gotten to know in their prior trips. Effie Wilcox lost her house due to foreclosure and she is moving out of town. Grandma seems very upset about this. Joey is confused. He thought all along that Grandma and Mrs. Wilcox don't like each other. He learns that their relationship is truly complex. In fact, they are good friends and will miss each other very much.

It isn't long before Grandma has concocted a plan to get Effie back to town. After watching a movie in town, it strikes her that people will believe anything if you make it seem real. She finds an old stovetop hat and an old quilt. With just a little handiwork, she makes it appear that Abe and Mary Todd Lincoln were the original owners of the items. She then tells everyone that she found them in Mrs. Wilcox's house. She sets all the women in town into a frenzy and catches the attention of Mr. Weidenbach. He calls her into the bank and wants to know why she started the rumor. She uses this as leverage to get Mrs. Wilcox's house back. Joey sees just what Grandma will do to help out a friend.

## Vocabulary

valise, handbill, stovepipe hat, eaves, rummage sale, seersucker, implement, thrift



# Chapter 7

## Summary

“Centennial Summer – 1935”

Joey is fifteen and Mary Alice thirteen during their seventh and final trip to see Grandma Dowdel. Joey is expecting to get a job the next summer and Mary Alice will be entering eighth grade. They both think that they are getting too old for these summer trips. When they reach the depot, they notice the “Drifters Keep Moving” sign has been replaced with a new sign that reads: “Welcome to the Centennial Celebration, A Century of Progress, 1835-1935, See our Ladies’ Hospitality Committee for a complete list of centennial activities, Gentlemen: grow a beard or pay a fine!”

They ask Grandma about the Centennial Celebration as soon as they get to her house. She acts uninterested, but after dinner, she sends the kids up to the attic again to go through all the old trunks. They are going to need historical costumes for the celebration. While they are up there, she also wants them to find the old butter churn. Mary Alice calls down to Grandma that she won’t be able to fit in any of the clothes they find. Grandma asks for some cut-velvet curtains with fringed trim instead. Joey finds an old suit and derby hat to wear and Mary Alice finds a beautiful white dress trimmed in seed pearls.

They take everything downstairs and decide to try on their costumes. When Grandma sees them, she freezes. Silence reigns for a few minutes, and then she tells the two that they look like her and Grandpa Dowdel on their wedding day. They haven’t realized until then that they are wearing wedding clothes.

The next morning, they are eating breakfast when Mrs. L. J. Weidenbach knocks on the door. She looks desperate. Several of the members of the Ladies Hospitality Committee have gotten sick and she needs Grandma’s help. After all, her hands will be full with her father, who will carry the honor of the Oldest Settler, and her nephew, who will be sure to win the talent show. Grandma is angry because Mrs. Weidenbach is asking her to scrub toilets while she runs her daddy and nephew around winning prizes. Mrs. Weidenbach says she will be too busy to help.

Grandma sends Joey to look for her gum boots, which he finds in the cob house. While there, he hears a sound. He initially thinks it is Grandma’s old tomcat, but it is a kitten instead. He gathers the kitten up and the gum boots and takes them inside. She tells him to get that kitten out of the house, but Joey knows she doesn’t mean it. He asks what happened to the old tom cat. She says he had been hit by a train. They are packing up to go out in the country to find Uncle Grady Griswold and his wife. If he is still living, he will be the oldest settler, not Mrs. Weidenbach’s father.



As they are walking along, Joey notices that Mary Alice's mind seems to be far away. He knows that she is up to something. She has been conspiring with Grandma. In fact, each year she has gotten closer and closer to Grandma and more and more like her. The kitten is tucked in a hamper; Grandma threatens to drown it. Joey knows that will never happen.

When they get to Uncle Grady Griswold's house, they notice that somebody still lived there, there are chickens in the brooder and the garden has been weeded. They go in. An old lady is sitting beside a cold stove and on the other side is "the oldest man on earth." Grandma is happy to see both are still living. Grandma asks Uncle Grady if he still has his army uniform. He says it is in the bedroom and she sends Joey after it. He finds it but doesn't think it looks right. When he asks, he finds out that Uncle Grady fought in the Mexican War not the Civil War. He can't believe that is possible. Uncle Grady will be there for the parade. They leave and Grandma leaves the kitten at the Griswold's.

On the first day of the Centennial Celebration, the town is crowded. There are competitions to fill the day, such as a spelling bee and a chili cook-off. Joey has not seen Mary Alice all day. The talent show is that evening and after dinner, Joey and Grandma set off for it. Grandma says they don't have to stay until the end.

The talent show is at the bandstand in the park. Joey and Grandma sit in back. They sit through a musical saw, a barbershop quartet and the choir from Mrs. Effie Wilcox's church. Finally, Mrs. L. J. Weidenbach's nephew comes on. He looks to be about in fifth grade and is dressed in old-time clothes. He recites a poem which garners a spattering of applause and Mrs. Weidenbach jumping up to tell everyone that he is her nephew. After he is done, Mrs. Merle Stubbs brings out a Victrola, drops a record on it, and starts it. From out of nowhere comes a graceful couple dancing the waltz. The crowd catches its breath. Joey realizes that Mary Alice is the girl. He looks hard trying to figure out who the male half of the couple is. Finally, he realizes it is Ray Veech. He is seeing Mary Alice in a whole new light and isn't sure he likes it. Mary Alice and Ray are the winners of the talent show.

They wake up before daybreak the next morning. They work right up until the last minute on their float. The parade starts at eleven, led off by high school bands from neighboring communities. Finally, it is time for the floats. Mrs. L.J. Weidenbach had decorated the first one. On it is her father in full Civil War blue. He seems to have no idea where he is. Mrs. Weidenbach is there too, dressed in a big hoop skirt, holding her daddy up. The sign reads "Oldest Settler in the Community, Born 1845, Decorated Veteran of the Civil War."

The float should have been followed by a marching platoon from the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, but somehow the Dowdels manage to get their float in instead. They had borrowed a hay frame from the Cowgills and all of the Cowgill brothers, except for Ernie, flank the float. (They have all grown up to be good Christian men except for Ernie, who is in jail.) Up front are Mary Alice and Joey dressed in the wedding clothes; Mary Alice is waving the cup for winning first prize at the talent show. Joey is



standing in for Ray who refused to ride in the parade. Mrs. Effie Wilcox sits behind them demonstrating the butter churn. In back is Uncle Grady Griswold in full uniform holding a sword. Grandma stands beside him to give him support. She is dressed in an old-fashioned dress she has made from the velvet curtains. Above them is a sign which reads, "Uncle Grady Griswold, Born 1832, And Winged in the Mexican War, By Far the Oldest Settler in the Community."

The parade is stopped by a train and that causes the Dowdel's float to run into the back of Mrs. Weidenbach's. She is already upset with them because of the talent show. At that point, her father turns around, reads the Dowdel's sign and narrows his eyes. Before you know it, he is out of his seat and so is Uncle Grady. They roll around in the street locked in combat. Finally, Mrs. Weidenbach pulls them apart.

Grandma comes to the depot to see them off. Somehow she knows that this is their last trip. As they are almost out of town, they hear a mew. They look down and discover Grandma had smuggled the kitten into their picnic hamper.

## Analysis

This chapter finds Joey and Mary Alice on their last summer trip to visit Grandma. They are both feeling older and more grown up and are putting some of their childlike tendencies behind them. The town seems to be coming out of the Depression and is getting ready to celebrate their Centennial the week Joey and Mary Alice come to visit.

As usual, Grandma acts uninterested, but she is very interested in the celebration. She doesn't want Mrs. Weidenbach to have all the glory when there are others who are less out spoken that deserve it. She works hard to make sure the right people get the attention they deserve.

Everyone is a bit melancholy when the time comes for the kids to leave. Grandma Dowdel toes to the depot with them, which was something she didn't normally do. So much time and so many experiences have come to an end.

## Vocabulary

worldliness, centennial, churn, bustle, Victrola, waltz, curtsy, stature



# Chapter 8

## Summary

“The Troop Train – 1942”

It is now 1942 and Joey and Mary Alice are grown. World War II has started. Joey realizes the war is his opportunity to realize his dream of flying, so when he is able, he joins up. He has to do basic training at Camp Leonard Wood and realizes that the troop train taking him there will pass through Grandma’s town sometime during the night. He sends Grandma a telegram to alert her since she never has acquired a phone.

When they reach Grandma’s town, the train slows past the depot. Joey looks out when they pass Grandma’s house. Every light is on and he sees Grandma standing in the door. She doesn’t know which car he is in, but she waves hoping Joey will see. He waves back, long after the window fills with darkness and distance.

## Analysis

Seven years have now passed since Joey’s last visit. The country has entered into World War II and Joey enlisted. When he realizes his train will be going past Grandma Dowdel’s house, he has to let her know. He needs to see her and knows she will want to see him. The reader can see just how much the two loved each other in this short chapter.

## Vocabulary

telegram, basic training



# Characters

## Joey Dowdel

Joey is the narrator of the book. He lives in Chicago and travels to visit his Grandma every summer. He is nine when the book begins and grows to age fifteen the last summer that they visit. He has a dream of flying throughout the book.

## Mary Alice Dowdel

Mary Alice is Joey's younger sister. She is seven during the first trip and grows to age thirteen by their final trip. She is heavily influenced by her trips and seems to grow closer to Grandma each time. She also picks up some of Grandma's sayings and habits over the years.

## Grandma Dowdel

Grandma Dowdel is the most complicated character in the book. In the beginning, she seems larger than life and while she never actually changes, the kids see her in a different light every trip. She claims to not care about her town, but will pull out all the stops to right a wrong. Joey and Mary Alice learn something new about Grandma each trip.

## Mrs. Effie Wilcox

Effie is the town gossip. In the beginning, it seems as though Effie and Grandma are enemies, but the kids learn over the years that they are actually best friends.

## Ernie Cowgill

Ernie is a local bully and also the youngest son of the Cowgill family; they ran the local dairy. Ernie is the only one of his brothers who doesn't redeem himself over the years. His older brothers grow up to be good Christian men, but Ernie ends up in jail.

## Aunt Puss Chapman

Grandma worked as a hired girl for Aunt Puss before she married Grandpa Dowdel. She was wealthy at the time, but when the kids meet her, she is very old and poor. Grandma visits her weekly to provide food and to help keep her out of the poor house.





## **Mrs. L. J. Weidenbach**

Mrs. L. J. Weidenbach is the wife of the banker. She is snobby and likes to act like she is better than most other people in town. She and Grandma Dowdel tend to battle and compete over the years.

## **Ray Veech**

Ray Veech is a few years older than Joey. He runs Veech's Gas and Oil for his father. Joey always strives to befriend him since he gives driving lessons. He becomes Mary Alice's dance partner during the Centennial Talent Show.



# Objects/Places

## Grandma Dowdel's House

Most of the book takes place at or near Grandma Dowdel's house. It is the very last house in town. It is very different from the place the kids grew up in. Probably the worst part about it, at least to Joey and Mary Alice, is that she had a privy. It is still old-fashioned, but suits Grandma. She never does install a telephone. The railroad tracks ran right past the house. The kitchen is the heart of the home. They eat all their meals there and it is usually the place where they find Grandma.

## Trains

Joey and Mary Alice ride the train to visit Grandma. The track passes near her house. Trains also figure in several of the stories in the book. It symbolizes a coming and a going. It also brings the newcomers to town and takes some characters away from town. In Chapter 5, Vandalia and Junior use the train to elope and run away from their disapproving parents. In Chapter 6, the train takes Mrs. Effie Wilcox away from town, for what everyone believes will be a permanent move. Yet, at the end of the chapter, it brings her back. In the final Chapter, the train brings Joey through town for one last time before he starts basic training during World War II.

## Coffee Pot Café

The Coffee Pot Café is the local hang out. The townspeople go there for news and gossip. It is near enough to the train depot that its front window gives a good view of people getting on and off the train.

## Cob House and Privy

Both the cob house and the privy are located at the back of Grandma's property. She stores many old things back there and her old tom cat lives in the cob house. Both buildings play a significant role in several of the stories. In Chapter 2, Effie Wilcox's privy is blown-up by the Cowgill brothers, prompting Grandma to seek justice against the town bullies. In Chapter 5, Junior is found sneaking around the privy looking for Vandalia and announces he wants to marry her.

## Twelve-Gauge Winchester

The gun was originally Grandpa Dowdel's, but Grandma kept it around for protection. She does use it in several of the stories. In Chapter 1, she uses her gun to scare away a reporter and make it seem like there is a ghost in Shotgun Cheatham's coffin. In



Chapter 2, she uses her gun as bait to get the Cowgill brothers to break into her house. She also holds them hostage with that gun until their parents can get there to administer punishment.

# Themes

## The Great Depression

Most of the book takes place during the Great Depression. This period of time affected every aspect of American life. The effect of the Depression is in almost every story told, from the drifters going through town and the distrust of the banks to the foreclosure of a main character's house. Whether referred to or not, the Depression is always present in the book.

## Family

The main theme in the book is family. Joey and Mary Alice travel each summer to visit their Grandma. The reader can see how their relationship grows through the years. Family is always strong and can even be seen in the relationships between some of the minor characters.

On their first trip, the kids have never even met Grandma Dowdel. Each year their ties with her grow even stronger. The kids never question her love for them and they seem to grow more protective of her over the years. They even mention at the beginning of Chapter 4 that their friends would not understand their Grandma. They are protective of her quirks. By the end of the book, you can see how deep that family attachment is when Joey sees her waiting for his train and waving even though the train came through late and she could not possibly know what car he was on.

## Friendship

It often seems that friendship and family are interchangeable in the book. Good friends are treated as family and vice versa. The book emphasizes the strong relationships between some of the characters. The friendship between Mrs. Effie Wilcox and Grandma is the most complicated and yet one of the strongest in the book. In the beginning, they seem to bicker and it appears that they hate each other. But, as the years go by you see more and more hints of their friendship. This friendship is very apparent in Chapter 6 when Grandma does whatever she can to get Effie's house back from the bank.

This theme is also apparent in the relationship between Grandma and Aunt Puss Chapman in Chapter 3 when the reader finds out that Grandma has been bringing her food every week for years. The theme also comes up in Chapter 5, when Mary Alice goes all out to help Vandalia after befriending her earlier in the chapter.



## Justice

In many of the stories, you see Grandma Dowdel, and at times Joey and Mary Alice, seeking justice. Grandma will do just about anything to right a wrong. You see her stopping a group of bullies, feeding the hungry, and battling the banks.

In Chapter 2, she is upset that the Cowgill brothers have been terrorizing her neighbors, so she concocts a plan to insure that their parents find out what they have been doing and she makes sure that their parents administer punishment. In Chapter 7, she wants to make sure Mrs. Weidenbach does not get all the glory during the town's Centennial celebration. She plots and plans to help others get the glory they deserve.

## Morality

Joey struggles with the question of morality throughout the book. He is often questioning Grandma's actions. In Chapter 3, she breaks several laws, but each time she is doing this to benefit someone who really needs the help. Joey is not sure how he feels about her actions. In Chapter 4, she cheats during the judging at the county fair. Joey struggles with this and never truly reconciles this event in his mind. During Chapter 6, she fabricates a story about the historical significance of Effie Wilcox's house, in order to get the house back from the bank and bring Effie back to town. In Joey's mind, Grandma's actions often seem wrong, but they result in something good. He struggles with this idea in every chapter of the book. But, the reader sees as the years go by that the kids start to see the shades of gray in Grandma's actions.



# Style

## Point of View

The story is told in first person point of view with Joey as the narrator. It is told in a series of stories, each taking place in a consecutive year during his annual trip to visit Grandma Dowdel. Joey is looking back as a very old man and does admit that distance and time have colored the stories and made them larger than life.

## Setting

The book is set in a small town in southern Illinois. Most of the book takes place on or around Grandma Dowdel's house, which is on the edge of town. The book is set during the Great Depression. The reader can see this effect on the town and the characters. Drifters pass through town searching for work. There is often a fear of foreclosure as townspeople struggle to pay their mortgages. The Great Depression also seems to keep the town from modernizing too quickly. A lot of the characters still have privies instead of indoor bathrooms. Movies are shown on canvas screens in the park. Some of the characters, such as Aunt Puss Chapman and Uncle Grady Griswold, live even further in the country and live as though time has not passed.

## Language and Meaning

The story is told in a casual tone which reflects the language and dialect of small-town Illinois during the Depression. It is conversational and readers feel like someone is telling them the story.

## Structure

The novel is divided into eight chapters and a prologue. Each chapter is fifteen to twenty-five pages long. Each chapter could be a stand-alone story, with only a few themes, like friendship and family recurring though the years. The chapters tell the story both in exposition and dialogue in a story-telling manner.

The novel contains one main plot and each chapter is a separate subplot. The main plot follows Joey and Mary Alice on their annual trips to visit their Grandma Dowdel. The main plot explores their growing relationships. The relationships between the characters carry over throughout the book, but the subplots do not extend beyond their individual chapters.

## Quotes

You wouldn't think we'd have to leave Chicago to see a dead body. (Chapter 1)

Of course the reporter had been lied to big-time up at the café, but Grandma's lies were more interesting, even historical (Chapter 1)

The story of Shotgun Cheatham's last night above ground kept The Coffee Pot Café fully engaged for the rest of our visit that summer. It was a story that grew in the telling in one of those little towns where there's always time to ponder all the different kinds of truth. (Chapter 1)

A bunch of worthless boys who'd ransack the town every night is apt to drop a mouse in the milk just before delivering it to my door. (Chapter 2)

And she'd returned law and order to the town she claimed she didn't give two hoots about. (Chapter 2)

You could see hard times from the window of the Wabash Blue Bird. The freight trains on the siding were loaded down with men trying to get from one part of the country to another, looking for work and something to eat. (Chapter 3)

That's private business between her and me. And I don't tell my private business. (Chapter 3)

Most people wouldn't take their bows until after they'd won a blue ribbon, but Grandma wasn't most people. (Chapter 4)

Down at Grandma's the only thing that reminded us of home and Chicago was Nehi. (Chapter 5)

I got ears on me like an Indian scout. And I don't sleep. (Chapter 5)

Movies is all pretend. They're made in California, you know. But they prove a point. Make something seem real, and people will believe it. The public will swallow anything. (Chapter 6)

I was getting too old to be a boy, and driving meant you were a man. (Chapter 6)

A rumor is sometimes truth on the trail. (Chapter 6)

The Centennial Celebration? Nothin' but an excuse for people to mill around, waste time, and make horses' patooties of themselves. I hope I never see another one. (Chapter 7)

The years went by, and Mary Alice and I grew up, slower than we wanted to, faster than we realized. (Chapter 8)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

How does the relationship between Joey and Mary Alice and their Grandma change over the years? What makes this relationship different than their life in Chicago?

## Topic 2

Why does Joey often feel conflicted with the actions of his Grandmother? How does he reconcile this in his mind?

## Topic 3

Why did Grandma switch her pie at the country fair? Why did this cause internal conflict for Joey? What additional understanding does he have of his Grandma after this incident?

## Topic 4

How did the Great Depression effect the characters in the book? Do you think the stories would be different, or even have occurred, during a different time period?

## Topic 5

How did Grandma Dowdel show her love for Joey and Mary Alice? How did she show friendship with Effie Wilcox and Aunt Puss Chapman?

## Topic 6

How does age and time effect the way Joey and Mary Alice view their Grandma?