

**STEPPING STONES™**

a chapter book

*History*

# PIONEER CAT

When Kate finds a cat,  
her biggest adventure begins!

by William H. Hooks

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a chapter book

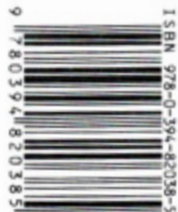
History

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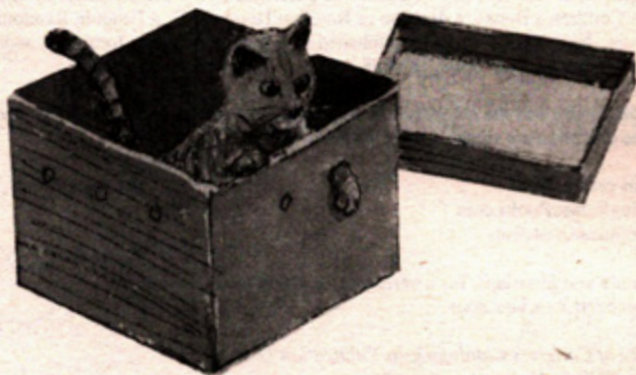


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# PIONEER CAT



by William H. Hooks  
illustrated by Charles Robinson

A STEPPING STONE BOOK™  
Random House  New York





# 1



## Snuggs

For two days I rode in the back of the dusty wagon and cried. I was one big mess. Feeling sorry for myself. And mad at my whole family.

Pa stopped the wagon. Everybody got out to eat. Everybody but me. I just sat where I was, moping instead of crying. I'd run dry on tears.

"Kate Purdy, are you going to eat something?" asked my ma.

"You know I can't swallow when I'm upset," I told Ma.

"Leave her be," said Pa. "My Katie has a mind and a stomach of her own."

"I'll take her gingerbread," said Duffy. He's my brother. He's one year older, but not a bit

smarter than me. Duffy can eat anything, anytime. Upset or not.

Ma plunked Benjy into my lap. "Well, if you're not going to eat, how about looking after your baby brother?"

Benjy's a cute little rascal. But it seemed to me that Ma could just once in a while ask Duffy to look after him. I was busy thinking about Doris. And our nice house in Jackson, Mississippi. And how perfect everything was back there.

We stayed in Jackson two whole years. That's the longest we were ever in one place. And the only place I had had a real friend. When I was little I had wanted a sister. Doris was better than a sister. I might have been jealous of a real sister. Not so with Doris. Just like Ma said, we were "two peas from the same pod."

We swore to be friends forever, me and Doris. But that creaky old wagon was putting more miles between us every day.

Benjy and Duffy liked traveling in the wagon, the same as Pa. Ma's not the complaining sort. She just takes her lot as it comes, with a smile. Me, I hated it.





Ma's said to me many a time, "Your Pa's got itchy feet. He's a traveling man. He'll keep moving west till we run out of land, I reckon."

Well, I reckon that's why we left Jackson—the perfect place as far as I was concerned. Duffy was all excited about going to Saint Joseph, Missouri.

"Saint Joe! The jumping-off place for the wild unknown!" Duffy shouted over and over till I was sick of it.

It was where Pa was bringing us to join a wagon train headed for Oregon.

It took us two weeks to reach Saint Joe. By the time we rolled into town I was sick of *me*. Sometimes you can get so tired of feeling sorry for yourself you just quit. Sort of like you've used up all your worry power.

When we got to Saint Joe it was Pa and Duffy's turn to be disappointed. We were too late for the wagon train. It had been gone a week. We'd have to wait a month for the next one.

After our long, miserable ride from Jackson things moved pretty fast. By late afternoon we were set up in two little rooms on Mudd Street.

And Pa had himself a job with the New West Harness Company.

Me and Ma set to straightening up things. Pa and Duffy went off to look around Saint Joe. I was feeling put out that I didn't get to go.

"Boys have all the fun," I said to Benjy. "You don't know how lucky you are."

It was night by the time Pa and Duffy came back. Me and Ma had supper ready. We all crowded around the table and joined hands. Pa said grace and we all said, "Amen." Benjy kept clapping his hands and saying, "Men, men, men!"

After supper Ma spread two pallets on the kitchen floor for me and Duffy. Pa and Ma and Benjy took the big bed in the other room.

I think I was sound asleep before I got the covers over me.

At first I thought I was dreaming. I kept hearing a sound. A sad little crying sound. I sat up and listened in the dark. "Meow, meow," came the cry. Right outside the door.

I pushed the quilt away and tiptoed to the





door. I didn't want to wake Duffy. As quietly as I could, I opened the door. A bright patch of moonlight shot into the room. I peeked through the crack. There was a little silver-gray cat.

"Meow, meow," cried the thin little cat.

"Sh, sh!" I whispered. "You'll wake everybody up."



The little cat seemed to understand. It stopped meowing and squeezed in the door.

"Hey, hold on," I whispered. "Ma don't hold with cats in the house."

But I didn't want to put the little cat out. So I closed the door and scooted back to my pallet. Soon I could feel the cat moving close to me. She nosed into the pallet and settled down against my arm.

"You like snuggling up, don't you, little cat?" I whispered. "I think I'll call you Snuggs."



## 2



## Secrets

Before dawn I woke up. For a minute I thought the whole thing had been a dream. But there was the cat snuggled up under my quilt.

I crept onto the porch and put her out. "Stay under the porch and keep quiet," I said.

I sneaked back in the house and crumbled some corn bread in a saucer of milk. Then I took it to Snuggs under the porch.

When Ma came out to the yard later that morning, Snuggs ran up to her.

"Kate," Ma called, "there's a little half-starved cat out here."

I tried not to sound too interested. "I saw her already," I said.

"We ought to give her something to eat," said Ma.

"You mean we can let her stay?" I asked cautiously.

"It's fine by me," said Ma. "Just as long as she keeps her place in the yard."

Her place at night is under my quilt, I thought. But all I said was, "Thank you, Ma."

Pa worked all day at the New West Harness Company. One night I baked him an apple pie. It's one of the things I can cook right. Pa said to me, "I'm glad to see my Katie's getting back some of her spit-and-vinegar. There's a rosy future for anybody who can bake like this."

It made me feel good. But I was holding back on Pa for yanking us up and dragging us off to Saint Joe. Leaving my best friend was still a sore point.

"Missing that wagon train may turn out to be a blessing," said Pa.

"Why?" asked Ma.

"It'll give me time to bargain for all the things we'll need for Oregon," answered Pa.

First Pa bought extra horses. Then he traded our old wagon in on a big new one with a canvas top.





"How does she look?" he cried.

"Looks like a cross between a boat and a wagon," said Ma.

"That's why they call these contraptions prairie schooners," said Pa.



"We're going to sail her all the way to Oregon!" shouted Duffy.

I had to laugh. The wagon did look like a ship, with its big white canvas top. Then I felt that old choking thing in my throat again. What a lot of fun it would be, traveling in the prairie schooner, if only Doris could come along.

Our small rooms were crammed with things for the trip. Duffy and I hardly had space for our pallets. Bags of dried beans, tin buckets of lard and brown sugar, and jars of apple jelly crowded around our beds. When I looked up at night, I was staring at slabs of bacon and dried beef hanging from the ceiling.

"We'll need food enough to last us through six months," said Ma.

Saint Joe was filling up fast. New wagons pulled in, crammed with goods and people. New children and dogs were all over the place.

Ma said, "I'll bet you'll make lots of new friends in the wagon train."

"No thanks," I told her. "I was perfectly happy with my old friends."

Ma gave me that look I get when I know I'm trying her patience. To tell the truth, I was





using most of my worry power on what to do about Snuggs. Not much was left over for Doris. I was afraid to even ask if I could take a stray cat on the trip. I already knew the answer.

My worry came to a head the day Pa said, "Time to pack the wagon. Captain Jonah, the trail boss, says the train moves out tomorrow."

Pa and Duffy loaded all the heavy boxes into the wagon.

I was half sick with worry. My brain just felt dazed. I couldn't come up with one single way to take Snuggs along.

That night Ma gave Duffy and me each a small box.

"It's going to be hard to fit everything in the wagon," she said. "But all of us ought to have our own little space. You can take anything you want, as long as it fits into your box."

I took my box out on the porch. It wouldn't hold much. Maybe my doll with the china head. And the hair ribbons Doris had given me. Suddenly Snuggs brushed against my leg. I patted her head and started talking to her.

"I've just got to think of a way to take you with me. You're as good a friend as I ever had.

# THERE'S A CAT ON THE OREGON TRAIL!



Kate Purdy does not want to go to Oregon with her family. Life on the road is tough and lonely. Then she finds a pretty little cat called Snuggs, and she decides to take her new friend . . . even though pets are not allowed on the wagon train. No matter what happens, Snuggs *has* to stay a secret!

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