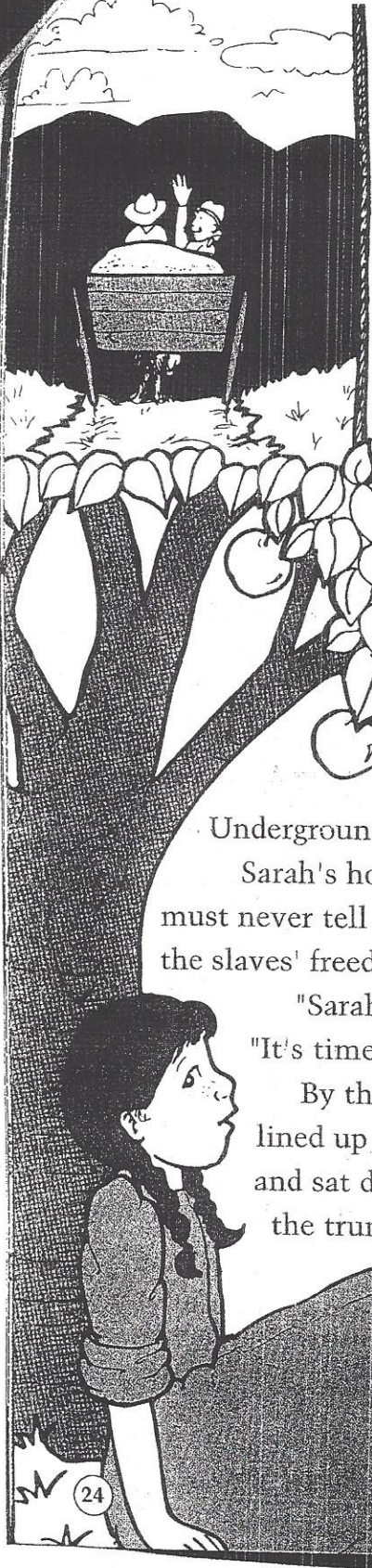


PF
Underground
Railroad

Sarah and the Underground Railroad

by Connie Elliott

Illustrated by Deborah C. Wright



It was just getting light on a summer morning in 1858. Sarah Perkins waved goodbye as Pa and her brother Walter drove away. Sarah knew that hidden under the sacks of corn in the wagon were two runaway slaves. On the way to the mill, Pa and Walter would take the two men to the Bennett farm, the next stop on the Underground Railroad.

Sarah's house was a stop on the Underground Railroad. "You must never tell a soul," Pa had said. Sarah never had. She knew that the slaves' freedom depended on secrecy.

"Sarah, come along!" Ma's voice interrupted her thoughts. "It's time to start canning those peaches!"

By the middle of the day, the jars of golden peaches were lined up on the kitchen table. Hot and tired, Sarah went outside and sat down in the shade of the apple tree. She leaned against the trunk and closed her eyes.

Suddenly, a voice broke the silence. "I saw 'em, boys. I saw 'em unloading those slaves at the Bennett place!"

Sarah sat upright. The voice belonged to Jim Kelly, their hired man, and it was coming from behind the shed.

"There's a big reward for those slaves," Jim Kelly was saying.

"What are we going to do?" said another voice.

"How can we catch them?" a third voice chimed in.

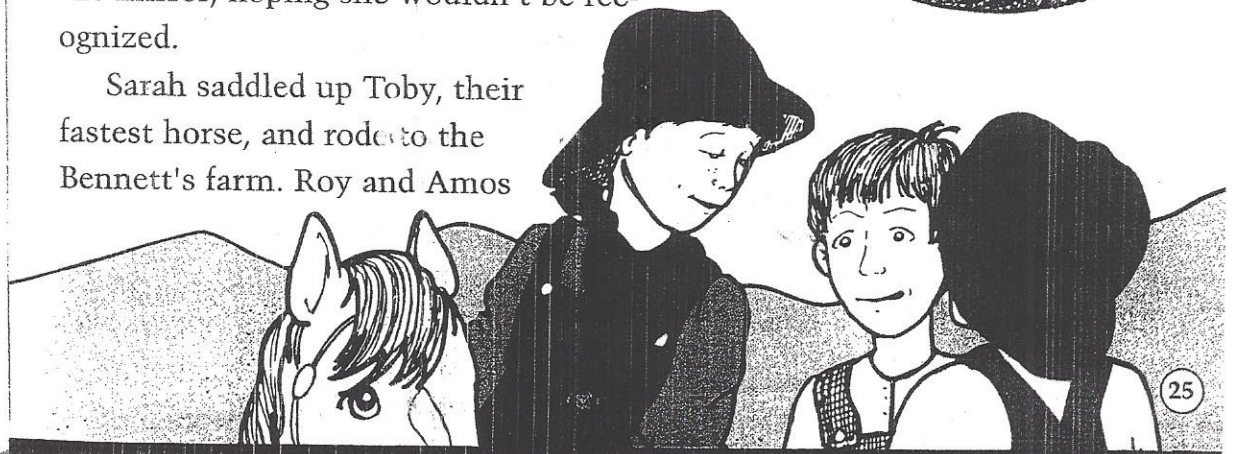
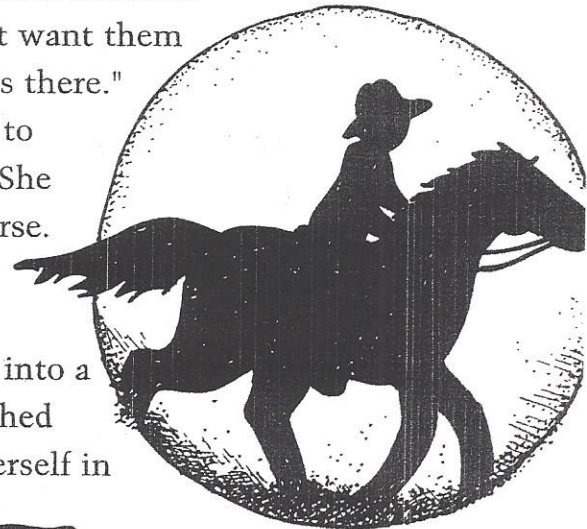
Sarah recognized the voices of Roy and Amos, two boys who were helping on the farm.

"I'm going to get the sheriff. While I'm doing that, you two hightail it out to the Bennett farm," said Jim Kelly. "Guard the road. Don't let anybody go in or out. We don't want them to move the slaves before the sheriff gets there."

Sarah's head was swimming. "I have to warn the Bennetts!" she said to herself. She started to run to the barn to saddle a horse. But she stopped. "Amos and Roy will never let me in," she muttered.

She ran inside. Quickly she changed into a pair of Walter's pants and shirt. She pushed her hair up under a cap and looked at herself in the mirror, hoping she wouldn't be recognized.

Sarah saddled up Toby, their fastest horse, and rode to the Bennett's farm. Roy and Amos





were already stationed at the turnoff to the farm when Sarah got there.

"Hey, you!" called Roy as Sarah started to turn on to the farm road.

Sarah's heart skipped a beat. She reined Toby in and stopped.

The boys ran over to her. "You can't go in there!" said Roy.

"I just want to get water for my horse," said Sarah. "We've been riding hard, and he is pretty tired."

Roy eyed her suspiciously. "You look familiar. What's your name?"

Sarah gulped. "John. John Freeman. I live in Alton, and I'm going to see my uncle over by Prairie Rock."

"Well, John Freeman, you can't stop here. Keep riding," said Roy.

"How far is it to the nearest farm?" asked Sarah.

"About five miles," said Amos.

"I can't go that far. My horse is about to drop. I'll get my water real fast; then I'll go." She nudged Toby. "Come on, boy. Let's go."

Toby started to move forward. Sarah held her breath.

Roy reached up and grabbed the reins. "Are you deaf? We're telling you to leave!" he yelled.

Sarah could feel tears welling up in her eyes. Her shoulders sagged. She had lost. She started to leave.

But then, she thought of the slaves being dragged back to their master, and she knew she could not give up.

She turned back to the boys. "At least you can tell me why you won't let me in."

"You are the biggest pest I have ever seen!" snarled Roy.

"Aw, it won't hurt to tell him. We're guarding the road until the sheriff comes," Amos said proudly. "There are two runaway slaves hiding in there."

"Quiet, Amos!" hissed Roy.

But it was too late. Sarah had her chance. She grinned. "Hmmm. There must be a reward for those slaves. I sure could use some of that money. I think I'll just hang around and help you guard the road."

Roy's face fell. "You can't do that."

"It's a free country. This is a public road," said Sarah. "This is all your own fault, you know. All I wanted was some water for my horse."

Amos said, "If we let you have the water, will you leave?"

"Well..." Sarah felt like singing. "I do need to get to my uncle's house." She sighed. "I hate to miss out on that reward money, but I guess I should get going."

Amos and Roy smiled broadly as they let her pass. Sarah rode down the curved dirt road to the Bennett's farmhouse. She knocked on the door. Mrs. Bennett answered.

"No time to talk! Hide the slaves. The sheriff will be here soon," said Sarah.

"Bless you, child," whispered Mrs. Bennett.

Sarah hopped back on Toby and rode away. When she reached the main road, she gave Roy and Amos a friendly wave and went on her way.



For the rest of the day, Sarah could not sit still. She paced the floor. She looked out the living room window, halfway expecting to see the sheriff ride by leading the two slaves.

Finally, at twilight, her father and brother returned. Sarah ran out to meet them.

Pa smiled at her and hugged her. "That was a brave thing you did today, Sarah. The sheriff searched high and low, but he didn't find a trace of the slaves at the Bennetts' farm. I don't think the sheriff will pay much attention to Jim Kelly from now on."

Sarah never knew where the slaves were hidden on that day. But in 1904, when Sarah was a grandmother, the old Bennett house was torn down. Underneath the stove was a sheet of metal. Underneath the metal was a trap door leading to a hidden basement. Most people couldn't figure out what that basement could have been used for.

But Sarah smiled. She knew.

