

# THE HORSESHOE MOUND PRESERVE TIME-TRAVELING ADVENTURE

BY ERIN KEYSER



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HORSESHOE MOUND PRESERVE

1679 N Blackhawk Road, Galena, IL



# HORSESHOE MOUND SHARE THE VIEW

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## Chapter 1

Neto and Natalia were twelve-year-old twins with the same brown skin, brown hair, and brown eyes. Yet they were as different as twins can be. If Neto wasn't reading a book, he had one tucked under his arm. Natalia didn't read unless she had to. She'd rather be climbing a tree or riding a bike.

This is the story of how two very different siblings went on an adventure they'd never forget.

It all started on a day too hot for September. The twins and their parents had just finished a picnic lunch at the Council Ring's stone seats. Then Natalia ran off to find the best climbing tree at JDCF's Horseshoe Mound.

"Neto, keep an eye on your sister, will you?" their mother asked.

Grumbling, Neto slid his Kindle, on which he'd been reading *The History of Jo Daviess County*, into his backpack. He slung the bag over his shoulder and ran after Natalia before she could disappear from sight. She was heading down the trail to the western lookout.

"Natalia!" he called. "Wait up!"

But she didn't, of course. Neto sighed and ran faster.

He finally caught up to her at a tree just south of the trail. He knew from his studies that it was a bur oak.

Natalia wasn't studying the bark or leaves though. She knelt in front of the tree, leaning close to it. "Look at this," she said.

Neto couldn't imagine what would cause such awe in her voice. He rounded the tree and stopped, his mouth falling open.



At the base of the tree was a small door, less than a foot high. Even a toddler would have trouble squeezing through that door.



Natalia, never one for caution, reached for the doorknob.

Neto dropped to his knees and grabbed her wrist. "What are you doing? You don't know what's in there."

"That's why I'm trying to find out." She pulled on her hand, but Neto held on. A brief tug-of-war followed.

Suddenly the little door creaked open. The twins froze, staring at the door with wide eyes. It was dark inside . . . except for two pinpricks of glowing green light. The twins couldn't breathe.

The door swung open wider, allowing sunshine to illuminate black and brown fur. The green light faded to warm brown eyes.

"A raccoon," Neto whispered.

The raccoon studied them both with what seemed like a very wise expression. Then it turned, glancing back at them once.

"He wants us to follow him!" Natalia kept her excitement hushed so as not to scare the raccoon.

Neto snorted. "How can you tell?"

"How can you not?" She began to crawl to the doorway.

"You won't fit in there," Neto said. His sister had to be at least three times bigger than the door. Yet as he watched, something strange happened. Either the doorway was expanding, or Natalia was . . . shrinking. He couldn't tell which.

He blinked several times, trying to make sense of what he saw. He looked into the hole, but the raccoon was nowhere in sight. The edges of the hole were hidden in shadows that hadn't been there before.

"Stop!" he cried, but somehow Natalia was already through the doorway. She yelped as the ground beneath her disappeared, revealing black emptiness. She tumbled down into the hole.

Neto grabbed her ankle right before she vanished. Her momentum yanked him into the hole before he could anchor himself. Together they plunged into the darkness . . .



## Chapter 2

They fell from the swirling darkness into the light of day. They rolled to a stop on hard rocks.

"Ow," Neto said, rubbing his elbow.

Natalia sat up slowly, glancing around in a daze. "Where are we?"

Neto looked up. A second later he was scrambling to his feet in panic.

They appeared to be in a wasteland of nothing but ice and rocks. The clouds were thick and low overhead. The air smelled fresh but cold, and wind gusted around them. In their t-shirts and shorts, the twins were instantly chilled.

"I think this is Horseshoe Mound," Natalia said through chattering teeth.

Neto spun in a circle to take in their surroundings. True, the hilltop they were on did somewhat resemble the shape of Horseshoe. But he saw none of the things he was used to—no road, Council Ring, cell phone tower, or view of Galena. No trees, grass, or signs of civilization. Even the land to the southeast looked different. Were those glaciers?

"We went back in time," Natalia whispered, "to the past."

Neto glared at her. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Do you have a better explanation?"

He didn't, and that made him angrier. He liked to always have an explanation for how the world worked. He knew that Albert Einstein's theories of relativity made time travel a possibility. But the idea that they'd traveled back in time through a hole in a tree—it was too unbelievable.

"Why did you have to follow that raccoon?" he snapped.

"The raccoon!" Natalia searched the area. "Where did he go?"

"Who cares?" Neto was almost shouting now. "We have bigger problems! We somehow landed in the Ice Age!"

He didn't know if that was true or not, but the shine of glaciers in the distance seemed good evidence. He'd read enough science books to know that a portion of elevated land—the corners of Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin—had not been covered in glaciers. Scientists called this the Driftless Area, a place of hills, valleys, and caves that differed greatly from the surrounding lands.







He wanted to explore this time and place, but he feared that if they didn't leave soon, they would freeze to death. "How will we get back to our own time?"

Natalia hugged herself, rubbing her arms for warmth. "We'll just go back to that tree with the door. It must be a magical portal that transports you to a different time."

Neto almost forgot about the cold as he stared at his sister. He'd always thought she was as logical and practical as he was. Yet here she was, saying a hole in a tree was just another means of travel—like a jump, a trail, a daydream, a blink. Had she hit her head when they fell into this new world?

Natalia stepped forward and pointed to a large rock. Neto came closer, following her gaze. The rock was actually a huge slab of limestone jutting out of the ground. On top of the limestone was the skeleton of a small animal he didn't recognize. It had mostly decomposed, leaving only the bones.

"In our time, this is the rock with fossils on it!" Natalia said. "This animal must later become one of those fossils."

Neto shook his head, stunned. He didn't want to stay here and turn into a fossil next to this poor animal. They needed to find the bur oak and leave. A horrible thought occurred to him. "We can't find that same tree with the door. No way is it thousands of years old. It won't be here."

Natalia turned in a slow circle, searching. Then she smiled. "There it is!" She took off, running awkwardly on her cold legs.

Neto ran after her, not daring to believe. There was only one tree in sight. It did seem to be in the right place based on what he remembered of Horseshoe's layout. But it couldn't be the same tree . . . could it?

They reached the tree, and it was indeed a Bur Oak. It had a hollow at the base, but no door. Neto wondered who had made the door, and when. If this was the same tree, some timeless magic had to preserve it. It looked to be the exact size and age as the tree in their time.

Natalia was already crawling into the hollow. Neto shivered and followed, trying to figure out if his body was getting smaller or the hole was getting bigger. And then they were falling, somersaulting through time and space . . .



## Chapter 3

When they tumbled out of the time-traveling darkness, they weren't at the foot of the bur oak. They were in the middle of a grassy field.

"It didn't work," Neto groaned.

Natalia sat up, brushing grass out of her hair. "At least we're not back in the Ice Age. And we landed in a different spot. The limestone slabs are over there." She pointed to the west.

Neto stood. He thought they'd landed close to where the Council Ring should be, but it was nowhere in sight. Nor was there the JDCF parking lot or road leading to Horseshoe. The glaciers were also absent, thankfully. This time period was warm, and the grass was thick beneath their feet. However, there were fewer trees than he was used to seeing.

He turned to the north and let out a sigh of relief. The town of Galena was visible in the distance, so at least they were in a period of civilization. It looked remarkably similar to the Galena he knew.

"What year is this?" he wondered aloud.

"1931," Natalia said from behind him.

He spun to face her. She was kneeling, studying something in the grass. He went to join her and saw the metal disk in the ground. It read, "U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey Reference Mark." There were several smaller words, and then "Horseshoe" and "1931." The dirt around it was disturbed, as if it had recently been placed there.

"I've seen this in our time," he said. "I asked Dad about it, and he said it's a survey marker. They use it as a reference point to create maps of this area."

Natalia gazed around her at all the horizons. "This would be a great place for mapping. You can see so far in every direction. The Mississippi River and Iowa to the west, Wisconsin to the north . . ."

The twins continued to point out landmarks they knew. Sinsinawa Mound, one of Natalia's favorite places to visit, was to the northwest. Charles Mound, the highest point in Illinois, was to the northeast, close to the town of Scales Mound.





"I wonder what the people of Galena would do if we walked down there and told them we're from the future," Neto said, joking.

Natalia's eyes widened as she stared at him. "1931 . . . our great-grandfather is alive right now! We could go find him!"

Their great-grandfather had died before they were born, but they'd heard lots of stories about how he emigrated from Mexico and settled in Galena right before The Great Depression. Neto wanted to meet him and find out what traits they'd inherited from him.

Then his logical side took over, and he shook his head sadly. "We can't. We might change him somehow, or change other people we'd meet. Who knows how that might change the future, for better or worse? We can't risk it."

Natalia sighed. "He probably wouldn't believe us anyway. I guess we don't belong here, do we?"

Neto put his hand on her shoulder. "Let's go home."

The magical bur oak, which Neto was starting to think of as the Time Tree, was easy to find since it was one of the few trees still standing on Horseshoe Mound. He figured most of the trees had been harvested for homes, businesses, and Galena's huge mining industry. He'd just been reading about the wood-burning furnaces that melted lead. The lead was then used to make bullets and other ammunition for the U.S. Civil War and Europe's Great War.

The Time Tree looked exactly the same—still no door covering its hole. Still no sign of the raccoon.

"Maybe we have to think about the time we came from as we travel," Natalia said. "Keep it in your head."

Neto was willing to try anything right now, no matter how far-fetched. *2014. Mom and Dad. Home.* He thought the words again and again as he crawled after Natalia into the vortex of dark chaos . . .



## Chapter 4

Neto didn't know what year it was, but they had definitely traveled through time and space yet again.

"Look at this forest," Natalia said, already on her feet. "It's beautiful."

Neto slowly rose, trying to find clues. All he could see were trees surrounding them. It was nice to finally be in a time period with trees, but this dark forest was unlike the trees in their time. The canopy was so thick he could barely see the sky. Pine trees mingled with the deciduous trees that would lose their leaves in winter.

Natalia was halfway up a white oak, her hands steady and sure on the branches.

"What is it with you and tree-climbing?" Neto called up to her.

She waited until she was comfortable on a branch before answering. "Trees like this might be hundreds of years old. They can teach us things if only we'll listen." She pressed her ear against the bark of the tree for a long moment.

Neto didn't want to ask, but he couldn't help feeling curious. "What does it say?"

"It says, 'Trouble can't reach you this high up.'" Her smile was so joyful that Neto decided to believe her. After all, if time-travel was possible, then talking-trees didn't seem too much of a stretch.

Natalia climbed farther until she was high enough to view their surroundings. "I can't see Galena or any buildings. I'm guessing we're in a year between the Ice Age and European settlement."

Neto frowned. That didn't narrow it down much. He couldn't figure out a pattern to their travels. They had gone backwards and forwards in the past, but they hadn't yet gone into the future.

"Native Americans could be around here though," Natalia continued.

The thought of a hunting party discovering them made his stomach twist. What would Native Americans think of two kids in strange clothes? "Um, maybe we should leave now." Then he froze as he realized the trouble they were in. "Oh no . . . how will we find the Time Tree in this forest?"

Natalia raised her eyebrows at his name for the tree. "The sun is setting over







there." She waved her hand in the general direction. "If we head that way, we should end up close to the western lookout." She climbed down and led the way through the trees.

They hiked to the top of the mound, which had fewer trees and more grasses. Neto knew this type of habitat was called an oak savanna. It had once been common in the Midwest, but in his time it was a rare habitat. He'd heard his mom say that JDCF planned to restore part of Horseshoe Mound to its original oak savanna habitat.

Thinking of his mom reminded him of his parents and he wondered if they'd noticed their missing children. He didn't know how this time-traveling business worked. Had time even passed since they left? Were they in some kind of strange limbo? "Why haven't we made it back home?" he asked. "Imagining our destination didn't help us last time."

Natalia's face scrunched in concentration. "I don't know. Maybe there's something we have to do before we're allowed to return . . . like a task or mission that has to be completed."

Neto threw his hands up in the air. "How are we supposed to know what that is?"

But his sister only shook her head. They were close to the western edge of the bluff, and she was searching for the Time Tree. Neto looked for the tree as well, but he was distracted by his gloomy thoughts.

Suddenly they heard a yell far behind them. They swung around and saw a dozen Native American Indians on horseback. The men were on the other side of the oak savanna, but they were galloping toward the twins. Approaching fast.

"Hurry!" Neto said. They darted through the trees. He tripped on a stick, but Natalia grabbed his arm before he could fall. Then she sprinted ahead of him. She was the faster runner and had a better idea where to go.

He made the mistake of glancing back. The horses were much closer now—too close. Their pounding hooves were loud in his ears. Several Indians had arrows notched in their bows, ready to shoot.

"Neto!" his sister cried. He turned to see her at the foot of the Time Tree, holding out her hand to him. He skidded to a stop and dropped to his knees beside her.

The horses swerved away, and two Indians released their arrows. Not far away, a deer dropped to the ground.

Neto hadn't noticed the deer earlier. Had the men seen the twins at all? He didn't want to stay and find out. He dove into the hole after Natalia and felt the darkness swallow them . . .



## Chapter 5

Neto's fall ended with him facedown on the forest floor, his heart still pounding like the hooves of a galloping horse.

Natalia shook his shoulder. "Neto! Are you okay?"

They always had rough landings after time traveling. He figured she was more worried about their near brush with death . . . or what they'd wrongly assumed was a near brush with death. "I'm fine," he said, spitting out a leaf and pushing himself up with his forearms.

Natalia's face was pale. "I thought the Indians were after us."

"Me too. But we should've known better."

Standing on shaky legs, Neto surveyed the area. They were in a forest again, but these trees weren't as thick as the last forest they had visited. Stumps here and there showed where trees had been chopped down.

"Definitely a time of civilization," he said, thinking aloud. "But not of Native Americans. Maybe early settlers?"

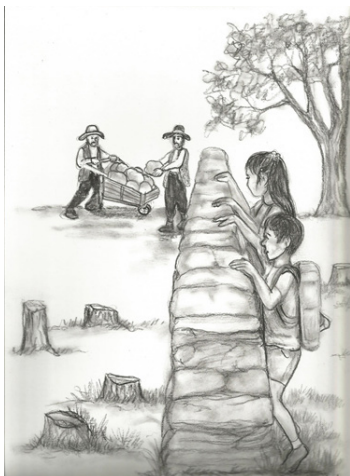
"Check this out," Natalia said. She'd found a rock wall. It was about knee-high and stretched about as long as a classroom. The rocks were stacked but didn't seem to have any mortar to hold them together. Neto saw places where rocks had fallen to the ground.

Natalia gasped. "I recognize this place! We're on the north side of Horseshoe again. Part of this wall still stands in our time on JDCF's property. I wonder who built it."

Before Neto could think of a logical answer, he heard a strange squeaking noise. His eyes flew to his sister's. Without a word, they hurried away from the sound. They found a big enough tree and ducked behind it.

The squeaking grew louder, closer. Neto's curiosity got the better of him. He peeked around the tree trunk. Natalia was already peeking around the other side.

Two men pushed crude wheelbarrows, rusty and needing oil to stop their squeaking. Both wheelbarrows were full of rocks.





One man dumped his rocks at the north end of the wall, and the other man dumped his rocks at the south end.

The men were dressed in clothes that Neto recognized from pictures he'd seen of the 1800s. They wore vests over long-sleeved shirts, black pants, and hats with floppy brims.

Neto figured the year they were in had to be sometime soon after 1832, when the Black Hawk War had forced Native Americans into Iowa. These two white men were perhaps the first to buy this piece of land from the government after the Meskwaki tribe was driven out.

As the men stacked the rocks to make the wall longer, they argued about where exactly the property line was. The man who owned land to the east of the wall planned to convert his forest to farmland. The man to the west wanted to conserve his forest so he could hunt the wildlife for food and occasionally harvest timber for building projects. It seemed to be an old argument, and both men left without convincing the other of "the right way."

As soon as the men were out of sight, Neto whispered, "Let's go."

The twins walked quietly through the woods, heading south to the grassy mound and then west toward the lookout. They could see the town of Galena, large and thriving. Smoke rose from several areas.

"Are those fires?" Natalia asked.

Neto thought for a moment. "The smoke might be from the smelting furnaces they use for all the lead they're mining. Or it might be from steamboats. The Galena River was wide at this time, and it was the largest steamboat port north of St. Louis."

The countryside around Galena had more trees and prairies than they were used to seeing. It made him sad to think how those natural areas would soon be gone, used up for the mining industry and agriculture.

As they continued walking to the Time Tree, Natalia said, "I can't believe that man wants to cut down all those beautiful trees!"

Neto shrugged helplessly. "He owns the land. He can do what he wants. Besides, farmland is important for growing food, especially in this time period when they don't have big stores like Piggly Wiggly to buy all their food."

"He could grow food somewhere else, somewhere that isn't full of trees," Natalia said. "It only takes a few months to grow a field of corn. But it might take a hundred years to grow a forest like that one. It's harder to create, so it's more precious. Time is valuable, you know?"

Neto chewed on his lip, thinking hard. His sister was on to something . . .



something important about time and conservation.

"Natalia, remember when you said there might be a task or mission we'd have to complete? Well, maybe we're supposed to learn about conservation and help with it in our time."

She frowned. "Conservation? Isn't that what JDCF does?"

"Yeah, but they need our help. We could volunteer on their work days, and we could tell other people how important conservation is."

"We could also practice conservation at home," Natalia said, her eyes lighting up. "We could plant trees and native plants, like a butterfly garden or a prairie plot."

"Right, and Mom and Dad might let us build a little frog pond. We'll tell our friends to turn their backyards into wildlife sanctuaries, too."

They kept talking excitedly, trading ideas, until they reached the Time Tree with its hole at the base of the trunk.

Neto stared at the hole, sudden doubt creeping into his mind. What if he was wrong? What if their new dedication to conserving nature wasn't the key to returning home?

Natalia grabbed his arm. "Look!" She pointed at a nearby tree. A raccoon was peeking at them from behind the trunk.

"It's a sign," Natalia said with a big smile. "It means we're ready to go home."

Neto didn't know if it was the same raccoon, but it sure looked like the one they'd seen back in their time. Was it a magical time-traveling raccoon?

"We're going home to help with conservation," Natalia said to the raccoon. Then she pulled Neto to the hole in the Time Tree. He felt the same unexplainable shifting of size and time and space . . .

A second later, or maybe an eternity later, they tumbled out of the tree and onto the ground.

"I think this is our time. We made it!" Natalia scrambled to her feet and started jumping around.

Neto sat up slowly, looking around. The trees did look familiar, and the door was back on the Time Tree, and there was the pathway leading to the Council Ring. He grinned. "We made it, thanks to my idea."

"Hey, I thought it was my idea!"

Laughing, he stood and hugged his sister. "We figured it out together. C'mon, let's go see our parents. We need to tell them our conservation ideas!"

They ran to the Council Ring. When they got close, they saw their parents sitting on the same stone they'd been sitting on before.





“Mom! Dad!” Natalia shouted.

Their parents turned, smiling, not looking at all surprised to see them.

Very little time had passed during all of the twins’ travels, but a lot had happened in their hearts and minds. They hadn’t changed the past, but they would definitely change the future.

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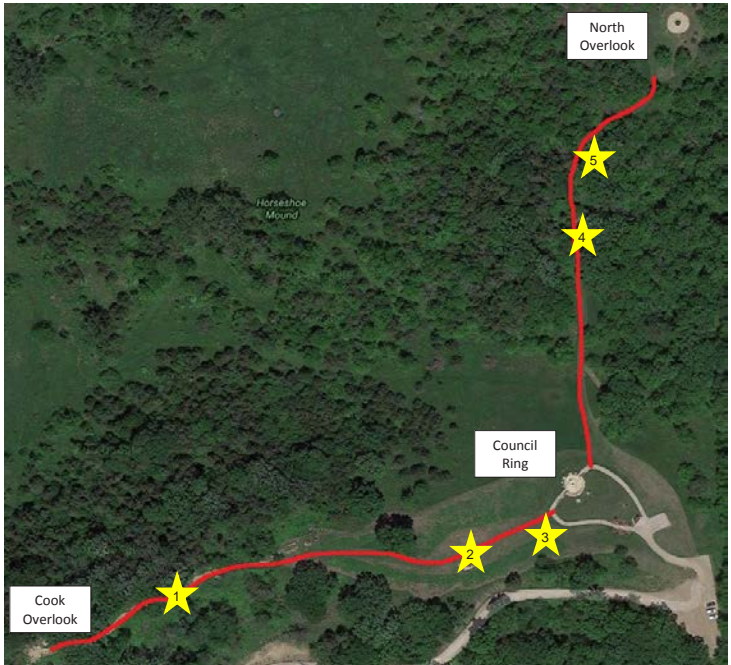
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# TRAVEL THE TRAILS OF HORSESHOE MOUND & SEARCH FOR 5 RIDDLES TO BE FOUND



The original Children's Adventure at Horseshoe Mound was sponsored by Dorte Breckenridge in 2014. JDCF received a Public Amenities Grant from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation in 2018 that provided funds for an upgrade to the adventure.



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