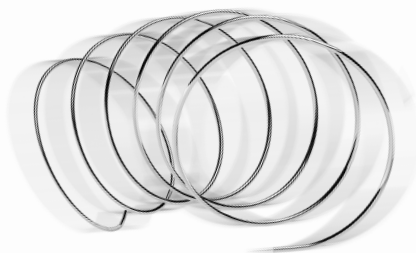




FIELD TRIPPED

ALLAN WOODROW



SCHOLASTIC PRESS | NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Woodrow, Allan, author

Title: Field tripped / Allan Woodrow.

Description: First edition. | New York : Scholastic Press, 2018. | Summary: The fifth graders of Liberty Falls Elementary have a reputation for trouble, but they still have a field trip to the mansion of Edward Minks (local inventor, founder of the town, and great-great-great grandfather of fifth-grader Eddie). While there, they search for secret inventions that are rumored to be hidden in the mansion—but they find that they are not the only ones searching, and somehow this class of trouble-makers must work together to thwart the thieves.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017055136 | ISBN 9781338116915

Subjects: LCSH: School field trips—Juvenile fiction. | Inventors—Juvenile fiction. | Inventions—Juvenile fiction. | Secrecy—Juvenile fiction. | Theft—Juvenile fiction. | CYAC: School field trips—Fiction. | Inventors—Fiction. | Inventions—Fiction. | Secrets—Fiction. | Stealing—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.W86047 Fi 2018 | DDC 813.6 [Fic]—dc23

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 18 19 20 21 22

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, September 2018

Book design by Yaffa Jaskoll



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AARON

I sit straight at my desk while everyone else in class buzzes about the field trip. We're going to a crazy mansion built by a guy who founded our town *and* invented more than two thousand things, including a hundred things that have something to do with pickles.

Also, the place may be haunted, but maybe not. At least that's what I overheard kids say during lunch.

There isn't anything to do when you sit by yourself at lunch other than overhear kids talking. My family moved here a couple months ago from Alaska. I sat by myself at lunch for a long time there, too. But then I made friends.

It's hard to make new friends when you move a lot. But it's easy to overhear stuff.

I'm sitting here by myself in class, too, waiting to leave on the trip. We'll be gone all afternoon and back before dinner. Just about everybody seems to be bouncing in their seats.

“Can you believe we’re finally going?” asks Chloe. She sits behind me in class.

I turn to answer her, but she’s not talking to me. She’s talking to her friend Sophie.

“Whatever,” Sophie says to Chloe, shrugging.

Sophie doesn’t seem too thrilled about this trip, but I think she’s the only one. Two of the four Liberty Falls fifth-grade classes are going. The other two classes in our grade go next week.

While the rest of the class whispers and bounces, I slip Dad’s letter from my notebook. I got it yesterday. It starts:

Atten-shun, Private Wharton!

That’s what Dad writes at the top of each of his letters to me. It’s sort of a joke. When I was a little squirt, a kindergarten–little squirt, I liked to pretend I was in the army so I could be more like Dad.

I always sign my letters to him the same way: *Private Aaron Wharton*.

Dad always ends his letters one way, too:

Over and Out, First Sergeant Wharton

P.S. Serve. Protect. Be all you can be.

I try to be all I can be, but I’m not sure if I even know what I can be yet.

Mrs. Greeley, our teacher, clears her throat. Then she coughs a few times. She's been coughing all morning. I slide the letter back into my notebook. "Is everyone ready?" she asks before coughing again.

A big cheer fills the room. This trip will be awesome—but I'm sure I'd have more fun if I was going with my last class, the one in Alaska. I miss my house, my room, my backyard, our army base's dog, and the big tree I liked to climb with the tree house that I never finished. I miss everything but the weather. It's cold here, but it was even colder in Alaska.

Maybe next time Dad will be sent somewhere warmer. Or, better yet, maybe we won't go anywhere else. I'm tired of moving all the time and not fitting in.

It's extra hard to fit in when you're not sure how you're supposed to fit. When you live somewhere for a while, you just sort of know that stuff. I don't even look like I fit in anywhere. My skin isn't quite dark like Dad's but not quite light like Mom's, and my hair is not quite curly but not quite straight. I'm stuck in the middle of Mom and Dad, just like I'm stuck sitting by myself at lunch.

Dad says everyone fits in somewhere. He says I just need to find my somewhere.

"As many of you already know," says Mrs. Greeley, "the Minks Mystery Mansion was the home of Edward Minks IV,

also known as the Innovator of Invention, the General of Genius, or most commonly, *the Legend of Liberty Falls!* He not only founded our town, but some say he was the world's greatest inventor, or maybe the world's second-greatest inventor. Top three for sure. Depends on the list."

"Did you know that he invented the school bell?" asks Eddie. He blurts it out without raising his hand. "Before that, kids never left class because no one knew school ended."

"He invented the school bell as we know it today," says Mrs. Greeley. "But bells have been around thousands of years and so have schools. I'm sure they always had ways to end classes."

Eddie shakes his head. He adjusts his glasses. He leans back and crosses his arms. "No, I am quite sure that kids never left school, even for summer vacation. That's why his invention was so important." When he talks, he lifts his chin, and sort of acts like he knows more than our teacher or anyone.

Mrs. Greeley smiles, but she's got this look on her face like she's trying extra hard to keep her smile but doesn't quite feel like smiling.

Everyone sort of has a hard time keeping a smile around Eddie. At lunch he sits at a table with a whole bunch of other

kids, but he sits at the end and no one pays attention to him. When they do, they sort of frown.

I'd rather sit by myself at lunch than have everyone at my table frown at me.

I guess Eddie doesn't really fit in anywhere, either.

Last week it was a big surprise when Mrs. Greeley told us that Edward Minks was Eddie's great-great-great-grandfather. Eddie didn't look happy that she told our class. I think he wanted to keep it a secret, but I don't know why. If I were the ancestor of someone famous, I'd want everyone to know.

"The Minks Mansion is very big," says Mrs. Greeley. "When the main house was first built, there were forty-two rooms, but the house grew and grew, and now it has one hundred and twenty-four rooms, including thirty-eight bedrooms. There are staircases that rise up to nowhere, doors that open into walls and others that open into thin air."

"Why did he build such a strange house?" asks Chloe. She smiles. Chloe has the biggest, friendliest smile in class. Her green eyes get all bright and shiny.

"Because Minks was a weirdo," says Sophie with an eye roll. She sort of smiles, too, but she has the unfriendliest smile in class.

"He was not a weirdo," says Eddie, still crossing his arms. "He was brilliant."

“I heard some people called him the Loony Bird of Liberty Falls,” says Sophie.

“People just didn’t understand his genius,” grunts Eddie.

“Let’s just say he was a bit eccentric,” says Mrs. Greeley.

I nod, but *eccentric* is just a nicer word for *weirdo*.

“Some say there are rooms that have never been found,” says our teacher. “And that one of those rooms is filled with secret inventions the Legend of Liberty Falls never told anyone about.”

“Like what?” Chloe asks.

Mrs. Greeley shrugs. “That’s why they call it the Minks Mystery Mansion. But they say the Mysterious Machines of Mr. Minks would be worth a fortune if they existed.” Then she coughs a whole bunch of times.

“Maybe he invented a cow,” says Chloe. “But instead of giving milk it gives cookies. And then you get a regular cow and you can have milk and cookies every night.”

“Or maybe he invented a chocolate milk cow,” says Sophie. “Because regular milk is dumb.”

Chloe’s big smile fades a little.

“There is no secret room,” says Eddie. He speaks loudly and puffs out his cheeks. “People have looked for that room for years. If there were a room, it would have been found already.”

“You never know,” says Mrs. Greeley. “Anyway, it’s time to go.” She turns and coughs. And coughs. And coughs. Her face looks as white as her hair, and Mrs. Greeley has very white hair.

While she clears her throat, I snag my backpack from beneath my seat and get in line.

I hope the trip is fun. I hope I fit in. Maybe I’ll even make a friend.

Now, that would be one perfect invention—an automatic friend-maker.

“This will be the best trip ever,” says Chloe, standing behind me and talking to Sophie. “Imagine if we found those secret inventions! Wouldn’t that be funtastic?”

“Whatever,” says Sophie, fixing her hair while looking at her reflection in the door window.

“I’m telling you, there are no inventions,” says Eddie. He looks away when he says that. Sometimes, people look away when they aren’t telling the whole truth.

Dad gave me the same look when I asked if his army unit was being deployed again and if he had to leave. He looked away and said he wasn’t leaving, but the next week he was gone.