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Comprehension  
Skills and Strategy

- Theme and Plot
- Sequence
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# The Tortilla Factory

by Eve Beck

illustrated by Michael Rex





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## Chapter One *Fridays*

Jack and his sister Belinda lived with their grandma in Austin, Texas. Jack was seven years old and Belinda was five. Every Friday after school their grandma would take them to do something that they had never done before.



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It was a warm, sunny Friday afternoon. Jack and Belinda stood outside their school waiting to see Grandma's yellow pickup truck.

"Come on, Belinda!" Jack shouted to his little sister, grabbing her hand. They hopped into the truck.

"Hi, Grandma," said Belinda, giving her grandmother a big hug. "Where are we going today?"

"Hello, sweethearts," she replied. "Today we are going to the tortilla factory. Jack, maybe you can do some research while we are there for your school project on Native Americans."

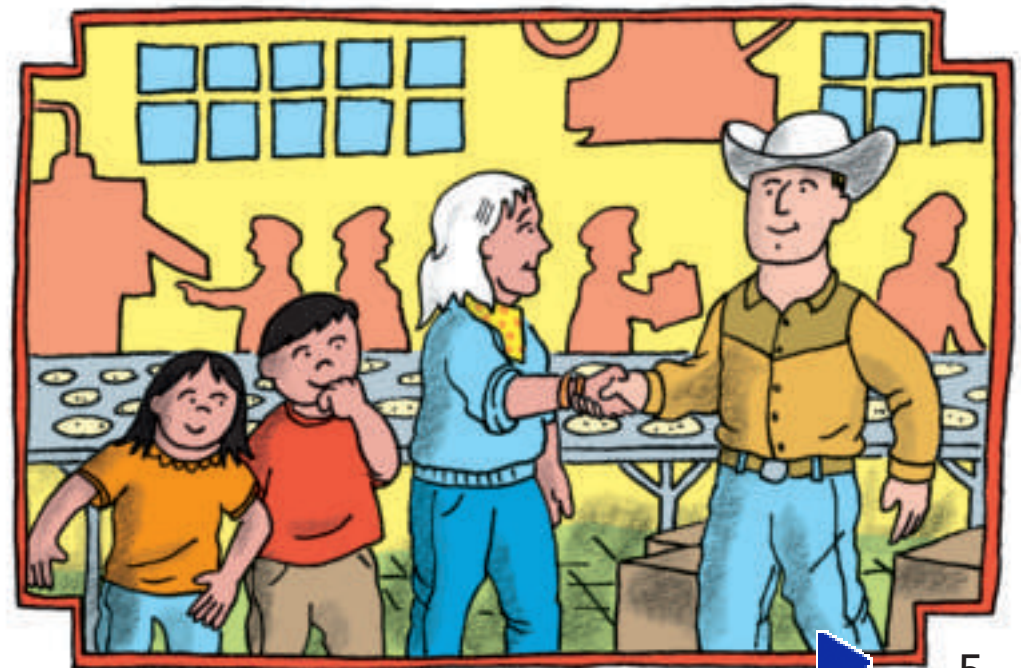


The tortilla factory was a large building that looked very old. Inside, it was loud and full of workers. Everyone wore rubber gloves and hair nets to keep the tortillas clean. A friendly man named Hank met them and said he would be their tour guide.

A wonderful fresh, warm smell drifted through the air. It made Jack hungry. Belinda closed her eyes and breathed in deeply.

"Mmm...smells good," she said.

"That's the corn," Hank explained. "In this factory we make corn tortillas. Tortillas can also be made out of flour."





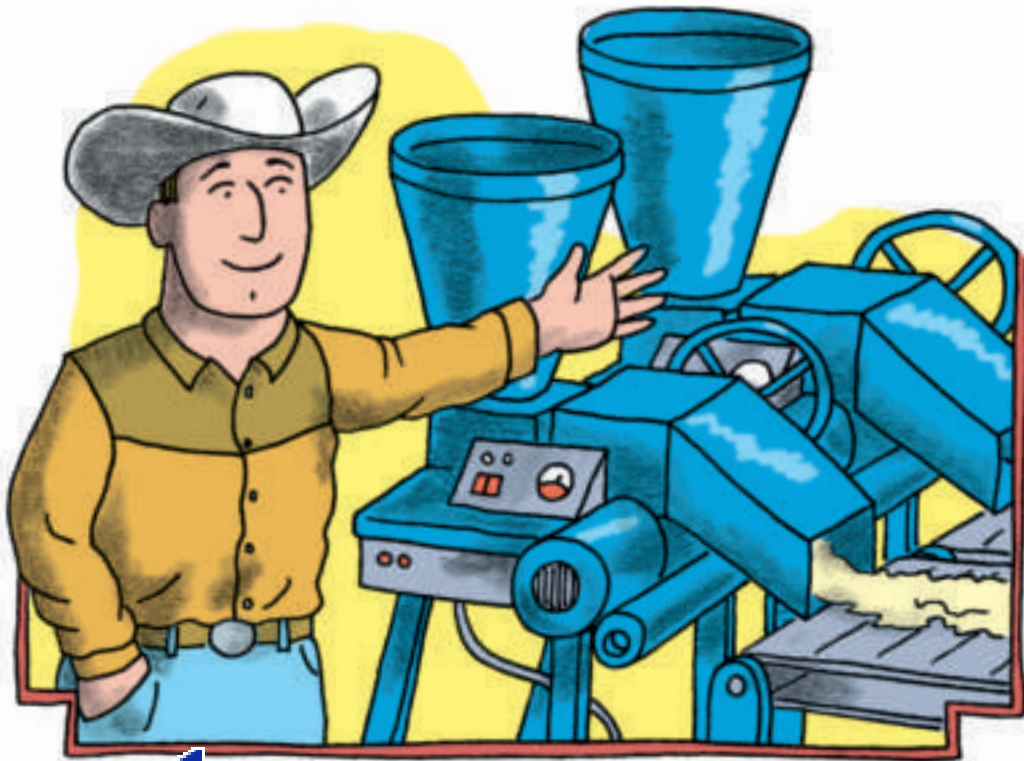
## Chapter Two *The Tour*

"These are the machines that assist the workers in making the tortillas," Hank said.

Hank showed them a huge machine that crushed the dried corn into cornmeal.

"Did Native Americans make these machines?" asked Jack, thinking about his project.

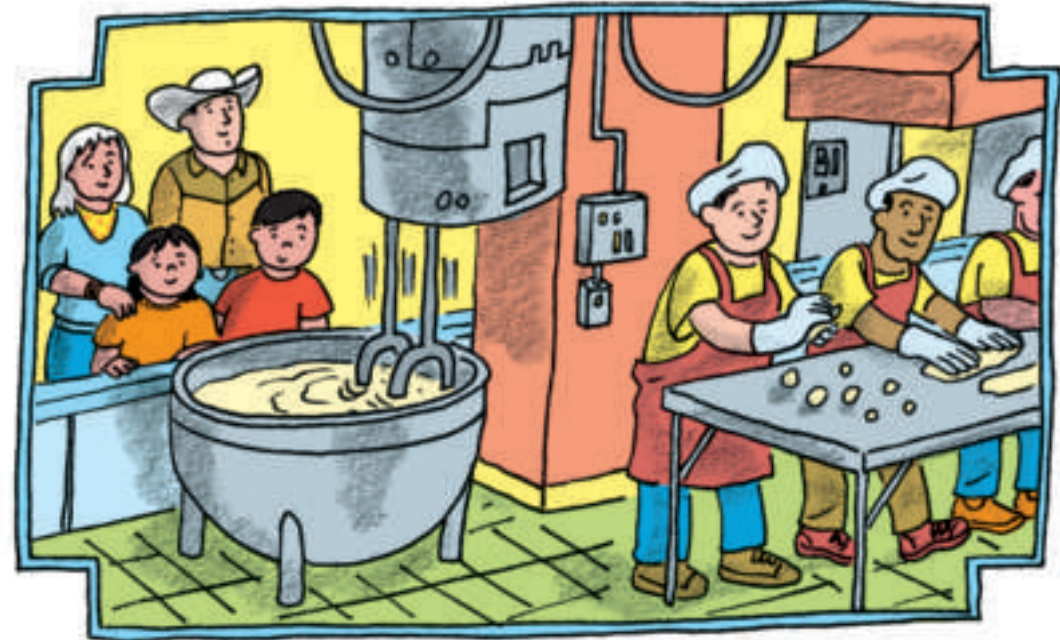
"No," said Hank. "Native Americans ground their cornmeal by hand with stone tools."



"We have electric mixers to make our dough, but we also use the same simple tortilla recipe that Native American and Mexican cultures have been using for thousands of years," said Hank.

Jack was remembering everything that Hank said so he could use it to write his report.

"Once the dough has been mixed, workers roll it into little balls and then pat them into thin, flat circles," Hank said.







"This machine can cook one hundred tortillas in about five minutes," Hank said as he showed them a third machine.

"Amazing!" Grandma exclaimed.

"Smells good," Belinda said. Hank smiled. He took a warm tortilla from the top of a stack that had just come out of the machine. He tore it into three pieces and gave one to Grandma, one to Jack, and one to Belinda.

"Delicious!" said Grandma, tasting hers.

"Great!" said Jack.

"Mmm..." said Belinda with her mouth full.



Hank took them into another room where the tortillas were packaged. The tortillas came in from the cooking machine on a moving belt in tall stacks. Then, workers took ten tortillas at a time and put them in plastic bags that had the factory's logo printed on them. Another machine sucked the extra air out of the bags to keep the tortillas fresh.

"Now the tortillas will be delivered to markets and restaurants all over Austin," Hank said.





### Chapter Three *The Corn Mystery*

"Where do you get the corn?" asked Belinda, noticing the picture on the wall.

"Good question. Did you know that corn doesn't grow wild? Its seeds will not scatter and grow on their own. Corn must be planted and weeded or it will die," Hank explained.

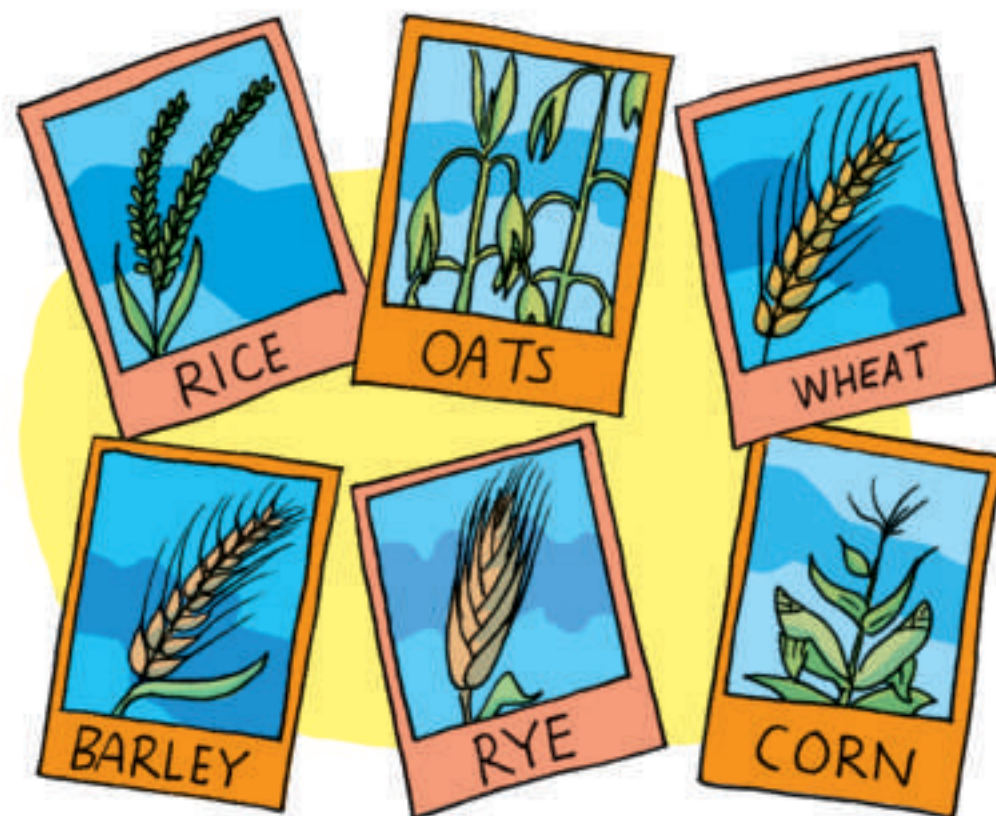
"If corn can't grow wild, then where did it come from?" Jack asked. He was trying to get as much information as he could.



"That is another very good question," said Hank. "For many years no one could figure that out. Scientists knew that corn was related to other grains, such as rice, oats, wheat, barley, and rye. They are all plants that grow like grass, just bigger," Hank said.

"But all those other plants grow wild, don't they?" Grandma asked Hank.

"Yes!" Hank exclaimed. "But no one could find wild-growing corn."







"It was a mystery!" Belinda said.

"Yes," said Hank. "It was a mystery until scientists found ancient fossils of corn plants in a cave in Mexico. They were different from the corn we see today. They were very small, only about one inch long," Hank told them.

"How old were the fossils?" Jack asked.

"Thousands of years old," Hank said. "Scientists now believe that people living in Mexico over ten thousand years ago may have eaten corn."



"We have learned that people living in South and Central America planted the seeds of a wild grass that produced a grain similar to corn," said Hank.

"But how did that grain become modern corn?" Grandma asked.

"Scientists believe that the pollen of a different grass mixed with the pollen of that grain and created a new plant," Hank said. "Slowly, over hundreds of years, the plants grew bigger and stronger until they looked like the corn that we know now."



Some wild grass was a lot like corn is today.







## Chapter Four *Native American Crops*

"Next," Hank said, "different tribes in North, Central, and South America realized corn was very good."

"They learned the right time of year to plant the seeds, how to fertilize the soil, and different ways to grow corn," Hank continued.

"When Christopher Columbus came to America, the Native Americans were already very skilled at growing their crops. Corn was abundant," said Hank.

"Did early settlers grow corn too?" asked Jack.

"Not yet. People from Europe had never even heard of corn," said Hank.

"How did they learn?" asked Jack.





"When the first settlers came to America, the Native Americans were very generous," Hank said. "They gave them corn to eat and taught them how to grow the plants. Without corn the settlers would have gone hungry."

"What types of food did the Native Americans make with corn?" Grandma asked.

"They crushed it into cornmeal and made bread, mush, and tortillas," said Hank. "Some tribes ate the whole corn cob. Some ate the kernels off the cob. The sweet stalks of the plant tasted like candy. They even made popcorn!"



"Can you think of some things that people use corn for today?" Hank asked Jack and Belinda.

"Tortillas!" they both cried at once.

"That's right," said Hank, laughing. "Anything else?"







"Corn flakes," Jack said.

"Sometimes we eat corn on the cob at home. Or tamales," said Belinda.

"They also use corn to feed cows, pigs, and horses," said Jack.

"Those are all good answers," Hank said. "People also use corn to make corn oil, corn syrup, cornstarch, baby powder, glue, and soap. Corn is very important for many meals in North, Central, and South America," Hank told them. "Now aren't you glad you came to my tortilla factory and learned all about corn?"

"Yes!" the children shouted. They all shook hands with Hank and waved goodbye.



"That was fun, Grandma," Jack said, once they were all in the car.

"Yeah!" said Belinda.

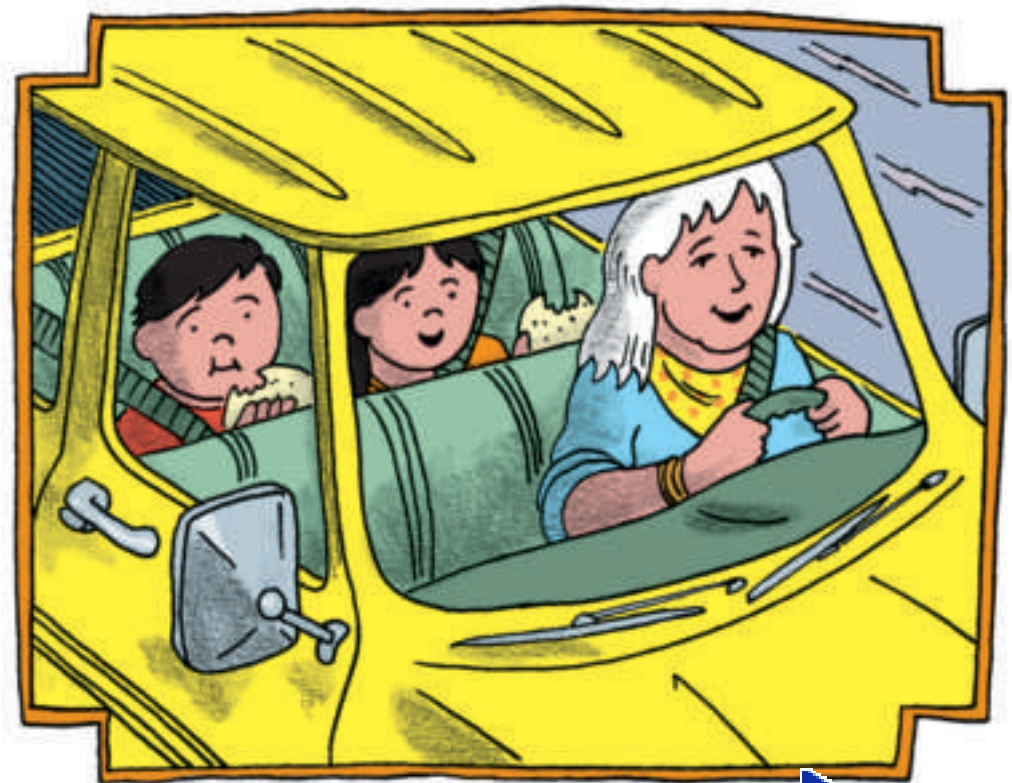
"Now every time I eat a tortilla or some popcorn I'll think about all the things we learned about corn," said Jack.

"All that talk about food made me hungry," Grandma said.

"Let's go to the taco stand!" Jack cried.

"Sounds great!" said Grandma.

"Mmm..." said Belinda.

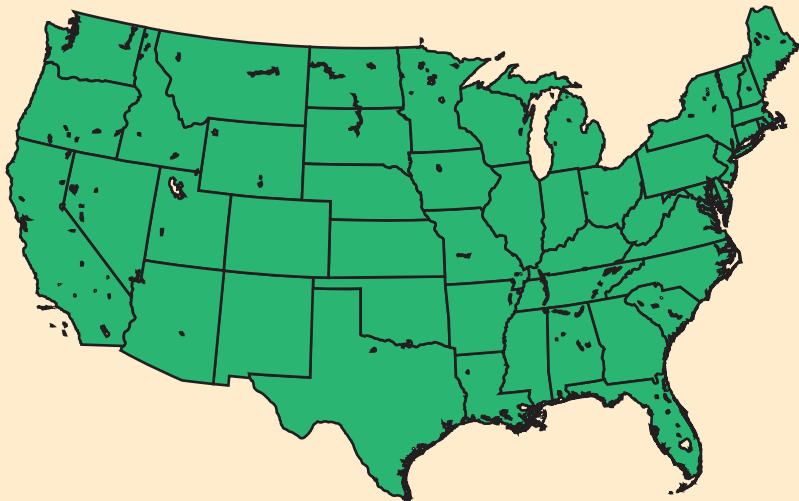




## Corn Today

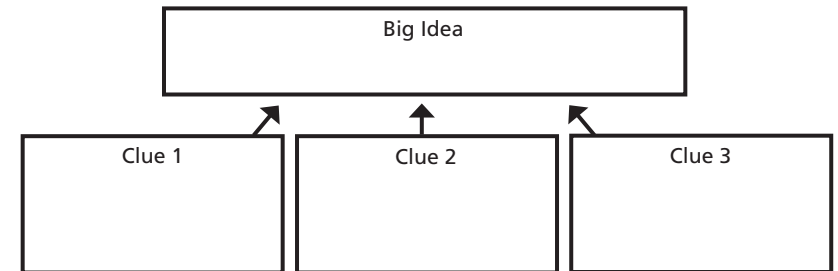
Today, farms in the United States grow twenty-five percent of the world's corn. Most of it grows in the famous "Corn Belt." This area goes across the north-central plains states of Ohio, Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska, Minnesota, Indiana, and Wisconsin. Look at the map and trace this area with your finger. See how big it is?

This part of our country has the hot sun and moist soil that corn needs to grow. Some of this corn is sold as food for people. Some of it is used as food for animals on farms. However it is used, corn helps everyone.



## Reader Response

1. Write the big idea of this story in the top box of a chart like the one below. Under the big idea, write three clues in the story that helped you understand it.



2. When you read that Jack and Belinda were going to tour a tortilla factory, what did you predict they would learn? Did your predictions change as you read?
3. The word *abundant* is used on page 14. Use the words on the page to help you figure out what *abundant* means.
4. If you were Jack, what would your project on Native Americans be about? Write a few sentences to explain your project.

