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You Couldn't Tell Him "No"

by Edith Grabeal Wilson Maxwell as
told to Anita Heistand

Wagon wheels whirred angrily and hoof beats thudded like trip hammers as the team took off in a cloud of dust down the road and away into the open prairie space. Dad, kneeling behind the boards at the front of the heavy farm wagon box, his hair blown by the wind, the reins tight in his hands, was gone.

Elmer and I looked at each other in horror. He had done it again. Dad always thought he could do things he couldn't do. You couldn't tell him "No!" In spite of our worried protests as we'd held the team, he had hollered, "Let 'em go!"

We ran to our horses. With hurried hands, we pushed bridles over the horses' heads, then leapt to their backs and took off after the wagon.

Anytime you had to snare down a horse's head to get a bridle on it, and have a throat strap on the bridle so she couldn't throw it off her head, a person ought to know that horse wasn't ready to pull a wagon. The horse was pretty—fairly tall, lean, soft, mild-looking brown, a blaze face—but when you looked in her eyes, they said, "Watch out!"

Dad had bought her from some wild-horse catchers in the

Colorado mountains, and she was supposed to be broke to pull wagons. Seems like those wild horses never became truly broke, but Dad was bound to try.

He had decided the way to do it was to team her up with a gentle horse that had pulled the wagon when we came as homesteaders to the Oklahoma Panhandle. Old Bess would tame her down. He forgot that Old Bess still had spirit enough to enjoy a good run if she had the right urging. The Wild Horse had renewed Old Bess.

Uncle Clarence, who lived two miles down the long, straight road, saw the dust cloud coming. Soon he could tell it was the banner of runaway horses.

"George!" he yelled to his son. "Get out here! We've got to flag those horses into the yard and against the corral fence!"

Clarence and George managed to run the team off to a standstill. The horses, heaving and sweating, fidgeted out the aftermath of their excitement. Dad was quivering from tension and

exhaustion. He talked with Uncle Clarence while he and the horses recovered.

Gradually the horses quieted down. "I think they'll be safe now, Clarence," Dad said. "You and George get them turned around and head them toward home. I'll drive them back and finish the job I set out to do."

Elmer and I were just getting in sight of Uncle Clarence's when we saw Dad on the way back. We cleared the road as the horses drummed toward us, full speed. Dad was definitely concentrating on holding the reins, looking neither to the left or right. I don't know if he even saw us. As soon as they passed us, we whirled our horses around and took off after them again.

As we neared our farm, we saw its tall windmill tower rising from the flat Oklahoma prairie. Our water tank, beside it, was made of staves on top of the ground, set around a thirty-foot diameter circle with about three feet of each board left sticking up. Dirt was banked against the outside so cattle and horses could walk up and drink out of the elevated pond.

The horses thundered by the house and up the windmill-tank bank. They couldn't have stopped if they'd wanted to. Over the edge and into the cold water went horses, Dad, and the front half of the wagon. It's a wonder it didn't kill them all, them being so hot.

Elmer and I jumped off our horses and up the bank. That part of the bank was ruined. Dad was climbing out over the tailgate of the wagon, and went a ways and sat down.

After he kind of came to himself, we all went into the water and unhitched the wagon. After lots of heavy work, we got it out. The horses, after they were unhitched, had managed to clamber out.

I wish I could say the ending of that trip caused the wild horse to be tractable, or my Dad to give thought to his ideas, but neither happened.

The next time I remember him getting overwhelmed by a bright idea was the time he decided to take a shortcut across the skating pond. Come to think of it, shortcuts were the cause of most of his troubles.

We milked about 25 cows by hand, night and morning. We sold the cream at the store and used the money for groceries. We raised pigs on the skim milk. The pigs weighed 60 pounds or so, and ran free — while the hogs, 300-350 pounds, were shut up.

That evening, Elmer and I had separated the milk, and went out to shut things up for the night.

Usually we carried the skim milk out to the pigs as we went, but this time we forgot. Dad came by and saw where we had left the two big buckets of milk setting, and decided to take them out.

Just below the windmill tank was a shallow overflow pond. Ducks and pigs used it in summer, and we skated on it in winter. It was frozen over at this time. Dad could have gone around it, but he decided to cut across. The pigs saw him coming, and knew what he had. They ran in a herd to meet him. One hit him in the legs, and down he sprawled. Pigs and milk everywhere. He couldn't get up, at all.

Elmer and I saw him fall, and knew we were in trouble. There was nothing to do, though, but to go help him up and walk him to the house.

Soon it was time to butcher a hog. When we butchered one, we hung it on the windmill tower overnight to cool out, its two hind legs hung from a single tree. Next day, we cut the hog up and cured some of the meat in the smoke house.

Usually, we got a rope on the hog and got it out of the pen, where Dad killed it. He didn't believe in shooting a hog; he hit it on the head with a sledgehammer.

This time he decided he'd just kill the hog in the pen, and we'd throw it over the fence. ("Throw" a 350 pound hog over the fence— Dad, Elmer, Mary and me.) There were about fifteen hogs in the pen together. We managed to get one separated,

and Dad gave me a short board and told me to keep the rest of the hogs back.

Usually Dad was accurate with his hits, but maybe because of the other hogs making him nervous, he hit this hog a glancing blow down across its ear. It began to squeal.

The minute the other hog began to hear that squealing, they headed toward it. I held them off as long as I could, then bailed over the fence. Elmer and Mary went over their fences, too. Dad stood the hogs off with his sledgehammer 'til he got them under control.

I'll never forget his angry, reproachful cry to me — "Did you want them to kill us all?"

Nobody could get in bigger jams than my Dad, or distribute blame more unfairly. But he was lovable in spite of his obstinacy — or maybe because of it. ■

(Anita Heistand is a nonfiction writer and her works have been published regionally and nationally. She likes to interview older people and write their best stories.)