

The Barn Fire

Fortunately, there were no animals at the farm of Evert and Helen Mainquist last Wednesday afternoon, Nov. 29. A fire that started in the milkhouse quickly swept through the hay mow and destroyed the barn.

WRIGHT COUNTY JOURNAL PRESS, DECEMBER 7, 1995

A neighbor, George Buskey, told my father that his barn was built in 1916. Buskey's barn and my father's barn were built from lumber northeast of my father's farm. A sawmill was set up in the woods; my father's barn was built from the elm, and Buskey's was built from the oak. Traveling stone masons split rock from nearby fields and set the stones in concrete for the foundations. Dad said they were "tremendously strong men with hard, rough hands." My father's barn was a link for me to another era long gone.

My father's barn was built with weaker wood, elm, but it was christened. Across its red brow facing the road, "Hillcrest Farm" was painted in white letters. Those simple white letters made my father's farm special.

In high school, a cheerleader and her boyfriend drove me home. As we crossed the crest of the hill, my parents' farm appeared, almost like a fairy tale. The grass was green, the sky was blue, and the buildings were washed in rain. When the popular couple was impressed, I saw my father's farm with new eyes that day in 1968, but I will never see those distinctive white letters again.

One November morning in 1995, my mother called me before I went to work. Without saying "Hello" or "How are you?" she blurted, "The barn burned down." I asked, "Were the mules in the barn?" When Mom said no, I was relieved. My father's mules were a small, gentle team who would have been impossible to replace.

I went to my job as a telephone operator for an answering service. We took phone calls constantly, and we're alone during our breaks. If I was lucky, I could talk to someone for a minute. I mentioned the fire to a man from Pittsburgh, but he said nothing. During intervals of a couple seconds between calls, tears rolled down my cheeks.

That night I called my parents. Dad explained an electrical problem had started the fire. Three fire trucks came out, but by the time they arrived all they could do was prevent

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the fire from spreading to the other buildings. Like a typical farmer, he noted that it was fortunate the wind was blowing in the right direction.

Rollie Mills, a neighbor, gave Dad a big round bale of hay and a rack for feeding it to the beef stock and mules. Jim and Ruth Bonk, other neighbors, had my parents over for dinner that night. A county commissioner stopped by, too. He said, "Good thing the mules weren't in the barn." So many friends and neighbors called my parents that their phone line was busy until late that evening.

I called my friend Elenore Anderson because she is from a farm. It turned out her father's barn had burned down, too. She warned me about the big hole that awaited my return to my parents farm. I took a few deep breaths to keep from crying over the phone.

I said, "It's too bad there isn't a barn loss support group." Elenore replied, "Yes, there will be. People will talk about other barn fires. They'll ask, 'Where were you when the fire started?' And people will say, 'Good things the mules weren't in the barn.' That will help your parents get over it." Later Mom talked about how many other barn fires she had heard about, and Dad said more people asked if the animals were all right than if he was all right. Lillian Carstenson, a friend in town, said, "Good thing the mules weren't in the barn."

The fire brought back memories. When I was a little girl, I went to the barn during milking time to play and watch my father work. Sometimes I swept the walkway or helped feed the calves or cows. Once my sisters and I rode the heifers in a pen. When we got on one heifer named Nelly, she immediately kneeled. We slid down her neck, over her head and into the manure. While I admired Nelly's intelligence, I quit riding her.

I liked it on the walkway. The steady, cheerful voice of WCCO came across my grandmother's large old Hershey brown radio. The bright, bare incandescent bulbs created warm light, and the milking machines went *swiss-swiss, swiss-swiss*.

With the dust from the lime and the straw, the light was soft and almost romantic. The cows maintained the steady dignity of elderly grand duchesses despite their plops of manure in the gutters. Sometimes my father saddled Sugar, the quarterhorse, and let me sit on her in her stall. I felt like a princess on her royal steed.

The cats waited for my father to feed them warm, foamy milk or for someone to pet them. All of them were important enough to have names. Dad named one pitch black cat "Whitey," and my sister named a female cat, "Prince." I was upset when my father named my cat "Selfish" because he wouldn't let other cats drink milk with him.

My father worked hard for forty-five years, with no complaint about the long hours with no mornings or evenings off and rare vacations. He was happy and proud to provide for me, my sisters and my mother. Watching my father benevolently reign over the barn made me as content and secure as a cat in a warm spot on a cold day.

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One time before milking, my father asked me if I wanted to climb the silo chute, a narrow tunnel with ladder rungs leading to the top of the silage (ground fermented corn). I was too young to climb the chute, and I was too young to say no to my father. He climbed right behind me, his strong farmer arms encasing my tiny little girl body. The verdant aroma of the silage surrounded me like incense, and the light coming through the plastic chute had a blue hue. I felt like I was floating, with no need to be afraid.

My last memory of the barn was riding the mules with my father on the last warm day before winter. I used the little saddle, the one my parents gave my sisters and me one Christmas. That December night, my parents took us to the south porch and told us to watch for Santa's sleigh in the starry sky. Suddenly the little saddle appeared. They were so proud it could have been rodeo saddle with silver trim on a Palomino in the Rose Bowl parade.

It was a fine saddle. Even as an adult, it fit me like a pair of old blue jeans. It would be hard to be bucked out of--although with a mule like Molly that was hardly possible. When I mentioned to my sister Laurie that I liked it, she said, "I think it's nice, too." I thought, "There's going to be a fight someday."

That last nice fall day, Dad had a hard time mounting his mule, Minnie, because his long underwear restricted his movement and he was eighty-four years old. My father asked me to put his foot in his stirrup, but that wasn't enough. Finally, I asked my dad, "Can I push your butt in the saddle?" He said yes. With a push on his butt and a swing of his leg, he was on. It pleased me that he trusted me with his dignity.

After the news of the barn fire, that memory carried me until I returned home. When I drove to my parents' farm, my car radio played oldies that made me forget the fire. As I crossed the crest of the hill, I noticed the south side of the machine shed was blackened. I couldn't understand it until I remembered the barn fire. When I looked to the south of the machine shed, I saw ashes with a few bones from the fire.

The bones were the silo my father built before he married, the cow stantions Dad installed when he went Grade A, the stock tank he once kept bullheads in. Part of the manure carrier still stood, but it was amputated. The foundation the masons had built in 1916 was just a pile of rocks. Where the red barn I loved once stood, nothing but ashes and bones and air remained. The rosettes of the little saddle would be impossible to find.

A burning barn is an awesome sight. If it's a large barn and it's on a hill, the flames can be seen across miles of fields. Some say the only thing a burning barn can be compared to is a ship blazing at sea. However, as awesome as a burning barn is, what is more astonishing are the memories such flames kindle.