

**The Team**  
By Helen I. Olson

After Nancy died, Belle was inconsolable. For days she ran unrestrained through the woods looking for her missing partner, until Grandpa was afraid he would have to put her down, too.

Nancy had spent years of faithful service yoked to Belle in front of a plow or harrow or hay wagon moving at a slow but steady pace, encouraged rather than urged on by our patient Grandfather. Her demise had occurred unexpectedly, the result of a moment of levity enjoyed in the woods after the day's work was done. She and Belle had been put out to pasture for the evening, and she had decided to indulge in a short gallop through the small, cool glade. Apparently something spooked her, and in that tiny out-of-control moment, she stepped in a hole, lost her footing and broke her leg in the fall. There was nothing to be done, no way to fix the leg. A neighbor with a rifle was called. She was buried where she fell. And Belle searched for her for days.<sup>1</sup>

Horses, especially a team of horses, hold a special place in a farmer's heart, for the team is not two, but three: two carefully matched horses hitched one to each side of the yoke, pulling with equal strength and deliberation, and one farmer who knows his team, encouraging them at times, urging and demanding at others, and always knowing which command is right. Grandpa Piper was a small man, deliberate and patient in his movements. He could work all day in the hot sun, never hurrying, never wasting a motion. Nancy and Belle were a small team as draft horses go, slow and plodding. No amount of urging, no shouted "giddy-ups" would make them change their pace for more than a few seconds, but they never bolted, never reared. When the day's work was over, small grandchildren could be put on their backs for the ride down to the creek for water. They and Grandpa had been a perfect match.

After a few days, Belle's frenetic running slowed to a walk and she began again to eat more than a hasty mouthful and to spend a reasonable amount of time at the metal barrel that had been halved lengthwise and set on legs to make a watering trough. She could be tempted with a pail of oats and consented to pull the manure dray out of the cow barn each morning.

But a farmer needs a team, and talk of what to do went on not only at Grandma and Grandpa's table, but also among all their various children and their spouses.

One decision was made fairly early on. "Belle has served faithfully for fifteen years," said Grandpa, "she deserves a rest. It would be too hard to match her with another horse. She can do a little cultivating, but I think she will enjoy being put out to pasture." Much to the relief of the over-imaginative grandchildren, a trip to the glue factory was never seriously considered.

It was 1942 and all of industry was dedicated to The War Effort. Grandpa had his name on a waiting list at the Ford dealership for a car, which he wouldn't get until 1946. Farmers, however, could apply for a tractor, since agriculture was necessary to the National Defense. International Harvester had just introduced a small tractor, the Farmall A, which seemed to some in the family to match Grandpa perfectly. Even our Dad, who had grown up helping to break the teams raised from colts by his step-father, and who genuinely loved a nice team, thought Grandpa would be better off with a tractor. "He's not a young man anymore, Isabel," Daddy would insist to our Mother. "A team takes a lot of work, especially a new one. That new little Farmall is a sweet tractor. It's just the right size for Sam's place."

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<sup>1</sup> A conversation with my brother Frank reveals that I must have two horse stories blended into one. He says that Nancy died of old age and they just found her dead behind the barn. I decided to exercise my license as a writer and leave my original opening.

But Grandpa could not see farming without a team. "I'm too old to change my ways," he said. "I'm not interested in mechanizing. I just want to keep farming the old-fashioned way." And for some reason, possibly dating back to his early daydreams about being a farmer, Grandpa wanted a big team.

The new team came from south of Lincoln. Billy and Mike were geldings four and five years old, barely broken to the yoke, bigger than Nancy and Belle but as beautifully matched, with nearly black shiny coats and a sassy manner. The farmer who owned them had replaced them the year before with a tractor and hadn't had them in the hitch since. Sonny<sup>2</sup> and Dad went along with Grandpa to buy them. They were eager to work and their muscles rippled as they high stepped along with heads tossing. They were also faster and harder to handle. They tested their new master and sometimes Grandpa could be seen nearly running to keep up with them.

Daddy worried. "They're just too much for your Dad," he'd fuss to Mom over dinner. "They're too big and too fast and too full of piss and vinegar. Sam's not going to be able to control them, and if he does, they're going to wear him out. He never should have bought a team that young." Mom said things designed to placate Dad's fears, but we could tell she also was worried. We children were half afraid and half in awe of the new team. Let out of their harnesses, they would burst out of the barn and run balking and prancing around the barnyard releasing their adolescent energy. Rarely did they stand still for more than a few minutes. There was no question about getting on their backs.

Uncle Arthur came home on leave from the Navy. Though he was never particularly fond of the farm or of farm animals, he decided to help out by mowing the hay. Nancy and Belle had always responded to voice commands: whoa, haw, gee, back, giddy-up. Unk brought the team out of the barn with their yoke on, backed them up to the mower and dropped the reins while he stooped to pick up the mower hitch. Nancy and Belle would have waited patiently. The new team bolted the minute the reins were dropped and took off across the road and down through the woods. Eventually they straddled a tree and tore the harness to pieces. Unk brought them back to the barn and spent most of the day repairing the harness and nursing his anger. He finished the mending late in the afternoon, hitched the team to the mower and with whip cracking over their backs drove the team at a run around the field. He didn't let up until the job was finished and the horses were frothing from exhaustion.

Grandpa watched the whole episode in a state of nervous anxiety. He had always treated his teams with such care and respect that his one-hour nap each day after lunch was to let the team rest, and the family walked to Sunday School because he felt the team deserved a day off from its labor just like the family. He both didn't want to offend his son and couldn't bear to watch what he considered mistreatment of his animals. He was afraid they would not survive Unk's wrath. To Unk and, in fact, to a number of the family and neighbors who held opinions about nearly everything, this was once more piece of evidence that the team was wild and un-manageable and would be well rid of.

The team "running away on Arthur" was, of course, a dinner table topic at our house. Mom was concerned that the team really was wild. Daddy defended the team, pointing out that Unk had never liked horses and had never handled them well. "It's a good team, Isabel," he said, "a beautiful team. Art just doesn't like horses and they can tell he's afraid of them. Your Dad understands them. But I think they're too much team for him. He can handle them, but they wear him out. He shouldn't have bought such a big team." Mom, as usual, looked concerned but didn't have a lot to say. Maybe there wasn't much to add. We all knew the new team was a problem. It seemed like a lot of people were talking and were concerned.

Grandpa and the team finished out the season. The hay was all brought into the barn; threshing crews came by to do the oats. Winters are slower on the farm. The animals stay in the barn most of the time

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<sup>2</sup> In a family loaded with nicknames, we always called Uncle Arthur "Unk" and Frank, whose given name is Francis, "Sonny."

and are let out only to drink from the trough after the ice has been broken. The team's only task was to pull the manure dray out into the field for unloading every mid-morning after Grandpa had finished cleaning the barn. The team was curried every day after Grandpa had finished with the cows. The long slow strokes over their withers and flanks and Grandpa's gentle voice calmed them. They recognized him as soon as he entered the barn and trusted his presence in their stalls. It was beginning to look like his patience would work.

Then, on Palm Sunday, Sollie Gauthier dropped dead. Small communities always take such events hard, and Spruce was no exception. Sollie was Aunt Maysie's father, the father-in-law of grandpa's son Elmer. Collections were taken, food was carried over to the house for the Wake. The funeral mass was to be on Tuesday morning at St. Gabriel's, the little French Catholic church in Black River.

There is a rhythm to a farmer's life that doesn't handle changes in schedule well. No matter what, the cows have to be milked morning and night, the milk churned, the barn cleaned, the animals and chickens fed. Grandpa got up early and rushed on the morning of the funeral, knowing he had to get the chores done, and then get breakfast, bathed, and into his good black wool pin-striped suit and off to the funeral mass. He moved a little quicker and probably with a little more distraction as he emerged from the bedroom. In any event, while still in his nightshirt he slipped on the rug at the top of the stairs and fell into the landing, breaking his right collar-bone.

Now the community had a new crisis. The nearest neighbors came to milk the cows while Mom took Grandpa to town to get his shoulder set. After the Sollie's funeral, some of the neighbors gathered to plan how to handle Grandpa's chores until more permanent arrangements could be made. The team played a large role in the discussion. Tommy Clark, whose farm adjoined Grandpa's at the corner, had been a horse trainer most of his life and volunteered to handle the team. Tommy was a small, nervous man, with a high-pitched voice and an agitated manner. The team apparently made an instant decision not to like him, because when he tried to enter their stalls, they pushed against him, squeezing him against the side of the stall. He didn't even manage to get a harness on either of them before he "chickened out." "Them horses are killers," he declared to most of the community. "They're dangerous and Sam should get rid of 'em."

At our house, plans were being made to move to Grandpa and Grandma's for the time that Grandpa's shoulder was healing. That way, Mom and Dad could do the major chores together before Daddy went into work. We only had two cows at the time, so moving them in with Grandpa's herd wouldn't be too difficult. We were to move on Easter afternoon.

Meanwhile, the team's reputation as "killers" had spread throughout the community and no one would attempt to drive them. "That team has to be taken out, Isabel," said Dad. "The longer they're left in there, the wilder they'll get. That was their problem in the first place. I'm gonna drive 'em." Mom looked tense and concerned and she brought up the "run away" incident with Unk. "I know how to handle that team, Isabel," insisted Dad. "I grew up with horses. Your brother doesn't know anything about them, and the team knew it." Daddy wouldn't be dissuaded, and the fact was that the team had to be driven before they took their stalls and goodness-knows-what-else down.

Bright and early on Saturday morning, we all went over to the farm. Mom and Dad did the milking. Sonny was supposed to help, too, but proved to be the world's slowest milker. Dad cleaned the barn, heaping the manure on the dray. Then he went to harness the team.

By this time, we were all standing on the slope just on the other side of the fence from the barnyard. It was quiet and I don't think any of us were breathing very hard. We could hear the horses stomping and snorting in their stalls and Dad's sharp, firm commands, "whoa, Billy; stay Mike!" It didn't sound very reassuring.

Suddenly, the team burst from the barn, tossing their heads and straining at the yoke with their front legs nearly off the ground. Standing on the front of the dray was our Dad, leaning back on the reins, yelling at the top of his lungs, and cracking a whip above the team's heads. Never had he looked so heroic. Suddenly, he, who had been the outsider, the Norwegian peasant in the Scottish community, was the one who could master what no one else do. He was "handling" the team.

They made a wide arced turn at full gallop, heading up out of the barnyard and onto the field behind the barn. As the dray rounded the corner, a lofty wave of manure arched up and over the field. By the time they had finished the turn and were running straight, the dray was empty. But Dad was still standing on the front, braced against the reins, cracking the whip and urging the team on. They made two circles of the field before the team began to slow down. By the time they returned to the barn, the team was walking docily and Daddy was talking to them, reassuring and encouraging them. He wiped them down to get rid of their frothy sweat and curried them before feeding them and leading them out to drink. We hung around, filled with pride. Our Dad had acquired new stature.

Grandpa was a grumpy invalid. Work and farming, along with the Presbyterian Church, were his life. He didn't know what to do with days that weren't filled with work. It pained him to be "useless," knowing that his inability was making more work for others. And he just plain missed the rhythm of his daily chores and the satisfaction they brought to him. And there was one other issue: the doctor had forbidden him to go back to farming with a team. He wrote in for permission to buy a little Farmall A, a purchase that was to bring great pleasure to Frank and which eventually Grandpa came to enjoy.

But the matter of the team remained a concern. Grandpa loved his animals and selling them meant finding an owner who would appreciate and care for them. That wasn't going to be so easy when farmers in the area were eagerly switching over to tractors.

Fortunately, there was a Mennonite community up North of Alpena. A strapping young Mennonite farmer, just setting up his household, came down to try out the team. We children, of course, were intrigued by his beard and strange dress. I'm sure we stared, but he was polite and acted as though he didn't notice. He loved the team and as he strode across the field behind them, they looked like they belonged together. After he had signed the papers and slid the money across the table to Grandpa, he said, "All right, Mr. Piper. Now I've bought 'em. Now tell me what's wrong with 'em, that you're sellin' 'em."

"There's nothing wrong with them," said Grandpa. "They were just too young and too strong for me to handle."

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