

FOR THE FAMILY OF

LOUIS J. WILSON

HOW HORSEY CAN YOU GET

BY

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A few days ago while sitting at the luncheon table with our cleaning woman, I was inspired to write this paper. Our cleaning woman is a large husky Irish lady who originally came from down Dakota way. She sings Irish ditties while she works-she slam bangs thru the house-never going around a floor lamp or plant stand-she goes thru them. Herky calls her fullback Kerrigan. I suppose her breakage amounts to at least one hundred dollars a year, but we love her in spite of it all.

But this paper isn't about Mary-she is only the inspiration-so let's get back to the luncheon table. As we sat there over coffee, we got to reminiscing about our earlier days and experiences we had had, she on the farm, I in the small village. Eventually she got to talking about my father and some of his experiences as a country doctor whom she was familiar with. And I, in return, was recalling experiences that I had with father in traveling about the countryside with him. In the course of the chatting she recalled a little team of gray ponies that Dad drove for many years-and then came the inspiration.

I used to sit with Father many, many evenings and listen-almost spell-bound at times-to his stories of this or that trip in the rain and mud, others in the snow and cold or descriptions of difficult cases and problems that he had been confronted with-and the resourcefulness with which he solved many of these. As I sat there, I thought how much I would cherish a written record of some of those experiences that he had recounted.

I, too, was a country doctor for several years and I, too, have had many interesting, exciting, and in some cases nearly tragic experiences.

I, too, have children and grandchildren. Won't they some day cherish a written record of some of Dad's early experiences as a country doctor? Somehow I think they will.

So tonight I'm writing to my children and grandchildren and if you care to come along for the ride-fine. It is really coming along for the ride because tonight I'm going to be horsey and take you on a few buggy and sleigh rides, and in some instances a combination of the two.

The team of little gray ponies that Mary recalled were the earliest of our horses that I can remember. Dad bought them when I was about five years of age. Three years later, the original owner who had always regretted selling them, persuaded Father to sell them back to him. Two years later Dad, who likewise regretted selling them, again got possession on the death of the owner. They were a team of mares named Pet and Kit, weighing about 1100 pounds, and I believe the most intelligent horses we ever owned. They seemed to know that they shouldn't drink cold water when overheated. You could leave a hundred pounds of grain in front of them and they would only eat a normal feeding at any one time. They would trot all day long if you would let them, but they were the slowest walking horses I ever knew-they rested while they walked. They were the first horses I ever drove alone and I well recall that first drive. A little boy school friend of mine had accidentally taken poison. Father was out of town, expected back any time so I waited at the barn for him. When he drove in I told him he was wanted at the boy's home-that he had been poisoned. He said "Hop in, I may have to send you back for something." So I rode out with him. A few minutes later he came out of the house with a list of things for me to get at the office, and he told me to get them in a hurry. Wasn't I the proud young thing as I rode into town and out again.

Pet and Kit were extremely gentle but about once a year they would decide to run away and nobody could stop them. I recall two occasions when they came dashing home without Father, he having been dumped out on some sharp turn. When they were about 16 years old, Kit developed a bad front leg and she was sold. The new owner wanted a colt from her-had her bred and she died at time of foaling. Pet we drove until she was about 24, then Father turned her out to pasture in the summer and paid a man to house and feed her in the winter. She lived to be 29.

After finishing medical school, I returned to Dakota for six months during the winter and spring of 1923 in order to give Father a rest. There were no snow plows in those days, and we used horses entirely until after the spring break up. Father had given up keeping horses then and depended on hired livery in the winter time.

I did all the driving that winter and it was a winter. I had a driver named Charley-a man about my age-raised on a farm and still knowing very little about horses. He had only one team and we soon had them worn out. So a friend of mine from La Crescent said he had a swell road team and that I was welcome to use them-no charge.

What a team-beautiful bays-about 1300 lbs-part Hamiltonian and the fastest road team I ever saw. My friends had raised them from colts and when they broke them to harness, they did it by hitching them to a bob-sled-letting out a blood-curdling yell-and letting them run. They had been running ever since. They had been standing in the barn all winter when I went down to get them about February 1st, grain fed and full of ginger. We hitched them up to a cutter and the boys told me I would have to hold a heavy line on them at all times-if I'd slack off, they would break into a run. I started off and **how** I started off-I couldn't believe a team could trot that fast except on a race track. They didn't

need tugs to pull the cutter-I pulled it with the reins. Within a mile and a half my arms were ready to drop off. I tried holding them with one hand to rest the other-I couldn't-I tried slacking off and they broke into a run-I snubbed them back to a trot-tried to stop them-they wouldn't stop-they didn't know what whoa meant. In desperation, I finally drove them into a tree beside the road. I had to repeat that performance twice more in the seven miles home.

For the next two weeks, I always took a driver with me, so we could relieve each other when our arms got tired. After that some of the ginger was driven out of them; and while they still always required a very tight rein, I could handle them.

At that time I had a boy very sick with pneumonia about six miles from home. About 11:00 P.M. one night they called me to come out-boy was looking bad. So was the weather-it had been snowing and blowing most of the late afternoon and night. I called my driver and we started out with this team of bays. Things went alright up the valley, but when we got up on the ridge it was really bad-couldn't see the horses in front of you much of the time-the landscape was just a solid mass of white-roads drifting badly and every low cut full of snow. Just beyond Nodine there was a rather deep cut. I'd driven that country for years with Father and I knew enought to avoid such cuts so I told the driver to take to the field and stay on top. He insisted we'd be better off sticking to the road-was afraid we'd get lost out in the field. He took the cut and in no time we were practically buried-the horses started plunging and soon were both down in the snow-one with both front feet up over the neck yolk.

Once a horse is down in deep snow he stays down until you do something about it. I've never seen one try to get up and out after they once lie down-and here's where you want to know something about horses.

The first thing you do in such a situation is always to unsnap the rein from the inside ring of the bit of each horse and reverse them so as to have one rein to each horse. (Explain) Then you take hold of the extreme ends of the reins-keeping them with you-then proceed to unhitch the horses from the sleigh and take down the neckyoke. Your horses are then free of the sleigh and free from each other. If there are two men present-you each take a rein and get just as far from the horse as the length of the rein will permit-then by jerking on the rein-and using the words that come naturally under such circumstances-you get the horse up. When a horse gets up in deep snow he always does it by lunging and plunging-he's frightened-panicked-until he gets firm footing under him.

I presumed my driver knew these fundamentals so I proceeded to work on one horse while he went at the other one. But as soon as we had them unhitched and while I was getting as far away as the rein would permit, he walked up in front of his horse, grabbed him by the bit and tried to get him up by jerking up on the bit. I let out a yell to stop him but before I could make myself heard-the horse started plunging-the driver was down-the horse lunging over him. Fortunately he was bowled over to one side-he lost his hold on the horse's bit-but no sharp horse shoe calks hit him. The horse stood still after he got firm footing under him and Charley got out of there-a sadder but wiser man. We eventually got the sleigh turned around-rehitched the horses-shoveled some snow from in front of them for a ways and got back up on high ground-then thru the fields to our destination. We didn't attempt to return home until the storm abated the next day.

A few days later we had an unseasonable rain-by afternoon it turned to heavy sleet. I was called south to Dresbach-I drove down with the wind to my back very comfortably. But coming back against the sleet and

wind it was terrible-sleet hitting your face felt like B.B. shot-soon the horses resented it. They made several attempts to turn around-finally succeeded upsetting me and the cutter in the process. They didn't attempt to run-just humped up with their rumps against the wind with an attitude that seemed to say, "We know what to do in a blizzard of this kind even if you don't." I let them stand awhile until they got the tears out of their eyes-then managed to turn them around and drive on home.

On reaching home, there was a call for me $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles west up on the ridge-a woman in labor. I called them and told them I couldn't put my horses out in that sleet anymore that day. We finally arranged that I take the train nine miles north to La Moille where they would meet me with a team. By doing this, we could drive in the valley to within a mile of his home thus avoiding the severe wind on the hill or ridge. By the time I reached La Moille by train-about 8 P.M.-the sleet had turned to snow and it was rapidly growing colder. The prospective father had brought two neighbors with him. It's always a comfort to have a few others sharing your troubles. We got along fine in the valley but wow! When we got on top of the ridge. I think it was the next to the worst storm I was ever out in. About 10 below zero with a heavy snow falling and a wind of about thirty or forty miles an hour and of course pitch dark. We had to take the fields as soon as we emerged from the valley, and I'm sure we rambled around for at least three miles to get to his home which, as I said, was only about a mile from the top of the hill. We cut three or four fences during the process. I really was somewhat frightened that night because we were totally lost at times. I think the homing instinct of the horses were what finally got us thru. As an anti-climax after we did arrive, I found the woman was in false labor and she didn't have her baby until two weeks later. Incidentally we were in that storm from 8:00 P.M.

until 2:00 A.M.

We had an enormous amount of snow that winter and the spring break up was a bad one. You all know the terrain around this part of the Mississippi Valley with the valley roads leading back to the hills, up the hills onto what we commonly call the ridge country or top of the bluffs. The snow goes off first in the valleys and back in those days of dirt roads that meant mud, and about the time the valley roads were really muddy the ridge roads had just began to soften as we called it. The hard packed snow of the roads began to thaw and soften up. This snow in the roads was often anywhere from one to five or six feet deep. As it thowed and softened, you could not drive a team on it because they would punch thru as we called it, and could easily break a leg or get foundered in the snow. Then we had to take to the fields again where the snow had been largely blown off in the winter winds. Sometimes we could be driving cars in the valleys, while the roads were entirely impassible even for horses on the ridge.

During that spring break up I recall three interesting experiences. I got a call about 9:00 P.M. one night for a confinement about eight miles west of town. I arranged to have a farmer living on top of the hill drive me by sleigh the rest of the way, after I drove by car to his farm home. I reached his home alright after ploughing thru a lot of mud and almost getting stuck on the hill. He had his team hitched to a buggy-said the fields were so bare that sleighing would be difficult-so we started on in the buggy. But you never stay on dry land all the time-quite frequently because of fences-gullies and what not, you will have to cross over a softened road-and in suchcases you find a place where the snow is not too deep. We had made several suchcross overs without accident but finally got in a corner where we had to cross over quite a cut where the

snow was deep and soft-the horses cut thru a lot-but we were nearly over when one front buggy wheel hit a soft spot-dropped in-and at the same time caved in-that is, the wheel collapsed completely. Well, you can't drive a buggy on three wheels-at least-not in the middle of the night. And that isn't as funny as it sounds either. In the day time, when you can see, you can find a pole and make a skid to take the place of a broken wheel. I've done that too. But it's difficult at night. So we unhitched the horses-walked to the next farm house-hitched onto a bob sled and went on our way. Got there before the baby was born, too. Automobile-buggy-and sleigh driving on an eight mile drive. Doesn't sound like much in the telling-but go out and try it some night.

About a week after this episode-I got a call about 10:00 P.M. to see a woman who was hemorrhaging over in Burns Valley. There were two ways to get to Burns Valley-one the usual way which made it about a ten mile drive. But there was another way-down to Dresbach-up the Dresbach hill-about a mile and a half over the ridge then down an old practically abandoned narrow steep road into the head of the valley. This cut the distance about in half and made most of it valley driving, thus avoiding the softened snow roads on the ridge except of a mile and a half. I hadn't been over this old road into Burns Valley in years-but was sure I could find it and save a lot of time and hard driving. While I was at the barn hitching up this same wild bay team that we've mentioned before, my neighbor, who happened to be the rural mail carrier came over to see where I was going. When I told him, he said I was crazy to attempt it with that team on such a dark night on such roads. He had driven his thirty miles on those roads that day, and was dead tired. But when I insisted that I was going-he insisted on going with me. Said he wouldn't let anybody attempt those roads with that "damned fool" team as he called them. But I

couldn't let him tackle any more driving that night-so I started out alone. well that damm fool team with their mania had me completely splattered with mud in the first mile-but everything went well until I got on top of the Dresbach hill and had to desert the road and take to the fields. I got thru the first field O. K.-then crossed over to another field which I hoped would extend as far as the old road down into Burns Valley. I drove on and on and finally was convinced that no field could be that long. Something was amiss, and I began to suspect that I was driving in a circle. But how to find out? Pitch dark-a crazy team that tried to run everytime you picked up the reins-no stars to get direction from. I had never left the team untied anyplace. Did I dare do it here? I finally decided there was no other way so I lit the lantern that we always carried for emergencies-set it down on the ground about twenty feet behind the buggy as a guide back to the buggy and started out on foot to see if I could find a line fence or the edge of the field or anything that would give me abearing. I hadn't gone very far before I encountered a fence. I looked back and the buggy was still next to the lantern-so I crawled thru the fence and shortly came to a drop off or embankment. I dropped down this and found myself on a road rather free from snow and definitely with a pitch to it so I presumed I was on the old hill road that I was looking for. I walked up the hill to where it joined the main road-and from there back to the lantern. Yes-and to the buggy-God bless that damm fool team-they hadn't moved a foot.

I started down the hill-I presume I was almost half way down when the horses stopped. I chuckled a little but they didn't move. Horses don't stop for nothing, as I had learned from father long before. So I re-lit the lantern and took a look. A beautiful gully or ditch washed out acroos the road-about twelve feet wide and approximately four feet

deep-rather steep slopes on either side. No room to turn around-could never back up the hill-nothing to do but go ahead. So I carried the lantern across the ditch, hung it on a tree branch on the other side, got back in the buggy and with a little flip of the whip on a couple of rumps we crossed the ditch-not a gentle descent down one side and a slow climb up the other but about two good jumps-one down in and one out. I nearly had my head snapped off, but we made it, and without breaking anything. Picked up the lantern-continued down the hill onto the flat and again the horses stopped. As in most of the valleys, there was a creek-there was supposed to be a bridge but it was gone-another nice bank-a stream and another bank. Well we had done it once, so we did it again-tho I think this one took three jumps instead of two. The rest of the trip was uneventful. I waited until daylight, then returned the long way around thru valleys all the way.

Shortly after I arrived in Dakota in January, a German farmer drove in to the office one day with his wife who was about five months pregnant and bleeding considerably from the uterus. Examination revealed that she had a placenta previa-or to you laymen-the afterbirth located over the cervical canal or entrance to the uterus. These are very serious situations-used to mean the loss of the baby in most cases-and frequently the loss of the mother. Now a days we deliver all these patients by Caesarian section and seldom loose a mother or baby. I tried to persuade this farmer to take his wife into the hospital by train, hoping the bleeding would cease and she could be carried on to term. He wouldn't hear of it. He had eleven children at home-had never lost one-this was all foolish young doctors talk. No amount of argument could change him. But before he started back home-I told him I would not deliver her in the home-and that if she continued to bleed, he would have

to take her to the hospital. If she stopped bleeding now, he must take her to the hospital on any recurrence of bleeding or immediately with the onset of labor pains. I did not hear from them again until one day in April. I was at Nodine with the car. I received a call to come to his place at once as his wife was hemorrhaging. This was during the spring break up and I couldn't possibly drive my car across the ridge to his home. There were no roads that were not filled with deep soft snow. I told him to send a team after me. I started walking to meet him, carrying a heavy OB bag-as I knew his wife was in real danger. I had walked perhaps a mile before he met me-I got in the buggy-he turned around and started home-horses on the walk. I suggested he speed them up as this was urgent. He replied that these were farm horses and they couldn't be driven fast-particularly on such roads-they weren't made for speed. I argued with him-finally snatched the reins away from him and with the whip-lashed them into the best gallop they were capable of. I kept them at it with him yelling that I would kill his horses-that he would sue me, etc., etc. We arrived at the home-I grabbed my bag and rushed in and found the wife unconscious-lying in an enormous pool of blood in the bed. She had hemorrhaged until she had circulatory collapse-and that saved her life for the time being. She didn't have enough blood pressure to keep her bleeding. She was alone in the house so I dragged her to the edge of the bed and did a quick dilation of the cervix, a version and extraction-and then manually removed the placenta. The baby was already dead when I arrived-but she rallied and pulled thru-I still don't know why.

Did he appreciate that I had saved his wife's life? Not at all-I merely got cussed for loosing the baby and probably ruining a good team of horses. Very pointedly he told me that Father had delivered

eleven live babies for him, I had lost the twelveth. He wouldn't even drive me back to my car-had to call a neighbor. Also, I had to threaten him with arrest for willful negligence before I eventually got paid for my services.

One more incident. If you are getting bored, I'm sorry, but I want my grandchildren to know about this one.

I had been in Harmony practicing for about two years when this one happened. Two days before Christmas it started to snow, a heavy wet snow and by the next morning there was about eight inches of fresh snow and more coming and the wind started to raise and the thermometer started to fall. About 10:30 a.m. I received a call some five miles from town-four miles west and a mile north. These were side roads and were not plowed out in the winter but up to that time there was little snow and I was still able to drive my car over most of the territory. The farmer calling said the farmers were hauling hogs that day and the road was open. A former superintendent of schools was visiting us at the time and he volunteered to go along for the ride. With much difficulty we got about three and one half miles west but could go no further so we managed to back up a ways-turn around and with more difficulty got back home. The wind was from the north and that east, west road was filling rapidly. I called the farmer and explained the situation and told him I could find nobody that would put a team out into that blizzard. He got rather nasty-called me a liar, a fair weather doctor, and several other things. Then I told him something like this, "Why you G. D. S. O. B. You can sit out there in your warm house with six or eight horses kicking your barn to pieces, and call me a fair-weather doctor. G. D. you-I can go any place you can go and if you'll get off your fat fanny and come and get me-I'm ready." Then I hung up. About three hours later

he had a brother and a neighbor arrived in town. They called me and said they were in but would have to rest their horses for an hour or two-then would pick me up. They did and we four started west in a bob sled. From the time we turned west at the edge of town, we were lost. We couldn't see any road-any line fences-any telephone poles-part of the time you couldn't see the horses. The wind was blowing stronger and the thermometer had dropped from about 20° above in the morning to about 12° below when we started out. The horses were wallowing thru snow up to their bellies-we just gave them their heads, hoping they knew where they were going. After about half an hour of this, we began to get frozen white blotches on our noses and checks-we watched each other and when a white spot would appear-we would cover it with snow to thaw it out.

Finally the horses stopped and wouldn't go on. We got out and looked them over-one had its tongue hanging way outside its mouth which means she was about done. We threw blankets over their heads so the wind wouldn't carry their breath away, as you say, we tried to break a road in front of them but we couldn't walk. The snow was so deep and the wind pulled our breath right out of our lungs, too, it seemed. For the first time in lots of driving, I was really frightened-I think we all were but nobody mentioned it. We started on again, the horses going slower and slower all the time. I didn't know whether we had gone two miles or six miles. But finally the horses swing right into the wind. We thought we had reached the four mile corner because the snow wasn't so deep. In a few minutes the horses stopped again and uncovering our faces, we found we were in a farm yard-right up against a barn. Were they home? No! Horse sense-yes. They had turned into a farmer's yard about 200 feet from the four mile corner. If they knew enough to do that, they must have known they could go that 200 feet

further, then turn to the right and go on home. It was only a mile with practically no snow in the road. Did they know they couldn't go any further-or did they know we couldn't take anymore.

Let's let the grandchildren figure it out. I know there is too much "I" in this paper. I know some of it sounds like bragadoo. I also know it sounds like repetition and that perhaps you are going to point out these things in your discussion.

But, you chair warmers, I don't care. I didn't write this paper for you. I wrote it for my children and my grandchildren, yes maybe for my great grandchildren.