

# Convinced that angels live among us

You know those mornings in early September, a hint of frost in the air, but none on the ground or rooftops.

At sunup, you hunt a jacket for extra warmth, and overshoes to shed dew from still-green meadow grass you have to walk through. After two hours, you take jacket and overshoes off, wondering how the morning got so hot so quickly.

A neighbor hired me to cut, bale, and stack second cutting on his 60-acre meadow. With baling completed, the meadow displayed its production — 2,000 small, square, 75-pound bales. The crimper on my Hesston swather did a good job.

After two warm days and cool nights in the windrow, the mixed grass-alfalfa hay baled nicely. My New Holland self-propelled baler made tight, firmly packed bales.

I drove my Drube hay stacker to the field the previous evening, and now my 4-year-old son and I were getting an early start. Pleasant aroma of freshly cut hay saturated calm morning air. Fog lay along the river a short distance to the north.

Robins chirruped around the stack yard and conversed among themselves in an apple tree standing in one corner. Red-winged blackbirds added their bugling melody while happily scrambling through branches of chokecherry bushes to harvest plump black berries.

Deep blue sky promised a perfect day for muscle-wrenching hay stacking.

I worked alone because two high-school boys, who helped me during the summer, went back to school. I hauled four or five stacker loads and dumped them on the stack.

Then I climbed up and placed the bales neatly to form a straight-sided stack before hauling another four of

five loads to repeat the process.

My son, Duane, stayed in the pickup until the day warmed enough to be comfortable. He rode with me on the Drube or else played nearby with steady chatter and little-boy questions.

We took a midmorning break to enjoy a Hershey bar and a can of root beer.

He asked, "Daddy, can I look for chokeberries in those little trees over there?"

"Go ahead, but don't wander off. Stay where I can see you."

"OK."

After scavenging the chokecherry bushes for 30 minutes, he climbed into the pickup cab. The next time I stopped to stack bales, I looked through the half-open window to see him stretched out across the seat, sound asleep.

Obviously, he found chokecherries, because dark juice ringed his mouth and one little fist held six or eight berries. I kept on working.

After waking up, he rode with me on the stacker until lunchtime. We took our lunch pails to shade provided by the growing haystack, sat on a hay bale, and ate Kipper snacks, sandwiches, and cookies.

He talked incessantly; I fully enjoyed his companionship with smiles and chuckles. We finished lunch and I relaxed for a few minutes.

He announced, "I bet I know something you don't know."

"What would that be?"

"There's a whole lot of apples in



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that tree over space between stack and tree.

"I know that, I saw them first thing this morning."

"I bet I saw them before you did."

"Maybe you did, and maybe you didn't."

The apple tree he referred to stood in a stack yard corner about 15 yards from the stack. Apples in various stages of ripening loaded branches that hung to the ground.

"Can I pick some apples to take home?"

"Sure, but don't pick the ones with too much green. Pick the red ones."

"I want to get a whole bunch; what can I carry them in?"

"Take your lunch pail."

He scampered away and I climbed up to stack bales I had dumped on the stack before breaking for lunch. Robins and blackbirds must have taken a break too. They no longer serenaded us.

Deep blue September sky and warm Wyoming air created a tranquility that lulled me into daydreams.

A piercing scream from behind the apple tree broke the peaceful quietude, immediately waking me to full alertness — a scream of terror that tore into my heart, and demanded immediate action.

I felt blood drain from my face, leaped from the stack, hit the ground running. Screams from behind the tree became more frantic. He didn't sound hurt, he sounded scared.

Questions raced through my mind in the seconds it took me to cross the

I ran around the tree, where a scene unfolded stopping me dead in my tracks. My scalp tightened and hairs stood up on the back of my neck.

Duane had accidentally trapped a badger in the woven wire fence corner near the apple tree. Crouched in the corner, two feet from my little boy, he snarled and hissed; ears laid back, mouth open, sharp white teeth bared.

Badgers are grouchy by nature with powerful front legs and long, heavy claws capable of digging through rocks and gravel. I could only imagine the potential for disaster. He could tear my son into shreds.

Duane, facing the badger, froze in place. I had to save him. With my heart pounding, I quietly inched toward him hoping to avoid startling the animal and provoking an attack.

Finally, close enough to reach and pick him up, I eased him into my arms and slowly backed away. His arms went around my neck so tight I could hardly breathe.

I held him close for a long time without saying anything. The badger escaped through an open gate and disappeared in tall grass.

The outcome of this event could have been much different. This incident, and other unforeseen predicaments I have experienced, convinces me that angels live among us.

Duane Portwood is an accomplished writer and cowboy poet. He has been volunteering his time and talent at the Sheridan Senior Center for more than two years.

Center Stage is written by friends of the Senior Center for the Sheridan community. It is a collection of insights and stories related to living well at every age.