

Fright and fear brought on by a runaway

"We're getting a mighty heavy load on that wagon," I said, looking skeptically at my father. "I don't think the horses can hold it on the hill."

"We can haul twice that much; load 'em on there."

My father rarely listened to warnings or suggestions from his children.

We needed lumber to build a barn and an addition on the house, so my father decided to harvest ponderosa pine timber on one of our ranches.

Early in the spring a neighbor set up his sawmill close to a huge pile of logs, and by late summer, stacks of lumber surrounded it.

A 4-mile-long wagon road connected the sawmill area, in the middle of a mesa, to the main ranch. That mid-August morning, my father ordered me to hitch Prince and Buster, 2,800 pounds of horse-flesh, to the new rubber-tired wagon.

"We can't use the truck because the rear duals are too wide for the wagon tracks," he said.

We stacked 1-by-6s 16 feet long onto the wagon until the load reached 4 feet high. My father said, "That's enough, get the chains and load binders and we'll chain the lumber to the wagon bed."

We looped two chains around the load and bound it securely to the wagon platform. Neither of us figured out that the load weighed over 3,000 pounds; more than the combined weight of the horses.

That weight would present no problem on a dry, level road. But we had to go down a half-mile hill with a barbed-wire gate stretched across at its base.

The road followed a fairly straight line down the incline, through the gate, and then leveled off around a sharp curve toward the ranch buildings.

After chaining the load, we headed for home. My father stood on the load, his feet shoulder-width apart, and held tight-

ly to the reins.

I sat at the rear of the load, my feet hanging over the back. The horses trotted along easily pulling the wagon, which rode quite smoothly.

The hoof beats on the dry road provided a strangely rhythmic beat to the jingling of the buckles and snaps on the harness. The leather tugs rarely tightened because the wagon, once in motion, propelled itself by its own inertia.

After three miles, the road started a decline toward the brow of the mesa 300 yards ahead. I expected my father to slow the team to a walk and approach the steep downgrade slowly, so it would have a better chance to hold the wagon on the hill, but he didn't.

I yelled, "Hey, you better slow down."

He either didn't hear me, or chose not to heed my warning, and made no attempt to rein the horses in. Their pace, instead of slowing, quickened as the load started pushing.

My father finally recognized his error and began seesawing on the reins trying to slow the horses. They nobly tried to slow down, but the wagon carried too much weight.

I could hear terror in his voice when he turned his head slightly and shouted, "Jump off, run and open the gate."

I seriously considered jumping, but just then we reached the crest and started a steep descent. The harness tugs went completely slack; the neck yoke rose up under the horses' noses as they tried to hold the load, and they were already running faster than I could.

I had no chance to beat them to the

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gate, still more than half a mile away.

Things went awry in a hurry. The boards, even though bound to the wagon bed, slid forward three feet or more until the chains contacted the steel bolsters and held there. The horses, seeing the lumber sliding closer, broke into a gallop, fleeing from the monster chasing them.

My father frantically pulled on the reins hollering, "Whoa, Whoa."

The horses sensed his frenzy and ran faster still. They were out of control. We had a full-fledged runaway on our hands.

I crawled forward and grabbed one of the chains for support and held onto my hat with the other hand. Standing there on my knees, I felt completely helpless, scared out of my wits.

The wind caught my father's hat, which went sailing off into the brush. He kept on hollering, "Whoa!"

The horses, running at top speed, covered the half-mile in a short time getting closer to the gate. I held on for dear life.

My mind's eye saw multiple possibilities for disaster. I envisioned two first-rate draft geldings killed or permanently crippled by wire cuts.

The wire might cut through the tires and cause a wreck. Maybe we would upset going around the sharp curve. What would happen if one, or both, of the horses fell?

The horses bore down on the gate like fox-hunting horses preparing to scale a hedge. They gathered themselves and jumped simultaneously, somehow able to clear the wire even with the wagon tongue between them.

The front of the wagon frame ripped the gate loose, and one end of it wrapped around the doubletree. The rest of it trailed along under the wagon between the tires.

As we flew around the curve, my father lost his balance and jumped. He landed, uninjured, in soft dirt and grass beside the road. He had to let go of the reins, and they fell to the ground between the horses and dragged along beside the wire.

Numb with fear, I kept hold of the chain, determined to stay with the wagon.

By that time the tired, winded horses were on level ground, no longer in panic. They slowed to a swinging lope, then to a trot, and brought the load to an easy stop in front of the barn.

They stood there breathing heavily, perspiration dripping on the ground. Their ears nervously flicked back and forth.

I jumped down, ran to them and stroked their sweaty necks, all the while talking softly to them. "Easy now, boys. Good boys."

I carefully examined them, wondering how they did what they did without even getting a scratch. I unhitched and tied them in the shade of an aspen tree to cool off.

The pleasant aroma of alfalfa hay in the barn loft wafted across the barnyard as I hurried to the shed for fencing pliers to cut wire loose from the wagon.

Within a short while, my bareheaded father walked past me on his way to the house. He regarded me with a dark scowl.

"I thought I told you to open the gate," he growled.

Silver Threads is a weekly column written by people who are involved with the Sheridan Senior Center.