NATURE'S EXECUTIONER

By

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A dangerous time of the year is upon us. It is wise to be wary of the violent storms to which the Southeast is subjected each year.

I was intrigued by a column on "Lightning," in an August 1978 Charlotte newspaper, followed by a news event, a few days later, about a young woman from Greensboro, who was almost "fried" by an electrical charge while at the beach.

One of the great losses to Charlotte was the death of the Educational Director, Emogene Willis, from the Center for Human Development, in 1972. Following a symposium in Raleigh that year, she joined her husband and friends at Myrtle Beach, for a brief summer holiday. One of those sudden, unexpected storms rolled in. The group gathered up their towels and headed for shelter, but Emogene dropped her beach kit, stopped long enough to retrieve it and was instantly killed.

We can't speculate about why Emogene was hit and others running almost beside her were not, but it does alert us to pay heed to the constant warnings about a most dangerous element of nature. Emogene was brilliant, a marvelous teacher of handicapped and retarded children. She was studying for her doctorate, and had she lived, more progress could have been achieved in a field lacking in expertise.

My own adventure with lightning is near disbelief, and all but those involved have pooh-poohed the story. It was back in the days, about 1925, when most labor was manual, hay cut with a simple mowing machine pulled by horses, then raked with another simple machine, shocked by hand, and in turn pitched on a wagon by hand, usually with a man on each side of a wagon and a farm child on top to level the load and tramp it down.

Early to rise, particularly that day, because Father said a summer storm was coming, got us into the field as the sun came up. We worked urgently, scarcely taking time for our noon meal, because that hay was for the horses and had to be put in the loft before it got wet. Cattle and sheep can digest mildewed hay but it is poisonous to horses.

We were almost to the end of the last row when the thunderheads moved in. Huge drops of rain began pelting us and when the lightning began crackling, Father called me to get off the load, and fast. I slipped from the load of hay, onto the rump of Old Dick, then to the ground and crouched beside my father and the hired man, under the side of the wagon, for protection.

The jagged streaks of lightning were followed immediately by deafening thunder. A short distance away, puffs of dry earth rose into the air and were quickly beaten down by the cascading rain. "Doggone it," snapped Father, "that was a little too close for comfort." Almost simultaneously the wagon lurched. "Whoa Meg," he called to the horses, "what is wrong?"

As suddenly as the storm began, it passed, and the thunder and lightning's furor moved away. As the rain slackened, Father got up and went to check on his otherwise serene Percheron team. "Come help me," he screamed.

The hired man and I bounded from beneath the wagon's overhang and went to him. Old Meg lay out flat on the ground in her traces. Father squatted on the ground massaging her neck and head, and told us to do the same. Finally Meg's eyes rolled and then opened. Father grunted relief but kept rubbing her neck, head, and rib cage. Finally, at Father's instructions, the hired man unhitched Old Dick, and then all three of us pushed, pulled and tugged to get Meg into an upright position so the weight of her viscera wouldn't suffocate her. We worked with that horse a good thirty minutes before we were able to get her on her trembling legs.

The rope from the wagon, normally used to tie around the load, was put around Dick, and then Meg, in effect tying them together. With Dick on one side for support, my father and the hired man on the other, I led that valuable team of horses slowly back to the barnyard and into the barn. Father worked with Meg all afternoon, keeping her on her feet and providing all the water she would drink. I know he spent most of the night with her too.

The hired man and I went back to the field with Old Dick and another horse, finished loading the wagon and pulled it alongside the barn, but as we were hitching the team to the wagon, there were the four new horseshoes with which Meg had been shod a few days before. The electrical charge had evidently made contact, and with metal shoes on wet ground, provided a knock-out situation.

Later when Father examined Meg's feet, there were holes in each hoof where the nails had fastened the shoes in place. Old Dick had not been shod and that flash of lightning hadn't affected him.

Meg gradually recovered her equilibrium, recuperated from the shock and dizziness and two weeks later was back at work. The singed feathers around her ankles eventually grew back, and when years overcame her ability to work, she lived out her life in the pasture where she, as a young mare, was almost killed by lightning.

We can't spend our lives in fear of lightning, but we can jolly well respect it and take the precautions to avoid death from it.

FOOTNOTE

1. *Esther Hankins was raised in a rural agricultural and mining community in Utah, and later earned a B.A. degree. After working 20 years as a civilian for the military, she was awarded an honorary Director for Logistics Emeritus by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.*