

WENDY— A VERY YOUNG HEROINE

So what if she'd never really driven the truck before — Wendy just had to get her grandpa to the hospital...and fast.

By Nilah Rodgers



Everyone knows little girls of nine are lovable. But some are brave too. Wendy Harmon of Savanna, Okla., saved the life of her 68-year-old grandfather and has a handsome plaque to prove her extraordinary act of heroism.

Wendy and her mother, Lynda, were living with her mother's parents, Etta Mae and Archie Wright, on the Wrights' 275-acre central Texas ranch. Wendy adored her grandparents, whom she called Pa and Ma. After her mother and father were divorced, they represented security in her life.

On Saturday morning, March 18, 1978, Pa was not in the best of shape because eight months earlier a horse had fallen on him. But he was feeling well enough to paint a side of the big white farmhouse. Ma was not doing too well, either, because just that morning she had come home from a hospital stay following a farm accident in which she had lost two fingers on her left hand and broken her right arm and collarbone. Her arm was still in a cast and her neck in a brace.

After Wendy's mother went off to work, as usual, at the Gatesville department store, Wendy and her friend Amy amused themselves by jumping on the trampoline in the backyard. Every now and then, between jumps, Wendy looked to-

ward the porch to see how Pa was doing with his painting. When, at one point, Wendy noticed that the paintbrush was lying across the top of the paint can and Pa was no longer in view, it didn't occur to her that something might be wrong.

Archie Wright had about 15 goats grazing in the pasture behind the barn. When he saw some of the goats slip into the fenced area where he kept the cow and her two-week-old calf, he knew the cow would be upset. He hated to quit painting now that he was almost around to the front of the house, but it would only take a couple of minutes to chase the goats. He put his paintbrush down, reached for his cane, and headed for the barn with his collie, Smut, at his heels.

Archie entered the cow lot and closed the gate behind him. The cow immediately moved in front of her calf. Archie could see that the goats had made her nervous. He waved his walking stick at the goats and yelled at them to get back where they belonged. Just then, Smut dashed between Archie and the cow. The cow lunged at the dog. Smut yelped and jumped aside. The cow kept lunging and her horn caught Archie in his groin. The cow rammed him against the barn.

Then the cow raised her head and impaled Archie on her horn. She snorted and spun around, throwing Archie through the air. He landed on the ground and lay motionless

for several minutes. The cow trotted off and licked her calf. Archie tried to stand, but could not get up. A fierce pain raged through him. He tried to cry out for help. But he hurt too much to yell very loud. He inched himself along the ground to the side of the barn.

"Help!" he cried in a hoarse, grating whisper.

Blood was beginning to soak his tattered trousers. The front of his body was ripped open. His cane was gone and without it, he could not pull himself up. Again he tried to shout for help, but the shout came out as a whimper.

Wendy thought she heard something strange. She stopped jumping, turned to the sound, and listened carefully. She figured it must be a goat.

Then again, she heard the weird cry. She stood still to listen once more. It sounded like somebody saying, "Help! Help!"

The cry was not very loud, but there was a special sound to it—the same sound Ma had made on the day of her accident.

"Help! Help!"

The hair on the back of Wendy's neck prickled. It was Pa.

"Pa's hurt," Wendy shouted at Amy and then raced to the back door of the house.

"Ma," Wendy gasped, "I heard Pa yell for help."

"Go see if he's in the cow lot," Ma said. "Archie said some goats got in with the cow."

continued on page 44

WENDY—A VERY YOUNG HEROINE

continued

Wendy's throat tightened. Ma had been hurt because of a bull. But the cow was gentle. Still, Pa had warned Wendy that a cow with a calf could be even more dangerous than a bull.

Wendy ran to the pasture. Amy was right behind her.

"Pa?" she called out, but Pa did not answer.

Wendy scrambled over the fence and saw her grandfather on his knees.

He was bent over, his face contorted with agony. His clothes were torn and soaked with blood.

Then Wendy saw the cow. Pa's blood was running down one side of the animal's head from her red-tipped horn to her mouth. The cow lowered her head, aiming her horns in Wendy's direction. The child was terrified. But she took a deep breath, squeezed her eyes shut, and ran to her grandpa.

"Pa, Pa," she cried. "What happened?"

"Go . . . get . . . the . . . pickup," Pa said softly.

Wendy jumped back over the fence and ran to the house. She was running so fast, she almost crashed through the screen door. Amy was right behind her. "Ma," Wendy said, "Pa's hurt bad. Where are the keys to the pickup?"

"In the bowl on the kitchen cabinet," Ma answered.

Wendy grabbed the keys. Pa had sometimes let her drive the pickup when they were down in the pasture, so she knew what to do. She seized the steering wheel. Amy ran to the passenger side and got in. But driving in the pasture had never called for reverse. Now Wendy had to back the pickup out of the narrow garage. And if she did not back out straight, she would hit the air-conditioner that stuck out of the living-room window.

"Am I gonna hit the cooler?" Wendy asked Amy again and again as she inched into the driveway. She was so small she had to stand to see out the rear window.

As she finally cleared the garage, she let out a ragged, "Whe-e-e-w!" Then she headed the pickup toward the barn and Pa.

She stopped the pickup so the passenger door was next to him. Wendy weighed about 80 pounds; Amy was not much heavier. Together, they did not weigh as much as Pa. But they had to get him into the pickup. Amy pulled, Wendy pushed, they both struggled. Finally, Pa slumped into the seat.

Amy scrambled in beside Pa and

continued on page 46

WENDY—A VERY YOUNG HEROINE

continued

Wendy slid behind the steering wheel. She shoved her foot onto the accelerator, and the pickup lurched toward the house.

"You stay with Ma," Pa told Amy.

"Tell Ma I'm taking Pa to the hospital," Wendy said.

It was 250 yards to the road then 14 miles to town. Wendy turned onto the highway, leaning hard on the steering wheel to pull herself up high enough to see over the dashboard and still reach the accelerator with her foot. Pa's face was as white as his hair. He groaned in pain.

"Don't drive fast!" Pa said.

"I've got to, Pa," Wendy said.

"You're hurt bad." She knew she had to get Pa to the hospital—fast.

About three miles outside Gatesville, she recognized her mother's car. The relief made her limp. She had to stand up to brake the pickup to a stop.

"Hurry, Mom! Hurry!" she cried. She felt tears and swallowed hard. Her mother slid into the driver's seat.

"Ma phoned me," her mother said. "You drove about 11 miles. You did fine, Wendy. Pa's going to be okay."

"Pa, you're going to be fine," Wendy said. "Everything's going to be all right." To reassure herself as well as Pa, Wendy kept repeating the words.

Her mother stopped at the hospital emergency entrance. Attendants put Pa on a stretcher and rolled him inside.

"We've got to get him into surgery fast," a doctor said. "Another 10 minutes, and he'd have bled to death. It's a good thing you didn't wait for an ambulance."

It had never occurred to Wendy to call an ambulance. All she knew when she saw Pa so badly hurt was that she had to get him to the hospital right away.

On March 26, 1979, Wendy and her mother went to Houston, where Wendy received the Texas Farm and Ranch Safety Council's "Rural Heroism Award."

Wendy accepted the plaque and leaned toward the microphone. "I had to save Pa's life," she said "I was scared. But I told myself I could do it. I knew I had to."

This year Wendy is 11 and a fifth grader in Savanna, Okla., where she and her mother now live. Wendy did not want to move so far away from her grandparents. But she visits Ma and Pa often and they visit her.

Wendy is one of nine grandchildren, but she has special claims on Pa. If Pa shows a little partiality, everybody accepts that without jealousy. After all, she saved Pa's life. ♦