

THE PRAIRIE FIRE - HELMER LIFFENGREN



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Excerpted From "Next Year Country" by Louise Hullinger

Folks around Draper, South Dakota, still refer to the summer of 1930 as a Scorcher. (Folklore has it that you could fry eggs on the rooftops during August of that year!)

The searing sun turned the treeless plains into a tinderbox; the grasses, curled and brown, lay wilting alongside the road; the drouth-stunted weeds crunched underfoot. An idle flick from a cigarette, a careless

spark from a running motor, even the hot sun beating down on a chip of broken glass could ignite the vast prairie turning it into a blazing holocaust.

Morning dawned bright and clear. There was an air of tranquility on the day the prairie fire struck. It was barely past noon when the farmer noted the first faint smell of smoke and, could see, in the distance, along the horizon, the shadowy tracings of a fire.

In the moments it took to reach his tractor he exulted in how much easier it was to plow safety furrows with his new tractor than it had been in the past with a team of horses. With a tractor he could maneuver the dried coulees, could easily cross the rough, untamed prairie.

Round and round the scattered farm buildings the farmer plowed, leaving protective furrows of freshly turned earth. Satisfied that his buildings were safe from fire he thought next to protect his winter's supply of cattle food. The furrows were purple-black and deep, so wide an errant fire could not cross.

As he finished fireproofing his own place, he noticed the wind had switched slightly. Shouting to his wife that he was going to plow around the neighbor's buildings, too, he hurried off, in high gear, cutting through the pasture, heading towards the little cottage where an old couple lived.

They were a little old couple, in their late 70's, stone deaf. They wouldn't have heard about the fire, but by this time they would have smelled it, and seen it, and would have had no way to get out of its path.

The wind, which had increased sharply, began whipping the fire along. Scientists can explain how hot air rises and causes movement which is wind; in the course of a prairie fire, fire begets wind, and when the fire gets a good strong toehold, there's very little that can hold it back.

The farmer could see it coming closer, could see the red tongues of fire consuming the brittle, toast-colored grass.

It was about that time that a neighbor lady from the west came to help. She and her young children, ages four through eight, brought two large cream cans full of water. They were prepared to help beat back the fire.

At almost the same time two rigs of men arrived with barrels of water, and heaps of gunnysacks. Leaping out of the trucks they grabbed the sacks, soaked them in water, and frantically began beating at the fire as it raged in front of them.

The neighbor lady, who hadn't waited to search for gunny sacks, grabbed what she could that wouldn't burn readily. She snatched the heavy denim jeans her eight year old was wearing, doused them in water, and began lashing furiously at the fire which by now was frighteningly near.

Moments later several more rigs of men arrived, all with barrels of water. One of the men, an old timer, looked at the highway, a natural barrier to the fire, and reckoned, gravely, that they would have to start a backfire if they were to break this one's force. He'd experienced many fires, and this one was one of the fiercest.

The wind was flogging the fire into a frenzy. The crackling heat provided a backdrop of sound effects for the treacherous wind. Without a backfire, there could be no stopping this fire.

A backfire was built to consume the combustible materials in the path of a fire, so that it would have no place to go, and would be forced to die. There is a trick to it, a technique, and the old man knew it. He and several others huddled together to protect the flame from the onslaught of the wind, nursing their flame along until it was ready.

With the highway as a safety zone behind them, the men worked, coaxing, channeling, directing their fire towards the big one, until there was nothing left between the two fires to devour.

Taming the rampant fire required all the strength the men had, and even after the wind had died down, and dusk had come, they did not dare to leave.

Wiping sweaty arms across their foreheads, sipping what water was left, they sprawled on the charred earth, wishing it might rain. They were exhausted, but so was the fire.

It wasn't until then that they heard the news about the farmer who had gone to plow the furrows around the neighbor's home. When the capricious fire had turned, it had trapped the farmer. He had jumped from his tractor, and ran back through the fire, protected by leather leggings, remnants of his World War I uniform, and his arms, which he used to shield his face.

When he was found he was dazed and incoherent. The neighbors who found him took him immediately to the nearest doctor, thirty miles away. The tractor, in the perverse way of things, was turning circles, as though performing a slow ballet movement. Treatment for burns in those days was vaseline to be slathered on, and gauze bandages. The neighbors transported him, covered him with an apron, and gave him sips of water from a thermos made from a mason jar wrapped in burlap. When they brought him home he was beginning to be lucid.

All that fall neighbors came to help him with the chores, and to haul him to the doctor. The gauze stuck to his burned flesh and tore at the wounds when it was peeled; the odor of rotting flesh left a stench that had to be borne; the days were filled with unceasing pain.

Without the neighbors the work could not have been done. One of them came nightly to do the chores, and to tell tall tales and jokes to make him laugh. He couldn't smile because that caused the blisters on his face to crack and ache, but his big shoulders shook with laughter, and his eyes gleamed.

Winter came, and with the spring, the earth had healed and so had the farmer. The winter snows had blanketed the earth and the melting rains had carried away all traces of the fire that had ravaged it. When the grasses poked through they formed a soft carpet of green. The plowed furrows looked oddly out of place, a vestige, a reminder of things past.

When the gauze and bandages were removed, the fingers were no longer thick from swelling; no longer was there a fear of infection.

When the first green shoots of grain peeked through the ground, the farmer headed into the fields again. His arms were scarred and brown, in stark contrast to the pink-white of his arms above the elbow, where he had always rolled his blue denim shirt sleeves, but his steps were youthful, and plans for the new season began to take form.

It must have been a year later when a magazine salesman found his way to the farmer's home. "Wasn't it somewhere around here," the salesman asked, "where a man got burned trying to plow around an old couple's place?" But the salesman was anxious to sell magazines and didn't wait for a reply. "They say the old couple never realized he was plowing to try to save their place, and I've heard he never told them."

The farmer traded two old batteries for a subscription to a magazine, and shook the salesman's hand when he left.

"Good luck," the farmer said, and added, "Don't bother to stop at the little farm to the east; the old couple who lived there passed on last winter."

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The farmer in the story was my father, Helmer Liffengren, of Draper, South Dakota. We had only recently moved to that farm when the prairie fire broke out, and we did not know any of our neighbors well. But, in Dakota, neighbors were a precious commodity, something that one cherished and greatly appreciated.

I have written this story not only to pay homage to my father, but to cite the Rankins, the Dowlings, and the others who helped in our time of

great need. I would like to go even farther than that: I should like this story to honor good neighbors wherever they may be. @

This true story was first published in the May/June, 1993 issue of South Dakota magazine under "Remembering."