

Perseverance and laughter help Mary Stetter shoulder handicap and continue farming

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FOSTORIA — This is the story of a woman in love with farming. Mary Stetter is no ordinary farmer. She is a woman operating a hog farm, but that still is not her entire story.

November 12, 1982 began a painful ordeal that the 26-year-old continues to live with. The young woman lost part of an arm and severely injured a leg in a corn picking accident on her farm. Something that has flourished in the past two years is her will to live and continue farming.

"I was trying to unjam some cornstalks with a screwdriver when my arm got caught," begins Mary. "The screwdriver got caught first and instead of letting go I tried to pull it out. The machine was really pulling me in, so I tried to go around front to turn off the takeoff on the International Tractor. I was standing on one leg and trying to shut it off with the other leg and I slipped," she continues. "That's how I went in and got my leg caught."

As most farmers do, she was working by herself in a back field. Her only hope was to scream and pray that someone would hear her over the loud tractor. The neighbors called the ambulance and her

father, sister and cousin arrived to attempt a rescue.

"They tried to pry the picker apart with two big bars," remembers Mary. More help arrived with a pair of ambulances and two jaws of life. "I stayed conscious. I was trying to tell them where to open it. I was in there a couple of hours," she recalls.

Mary's arm was amputated in the field by a doctor. The day continued with her being rushed by ambulance to Altoona Hospital and then flown to Pittsburgh Presbyterian Hospital by the Life Line Helicopter.

While some may not like to hear such a story, similar accidents occur on farms across the country more often than we realize. Many farmers are without fingers or have other injuries to prove that farming is the most dangerous occupation today.

Mary doesn't mind talking about her experience. She has been interviewed many times. "Since there aren't as many women farming, my accident is even more obvious."

She moves slower and routine activities are a challenge. But Mary's perseverance and laughter make you forget her handicap.

She has suffered and continues to go through much pain, but hopes

that many farmers have learned from her mistake. "I talked to a lot of guys who did the same thing, but left go," smiles Mary. "What I did was my own fault. I should have known better," she admits. "You get tired and do something stupid."

Shouldering the blame does not mean that Mary finds the implements faultless. She believes that farm equipment could be made safer. "They should have it so the rollers pull apart, or if you get caught you could pull something and the machine shuts off."

Her best friend before the mishap and during her long recuperation has been her dog, John. The Labrador and Great Dane mix never leaves her side. "Anywhere I go, he's with me," she smiles. "When I was in the hospital they even brought him there. He didn't know who I was."

As Mary has gone through changes, so has her big black dog. She's concerned about his weight gain from lack of exercise. His personality has also been altered. "He's not the same animal. He's different," she said. John is now very protective of his master. "When I got caught in the picker, he got very vicious," says Mary.



Mary is hesitant and very careful around farm machinery since her accident. The mechanical-minded woman has modified the equipment to adapt to her handicap.

"He wouldn't let anyone near me."

The youngest in a family of eight children, Mary is the only one of Peter and Mary Stetter's family that chooses to farm. The 68-acre farm in northern Blair County was originally her grandfather's farm. Mary's father raised hogs while working full-time for the railroad. She always helped her father.

For a year Mary boarded horses, but found it wasn't profitable. She decided to raise hogs instead. She owns 35 Yorkshire sows and 80 feeder pigs. She owns more now than she did at the time of her accident.

"That's what I really like the best—the animals, but field work comes with it," she says. The small farm is planted in corn, hay and oats. Talking about female farmers, Mary said she believes that women have more patience and do better with animals than men. For some women the other work may be more difficult.

An outdoor enthusiast, the tanned farmer says that before the accident she did practically everything on the farm herself. Enjoying outside work and a sister's help made erecting farm buildings easy work. "Probably

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Mary takes time out to rest on a summer day with her helpers and companions. She's surrounded by Stephanie, her niece; Peter, her nephew; and her best friend, John.



Stephanie helps her aunt with the chores by feeding the hogs and doing other jobs Mary is still unable to do.

Homestead Notes



Long before her accident, Mary painted a big-as-life Yorkshire hog on the front of her barn to direct visitors to Stetters.