

Johnstown Couple Weathers Double Dose Of Painful Farm Accidents

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JOHNSTOWN — Janet and Don Mayer are able to laugh. That's saying a lot, because the R6 Johnstown couple have been through a pair of debilitating farm accidents in recent months.

Don is a third-generation farmer who shared a dairy, beef and hog operation with his father and brother and also holds a job off the farm. He admits to having seen more than his share of danger in his lifetime. He's a former firefighter who once fought a gas fire alongside Red Adair. During the storms that caused the 1977 Johnstown flood, Don received electrical shocks from lightning that hit his hilltop farm three times in a few minutes, the final time knocking him off a ladder and halfway across the yard.

But even that didn't prepare the Mayers for events of this year. Their story begins in February late on a very snowy Valentine night. "My mother-in-law called and said Violet was having trouble giving birth," Janet recalls. Violet, a

1,600-pound Charolais cross cow was eight days overdue and carrying a large Angus-Charolais calf. "I told Don a few days before that she was going to be trouble."

The veterinarian had been called but was delayed by the heavy snow. Janet, who has become fairly accomplished at calving, knew her help was needed. She went down the hill through the steep orchard road, now covered over with brown snow, and found her mother-in-law in the barn with her two brothers-in-law.

"I examined the cow and could feel that there were two back feet coming out first and the calf was huge," Janet says. After some discussion, they decided to use a calf-puller. "I wasn't convinced it was the right thing to do because the cow wasn't fully dilated. Looking back I should have known better."

As the calf began to move, the cow started to tear. In an effort to make the delivery easier, Janet got on the cow's right side and took her tail. But just as Janet stood even with the cow's right hip, the

calf struck a nerve on the cow's spinal column and Violet went down, pinning Janet between her hip and the stall partition.

"I don't know how long I was under there. It felt like forever," Janet admits. Her shoulder and hip were crushed against the partition, and her right leg was trapped. Her brothers-in-law managed to right the cow and pulled Janet to her feet. "It was like trying to stand up a bowl of oatmeal."

She was able to sit down at the end of the stall but thought her leg was broken. She waited for an ambulance while the men worked on the calf, which was still mid-delivery, and the hemorrhaging cow. Because of the snow and a garbled report that Janet was still trapped, an ambulance rushing to the farm slid off the road, destroying a fence and damaging the brand new vehicle. It was followed by a fire truck and a second ambulance, which got through. However, because the lower roads were impassable, they tried to take Janet out via the steep orchard road and got stuck along the way.

Inside the ambulance, Janet admits, "I prayed my leg wouldn't be broken." It wasn't until several days later that the irony of her prayers hit her. At a local hospital she was told she'd just overextended her knee and was sent home in a leg immobilizer. After several days of sitting still, Janet decided her leg didn't seem any better. In fact, the kneecap was located on the side instead of the top of her leg. She went to an orthopedic surgeon who told her, "It's a shame you didn't just break the leg; this kind of damage is much worse."

Jane laughs, "You gotta watch what you pray for, because it just might come true." Instead of a clean break, she had torn and twisted the knee joint, snapping off three tendons, tearing a muscle, and damaging virtually all the knee tissues. "They call it blowing out your knee. It's something professional football players do, and they told me if I were an athlete my career would have been ended."

The next day she had surgery ... 3½ hours to restore the knee to its correct position. She emerged from the operating room with some staples, stitches and two permanent pins internally and a 12-inch incision across the knee.

She admits the surgery went so well that nothing prepared her for what was to follow. There was pain, lots of it. She hoped to be home in a few days, but during her stay she caught the flu. She came home while still ill with the flu and managed to fall while getting to the



Janet and Don Mayer display their "hardware," a knee brace Janet must still use and a shoulder/arm restraint Don wore for four weeks.

Homestead Notes

bathroom at home.

"It was tough," Don says. Their younger son, nicknamed Bear, was home from Penn State on spring break and was able to help out for the first week, but after that Janet was on her own with Don usually away at his full-time job with Bethlehem Steel and older son Doug on his job as well.

"The first day I couldn't get the bedroom blind up. The sun was shining and I wanted to see it ... it was such a little thing," Janet recalls. "But I couldn't do it, and that set me off crying. I cried for about four hours."

Her recovery began to progress, with the help of therapy sessions three times a week. "But there were still a lot of days I felt nasty," she says.

One of those days was June 8, a bright, sunny Sunday. Because the Mayers are leaders in 4-H, they spent much of their free time working with youngsters in the Cloverleaf County-Bred Beef Club. This day they went out "visiting steers," to see how the youngsters were doing at handling. Janet had just been given permission to drive a few days earlier and had driven the family's Rabbit once but not the 1978 Volkswagen bus they decided to take on their visits.

They were at Capshaw Farms in Patton about an hour from home when, as Don recalls, "A 9-year-old girl was having a lot of trouble with an unruly steer. I thought I could help her out." The steer would handle well until he got within 50 feet of the barn. Then

he'd bolt.

"He had a show halter on and a nose clamp," Don says. "I thought I'd be able to control him." He smiles under his handlebar moustache as he recalls the scene. "I made several trips with him successfully. Then he bolted on me."

Don thought he had the situation under control and didn't want to let go of the lead and risk breaking the steer's neck. "But then I realized my body was going about 40 miles per hour and my feet were only going 20." Janet watched from the bus as Don flew through the air and landed hard on his right shoulder.

At first he said he was fine. He even stayed for a while longer. But within 30 minutes the pain and swelling had started. He took the wheel of the bus, determined to drive home. As they started onto a major highway, Don began to sweat and turn pale, on the verge of passing out. He told Janet to take the wheel.

That's the first time their plight struck them. Janet needed a step stool to get in and out of the bus because she was still in a brace and was using crutches. But Don was unable to stand or get down from the car because of his injury. With some difficulty they exchanged seats, Janet having to slide into the back of the bus to allow Don to slide across, then Janet coming forward to take the wheel. Janet drove straight to the hospital and because she couldn't get out of the car had to flag a

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Ambulances had a difficult time getting Janet to the hospital through the snow on this orchard road.



Don Mayer takes care of some of the family's beef herd.