

Yoders Triumph Over Illness That Threatened Son's Life

BY LOU ANN GOOD

BELLEVILLE (Mifflin Co.) — On a Monday morning in December 1982, Wanda Yoder answered her telephone. The caller was the school nurse who requested that Wanda pick up her eight-year-old son who was feeling nauseous.

By the time Wanda arrived at the school, Craig felt better.

Wanda and her husband J. Loren never suspected that this phantom symptom was the onset of every parent's nightmare.

Neither did the doctors. But when the nausea returned again and again, upper gastro-intestinal tests were ordered. Test results showed nothing, but the vomiting increased.

Then severe headaches hounded Craig. "We thought perhaps eye strain was causing the headaches," Wanda said, "but eye tests revealed nothing amiss."

One doctor surmised that the nausea was Craig's emotional response from being separated from his mother while in school. The Yoders knew better.

In May, five months after the first symptom, the Yoders made an appointment at Geisinger Medical Center.

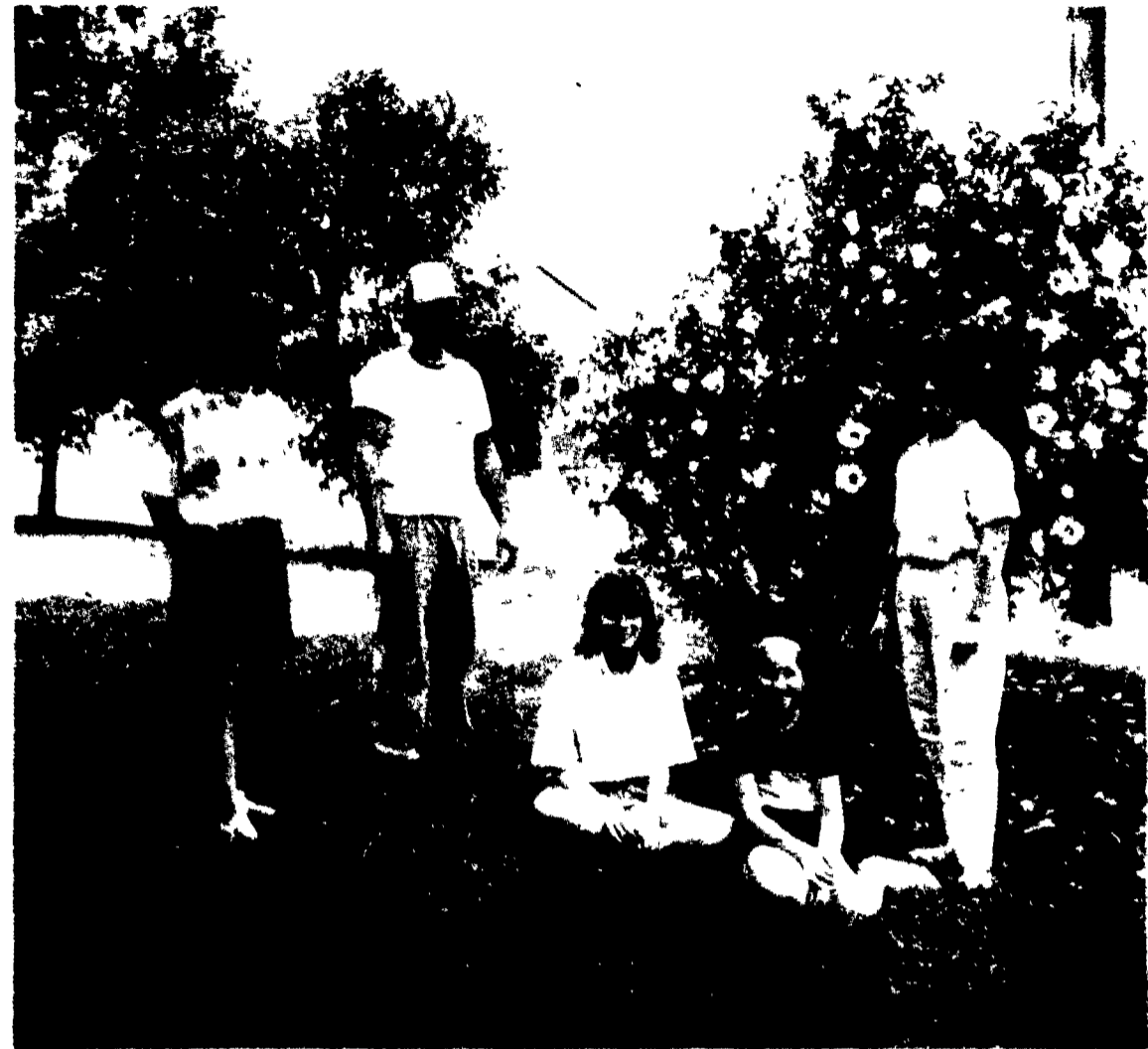
Illness diagnosed

As soon as the doctor examined Craig's eyes and noticed the pressure build-up, he diagnosed the eight-year-old as having a brain tumor.

Surgery was scheduled. Doctors prepared the Yoders for the worst. They warned that Craig may lose his memory and other functions, that the operation might not be successful.

Loren recalled, "I thought this is something that happens to other people—not us." He paused, "It's hard when it comes home."

Wanda said, "Although I knew Craig's illness was serious, the severity of his situation didn't hit



The J. Loren Yoder family enjoy their Belleville farm, which earned a Dairy of Distinction award last year. The family (from left), Jaylene, 18; Loren, Marcia, 16; Craig, 14; and Wanda, lead dairy princess and beef promotional activities in Mifflin and surrounding counties.

The Yoder family pulled together to get through the crisis when Craig was diagnosed with a brain tumor.

me until later."

Although surgery had been scheduled for two days later, doctors moved it up to the following day.

But cows don't wait for milking, and Loren had to return to their

farm, which was an hour and a half drive away, to line up help for their 50 milking cows.

Loren could not be there during the operation, but the six-hour wait during the operation was made easier for Wanda by extended family members who joined her in the waiting room.

When Craig was wheeled out of the operating room, his head was swathed in bandages. Wires and needles seem to be hooked everywhere. He groggily opened his eyes and recognized family members and murmured his aunt's name—an aunt with whom he seldom visited since she lived at a distance.

The Yoders were ecstatic. Craig had not lost his memory.

But the family found their fight with death was far from over.

Malignant Tumor

The tumor, the size of an egg, had been attached to the brain stem. Lab tests revealed it was malignant.

Meanwhile, there were farm duties to attend to. Loren said, "Wanda stayed at the hospital around the clock. I think that made it harder on her. Because I had to take care of the farm, I could get away from the stress and get involved in my work."

From the beginning, the Yoders were honest with their daughters. They explained that Craig's illness was basically a life and death issue.

Jaylene, then 12, daily helped her dad with the daily milking and the field work.

Loren said, "I couldn't have done it without her help. During this time, I learned to appreciate our family in a way I never had before. With Wanda staying at the hospital for two weeks, I realized

how important she was to me. And the children—they were so wonderful—each one."

Marcia, 10, made daily hospital visits with relatives. "Wanda said, 'Marcia's upbeat personality really helped Craig's recovery.'"

It was Marcia who first got Craig to smile after the surgery. It was Marcia who got him to say his ABC's and who patiently worked with him to regain his balance.

After a week in intensive care and a week in a semi-private room, Craig was released without any medication, but scheduled to return for radiology.

Coming home

The morning of Craig's release, Loren and Jaylene raked hay at 6 a.m. They picked up Craig and Wanda at the hospital. When they returned home, they were surprised to see neighbors and friends baling their hay.

"I'll never forget the picture. It was wonderful," Wanda said.

At home, it was difficult for the Yoders to treat Craig like a normal child. Wanda said, "When he jumped on his bike the first time, I wanted to stop him. His balance still was a bit shaky. I couldn't watch. I needed to turn the other way."

Loren said, "It was the same way when he got on a tractor. I couldn't watch him. I wanted to stop him, protect him."

Then it was time for the radiation treatments to begin. Every morning Wanda and Marcia left at 6 a.m. to take Craig for his radiation treatments. The series lasted five days a week for eight weeks.

Friends and family rallied around them. Loren said, "Some people didn't say much, but they'd slip a \$20 bill in my hand and say, 'Here's some money to buy gas or lunch for the family. It meant a lot to know people were praying for us.'"

He added, "Some people—no doubt it was their way of showing their concern—gave us advice about trying this or that doctor or what to eat or not to eat."

The Yoders decided it was most important to stick to one course of treatment. They found the doctors at Geisinger extremely sympathetic and helpful. Wanda said, "You could call them any time of the day or night."

Loren said, "I learned that farmers aren't the only ones who keep long hours; many doctors work even longer hours. And farmers aren't the only ones with stress. Doctors work under extreme pressure with so many life and death situations."

Low point

Despite supportive friends and doctors, both parents agreed that it was the lowest point in their son's battle with the cancerous tumor.

Doctors had warned the Yoders of the side effects Craig would face from taking radiation treatments, but the warnings were minor compared to seeing the awful side-effects first hand.

Wanda recalled, "At first, I tried bargaining with God. I'd beg, 'Oh God, just don't let him get sick on the stomach.'" But Craig got sick.

Wanda begged, "Don't let him lose his hair." But he lost all his thick blond hair.

Wanda kept up her frenzied begging for days until, she said, "One day, I just got down on my knees and said, 'OK, God, Craig is yours. No matter what happens, we'll get through it. If it is your time to take Craig home, then I accept it.'"

Immediately, things got better for the Yoders. Craig stopped getting ill from the radiation.

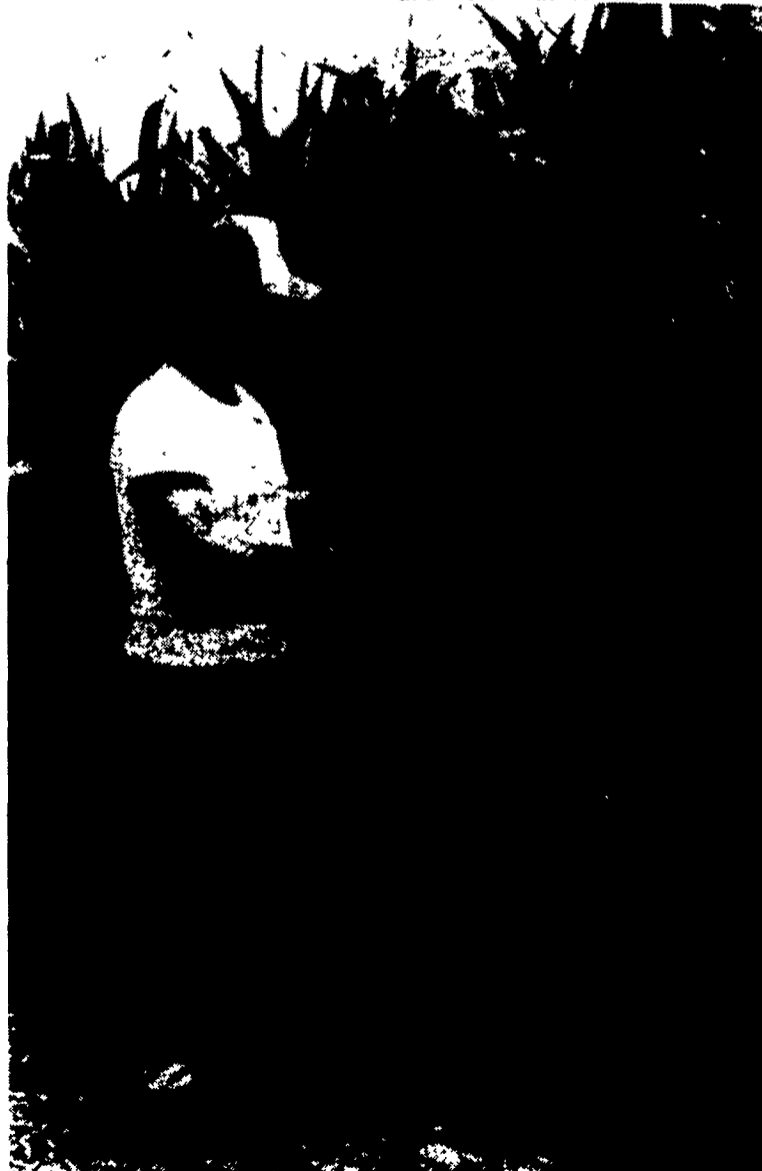
But to Wanda, the most amazing thing was that a new calmness entered her. "I learned my lesson," she said. "Things I thought were so important drifted into the background. I learned to live one day at a time. Each day, I appreciated the sun rise and the birds singing. Everything that God created was so wonderful, and I enjoyed it and felt so thankful for each day."

"It's hard to explain," Wanda added, "even though I was still scared, I felt God's strength to deal with each day."

Doctors had tried chemotherapy while Craig was receiving radiation, but Craig became too violently ill for them to continue both.

Wanda dreaded the chemotherapy that was slated to begin after the radiation stopped. The doctors

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Despite the turmoil of dealing with his son's illness, farming duties demanded Loren's attention.

Homestead
Notes