

## Horses in the River

Ralph C. Martin, rcmartin@uoguelph.ca

Nothing ever happened on the road to Hawkesville, before I was twelve. I should know. I walked, pedaled my bike and often rode in cars, trucks, tractors and buggies on that road. Fishing and swimming in the Conestoga River, bridged by the Hawkesville road, were enjoyable but never adventurous. And then, like a gift from God, out of the quiet flow of my life a wave emerged and broke.

One raw February day I was in our car on the road to Hawkesville with my father. As we approached the Conestoga River we saw two men fretfully looking over the bridge railing and then at our approaching car. I didn't have to ask Dad to stop. He may not have been quite as curious as I was but he muttered "what are they doing there?" We were a couple of miles from home and I didn't recognize them. Of course, dad knew them and if they had trouble there was no question about trying to help. Within seconds we spotted a team of horses swimming in the mid-river current, bounded by ice on each side as they approached the bridge from upstream.

"Snapped a trace as we were hauling manure" the younger man was saying. He pointed to a field high above the river. "Spooked 'em. The rest of the harness let go and away they went. Headed down the hill, circled through the bushes over there and ended up in the river," he continued as I watched his finger arch downward from pointing at the hill field, loop several times and settle on the direction of the horses in the river. "They won't stand that freezing water too long," sighed the older man.

The horses kept coming and my father and the other two men shouted and swung their arms threateningly at the horses, in an attempt to divert them to the riverbank. I couldn't shout. It didn't seem fair. Then they disappeared underneath us.

We ran to the other side of the bridge to see them reappear. “I can catch up to them,” I blurted, glancing at Dad, who nodded a wincing approval. “Be careful, Ralph,” he said as I started to run. I loved running, especially in wind and cold. The dart from mid-bridge to the end was easy and over the guard rail I sailed only to bust through the crust of snow on landing. Pulling out with all fours, I spread my weight on top of the crust and slid down the bank. At the bottom, I stayed on top for a few strides and then I muttered several non-Mennonite phrases as my boots punched through thin crusty snow, six or seven steps in a row.

After covering another 200 yards or so of wind swept ground on the river bank, I closed the gap on the swimming team. *Now what'll I do?* My rasping breath and the animals' snorts were as loud as my fear. As I gained on them, I caught the flash of one wild eye on my side. At that moment Granddad's training became my instinctual response. “Whoa boy, whoa boy! Hup, hup, hup; whoa boy, whoa boy,” I panted, while continuing to run along the riverbank. Despite my stumbling lurches and tears of cold and frustration, despite the river's current pushing the team toward the far side, our eye contact held.

The desperate horse reminded me of something familiar. *What was it? There was a story from last week's Family Herald. I was a long way from the comfort of the couch in the dining room where I'd read in the aroma of mom's steaming cream potatoes and pork sausage. It was a really good story. Something like this happened in the story too. Horses in water. A horse in the story had broken through the ice of a prairie pond. She'd thrashed to get out. Couldn't get out. Ahh yes that was it. Finally, the farmer held his hand under her chin. Magically, as if being lifted she got traction with her hooves. The line in the story was that “she heaved herself out of the tomb of water.”*

Then the team turned toward me. I gasped, and fears of runaway horses and numbing water paralyzed me. *Did they know about the story too?* In faith, I rubbed my reluctant feet, on ice over water, toward them. Now I was talking to myself. “Whoa boy, whoa boy take it easy.” Their pink blazing nostrils followed by huge steaming bodies forged closer, with the relentless river’s current impeding their progress. I could hear shouts behind me. They were trying to tell me something but I was too busy to listen. *Was that all they could do? Shout? It’s good old men can’t run fast.*

I kept clucking “Whoa boys, whoa boys; come on, come on; whoa boys, whoa boys.” Like a proselytizing preacher, convincing himself and his congregation, I reached both hands toward them as my boots slid forward on the ice.

A loose loop of rein lay almost within grasp. I became hot with resisting the urge to clutch and pull it. An inner whisper from Granddad warned, *They’ll rear back if you tug their reins!*

My open-palmed fingers barely extended under their frothing mouths. Suddenly, as if there was a puppet master in the sky, both horses raised their front legs onto my slippery platform. Steel horseshoes gouged the ice only inches from my fragile foot bones.

The ice held - then pitched and collapsed as I backed up. Frightened eyes locked onto mine in utter trust; steel bits rattled between clamping teeth; heaving chests wheezed; flailing hooves sent ice shards skittering across the fractured surface and leather harness twisted on itself. A hazardous dance on a slippery, disappearing floor, in eternal seconds.

Only when my heels sensed stable ground, beneath the snow, did time resume a normal pace. My trembling muscles still anticipating movement, began to settle. In a huddle with the

two exhausted horses, my quivering hands stroked quivering necks and muzzles. Noses nuzzled arms, chest and shoulders. We were secured by our trust, and at last, the solid shore.

“No time for standing around,” I heard, and men’s hands grabbed bridles as my new friends were lead away.

Praise was in short supply in our community because it might lead to pride. Dad said, “it was good you caught up to them and that they came out.” “Uh-huh.” I didn’t dare tell him the story about the horses in the Family Herald and I don’t think he was close enough to see what happened. *He’d never believe that holding horses’ chins could make them lift themselves out of water.* After that not much was said about it.

A week later I was at the corner store picking up the mail and there was a letter addressed to me and it wasn’t from grandma. There was no way I would open it in the store when everyone could watch me. I walked as coolly as I could, out the door, and down the road. Out of eyesight from the store I stuck my jackknife in an eyehole opening of the fold and ripped it open. A brand new five dollar bill that had never even been folded laid in blue contrast to the white paper. I made sure that it was pressed the long way into my pocket before I read the letter.

“Thank-you for getting our horses out of the river. We want to give you this because you helped us.” *What about the horses, I wondered? Were they OK?*

I told mom and dad about the letter and the five dollar bill and said, “I want to go over to see if the horses are OK.” “It’s not really our business” said dad. “They aren’t our horses.” *But we made that story come true again and I want to see if they got pneumonia,* I thought as I left the room. I could hear mom telling dad, “Ralph should thank them for the money. Five dollars is a lot of money for a twelve year old to get in the mail.” “I suppose,” he acknowledged.

A few days later we dropped in and I ran to the barn. Pushing my way to the horse stalls, I could see manes dipping into the manger and emerging as necks flicked sideways. The grinding of teeth and snorts guided me through the dim early evening light. Smells of horsy breath, sweet timothy leaves and manure in oat straw assured me I was in the right place. I climbed over hay bales to get in front of them and shinnied my hands under their muzzles. I lifted up. They pressed down and it was obvious that they were too busy eating oats to play games. *Yup. They're fine!*