

Late afternoon yesterday, Mama saw the cloud of smoke. To the west. Beyond the neighbours. End of September! It's hot. And so very dry. Even the creek behind the barn.

When she saw the smoke, Mama looked over her shoulder. "Where's Papa?" Fixing fence, I told her. Only Mama can call, like she did just then.

"Quick", Mama said. "Get the horses to the barn". I'm kinda small for my 14 years. But, the horses are quiet enough. My little sister could likely fetch them if she had to.

I ran to the barn for rope. Then pushed open the back door to the pasture. Molly and Marty were a ways away, near the dry creek bed. Their heads were up. Sniffing. As if they knew something crazy was about to happen. I sprinted, got Molly by her halter. Stay calm, I told myself. Breathe. No need to excite a big animal. I walked her to the fence, threw the rope around her neck, then climbed up beside a post. Pulled myself onto her back. In no time, we were inside.



Papa was there. Out of breath. Fussing with harness. Mama was shooing the the little ones into the milk room. "Stay here", she ordered. And she was gone, with a pitch fork, a bucket and a couple sacks. Papa and I had Molly and Marty set in their harness in record time. I led them across the yard and backed them toward the plow. Marty was twitching; snorting a bit. Molly kept an ear to him and the other cocked to Papa. Papa, constantly murmuring, "good girl, ata boy, steady now, here's the shaft." He kept the beasts focused on his voice, on the job we had to do. With their chests near my head, I murmured too.

"Off you go". He said without looking up. "Open the west gate and then help Mama". When a fire is coming, we only have a few options. We could try to outrun it with our horses, but abandoning the yard isn't something Mama or Papa would consider. So we'd made a plan, a few weeks back. Just in case. Papa and the horses would freshen up the firebreak. Mama and I'd start a back fire about 10 paces beyond the firebreak, to char the grass and stubble, so the fire wouldn't jump the black soil. We'd keep the back fire managed with buckets and wet sacks. Risky, for sure. But no turning back now!

I got water from the cattle trough, and caught up to Mama. We could see the fire this side of the neighbours. The air was thick. Flames were coming our way, and fast, as if bouncing over the stubble. Mama was running, pulling burning straw with the pitch fork. I made sure the back fire didn't sneak over the plowed earth. Like our neighbours to the west, we had to steer the fire around our farm yard. And hope neighbours to the east could do the same. Each family was on its own.

And we did! The battle lasted for hours. Our lungs ached for clean air. But we saved the farm! The first moment we felt safe, Mama ran to comfort my two sisters. We hugged each other. Nuzzled the horses. "I'm so pleased", our Papa said, "with how brave and calm all three of you girls were". That's when tears, filled all our blackened eyes.

*Prairie Fire! was inspired by stories in Vantage Points 4.*

*Vantage Points Flashbacks were written by David Neufeld with help from Betty Sawatzky. They were originally aired on CJRB Radio out of Boissevain, Manitoba in the early 2020s.*