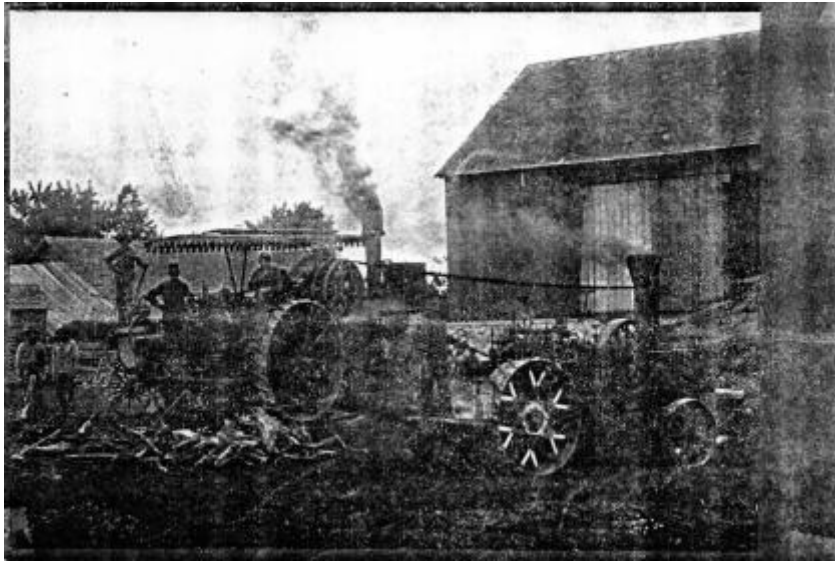


## CHAPTER I

### MATT'S ACCIDENT

by  
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Matt, his brothers and some of the crew  
New Franken, Wisconsin.

## MATT'S ACCIDENT

"Daddy's coming, Daddy's coming!" I cried excitedly at the sound of horses' hooves on crunchy snow and ring of harness bells. I ran to the barn door with my six-year old brother following, to welcome our returning father--to welcome Matt as he was commonly known.

As the door swung open a dark-haired, brown-mustached figure stepped into the bam. He was leading one horse by the bridle and the other part of the team followed close behind.

Even in the dim light of the kerosene lantern we could see immediately this wasn't our father, but uncle Stephan, his brother---

On that January day in 1916, darkness came early to the farming community of New Franken, Wisconsin. By chores time at five o'clock my older brothers, Conrad, Wendel and Ben, sixteen, fourteen and twelve respectively, had gone to the barn. Clarence, just two years older than I had gone along because we didn't like staying alone in the house, especially after dark. Besides, there wasn't anyone to look after us since our mother had been taken away to that institution nearly two years before...

We'd watched the boys milk---the rhythmic squeeze and gentle pull on the cow's teets that sent streams of milk into buckets they held between their knees, as they sat on low stools to the right of the cows. Watched, as they emptied the buckets into cans that would be put on the milk stand by the side of the road the following morning, to be picked up by the milk hauler. Watched, as they emptied the froth that stayed in the bottom of the buckets into the cat's old agate pan.

The cats, Hans and Gertie, had gotten froth all over their whiskers, and we amused ourselves with watching them clean it off with their front paws.

The boys had finished milking. Fed the cows hay and half-buckets of silage, (the fermented corn stored in the cement silo Mat had built in 1911), and filled the water troughs.

They'd 'slopped' the hogs--black and white Poland Chinas, and the red ones Matt especially liked to raise as a hobby.

After they'd shoveled away the manure from the cows, and put clean straw for bedding under them and red Dan (the one horse remaining in the barn), their chores were finished.

Now there was nothing to do but wait--and worry. They sat on the milk stools in the cow bam to pick up the comforting warmth of the animals' bodies and talk to each other in the Bavarian dialect we customarily used at home. "Where ca he be?" Wendel said to Conrad, his dark brown eyes reflecting the concern in his voice.

"Oh -- I don't knwo," Conrad answered, equally puzzled and concerned, "He should be home by now, it's eight o'clock already and too dark out to work."

"Why doesn't he return?" Ben, youngest of the three, also wanted to know why our father wasn't home yet. And what could possibly be keeping him?

Matt had taken the team and sleigh to the Joe Schneider farm, about two miles west of our home on highway 54 that morning. He was the engineer on the steam engine he and his brothers, Valtin and Stephan, owned jointly. In summer and fall it propelled their small threshing machine, and in winter it drove the circular saw that cut logs into fire wood lengths.

There wasn't much farm work in winter besides chores and they had sons to do that, so when Stephan said to his brother a few days earlier, "Madus, (German familiar name for Matthias) Joe Schneider cut down quite a few trees of his and he wants us to bring the machine and cut them up for him, Matt had agreed. Since there was about two days' work involved, they had left their equipment at the Schneider farm the previous day, and should have finished well before evening.

"What's going on? Where is our dad?" We asked almost in unison, as uncle Stephan began unharnessing Schimmel, the lead horse. He looked at the older boys, then at Clarence and me. Quietly, gently, hesitantly, he nudged us and said, "Kids, go over by the straw pile, I want to talk to your brothers."

We objected, but complied, while he spoke in low tones to our older brothers. It wasn't until much later that we learned what really happened to our father. we were only told on that cold January night there 'd seen an accident. He'd been hurt. He was in a hospital in Green Bay. Ten miles away. The far end of the world to a little four—year—old, whose only remaining parent had left the house that morning, strong, robust, healthy, and didn't return for twelve long weeks...

The older brothers, distraught, insecure, willing to follow any orders readily went along when uncle Stephan said, "Take the kids to aunt Hannah." They bundled Clarence and me against the sharp January wind and put us on a two-runner sled, which Wendel and Ben pulled the quarter mile up the road to our father's sister Hannah's home. Conrad remained at the house with uncle Stephan, who would stay until the two returned.

When we arrived at Aunt Hannah's I suddenly realized I was there to stay, not play as I often did in the past. Kicking, crying and screaming, "I wanna go home!" I refused to be comforted, when my aunt gave me an orange, (my most prized fruit and rare in our home) I promptly threw it across the room. Ben took me on his lap and I wet on him and the floor. Disgusted, he and Wendel left to go back home.

As they came through the door, Uncle Stephan got up from his seat near the hard coal heater, reached for the heavy overcoat he'd slung over the back of the chair and said, with a sympathetic nod to each, "I will leave now."

He would walk the mile-and-a-half to his home against the strong north-west wind, and checked periodically on his nephews in the weeks that followed.

The three brothers stayed alone on the farm, took care of it and the home as best they could until our father came back twelve weeks later, while Clarence and I stayed on with the Heim family.

In that large family of ten cousins were several to care for or play with us. One especially, Angeline, two months younger than I, became my buddy. Still, adjustment was difficult and I cried silently into my pillow many nights.

One day, when I was particularly lonely for my father, Aunt Hannah asked if I would like to write him a letter. "Yes yes!" I responded enthusiastically, "Please gibe me a sheet" I filled the paper with irregular lines and scrawlings verbalizing my childish thoughts and longings and covered the entire sheet with dots. When Aunt Hannah, a quizzical little smile on her round, gentle face asked what all the dots were for I said, "I had to dot the 'T's , didn't I?" Finally, in early April, as spring was breaking through I heard Aunt Hannah say to her husband Jake, "Madus comes home soon." Before my uncle had a chance to react to this news, I asked excitedly, giving little thought, or caring that I might be scolded for listening to adult conversation, "When, when will he come home?". "Within a few days" she smiled kindly. "Ok Ok, it is high time", my uncle responded, paying no attention to my interruption. "Yes and there would be much to do)," Aunt Hannah went on, telling us that within those few days before her brother would be coming home she and the older girls would go to our house and get it all nice and clean.

"And what else? I wanted to know, as I jumped up and down with anticipation. "Well——", and she went on, probably thinking aloud more than talking directly to us. They would scrub the white pine floor with lye water, clean and polish the kitchen stove, and wash down the wainscoting because it could get pretty greasy and smudgy, especially with the boys there alone for so long——

I felt warm all over hearing her plan, and beamed, "And what more?" She smiled indulgently as she continued to plan. Time permitting, they would clean the china cabinet that held what was left of her brother Matt's and Lizzie 's wedding presents, like the pretty green berry dishes and painted water pitchers. And yes, they would bake bread in the kitchen range and the house would smell so nice.

At last the day arrived. Uncle Stephan had gone to Green Bay with his horse and buggy to his sister Lena's, on Harvey street (where Matt had been convalescing for four weeks) after his eight-week stay in St. Vincent hospital, to bring him home.

He walked carefully, gingerly, through the wood shed, put one crutch ahead of the other, and hoisted himself up the step that led to the kitchen. Over the ledge, and into the clean shiney kitchen with the freshly—washed rag rugs on the white pine floor. To the fragrance of freshly—baked bread. He was home!

Lifting himself carefully on his crutches, he walked slowly over the multi—colored rag rugs and sat down on a straight-back kitchen chair. He was still big, but his large frame was thinner than when I'd last seen him three months before; his face so white behind the sandy—red mustache. And his light brown hair seemed darker than I remembered. And yes...the dimple—like indentation was still there in his left cheek - the one I so loved to play the game of putting my finger in the 'hole' with, and withdrawing quickly before he could snatch it. And how we would giggle if he missed - which was about half the time. Still, as he held out his arms and said, ""Come here, Girlie," I felt shy, strange. Twelve weeks is indeed a long time in the life of a four—year—old. ..

With a little more encouragement I finally went to him and climbed on his lap. As he held me and we talked quietly in our Bavarian dialect it was like he'd never been away. He was home, and I was home. Nothing else mattered.

Through the months and years, the story about what had happened that fateful, cold January day in 1916 gradually unfolded and I learned what had really happened. Matt had tended the engine and helped his brothers, Valtin and Stephan, feed logs into the saw at the Schneider place. Since it was a typical cold Wisconsin winter day they boosted their Spirits and reinforced body heat with periodic "Schlucks" of whiskey. By one o'clock they'd emptied the bottle. The wood pile was getting higher and the log pile lower.

The sun shone brightly on the snow—covered ground. The crisp air made their noses run onto their mustaches, which they wiped with the backs of their mittened hands, and periodically blew onto the snow. Everything was "hunky dory" (to use one of their common expressions) as they worked and joked with each other, enjoying the camaraderie.

The Burkart brothers were known to be an amiable lot. A little beer, some whiskey, a few jokes, and work was play... The big steam engine sputtered. Matt went to the head of it to adjust the throttle. As he reached up, and over it, he got a little too close to the wide belt that was going around and around, turning the circular saw that cut logs into fire wood.

The belt caught the sleeve of his jacket and carried him with it. As it made one round it threw him over twenty feet, luckily away from the saw. He lay motionless, though still conscious. His cries, mingled with the shocked voices of Valtin and Stephan, brought the Schneider women running from the house.

"Get the doctor, get Dr. Hunerty!" one of them called out. At the sound of voices and Matt's cries of pain, his sister Anna and her husband Peter, who lived a few hundred yards down the road, came running. Her face turned white at the sight of her brother's mangled body, but she soon pulled herself together and tried to comfort him. Meanwhile, uncle Pete ran back to his farm, quickly hitched up his horses, (there was no phone) and went as fast as he could the mile-and-a-half into the village to get the doctor.

Meanwhile, Matt was writhing in pain. His left leg was shattered from knee to ankle with thirteen compound fractures that pierced the flesh, and caused the blood to pool into a patch of brilliant red on the white snow. One of the Schneider women, noting the need for immediate action while awaiting the physician, said, "Get a bedroom door from the house and you men put him on it and carry him in." The brothers, who'd stood by in helpless shock, readily did as they were told. "Tie my leg to the good one," Matt pleaded as he felt his strength ebb, "It's falling apart..." The Schneider woman hurriedly got a clean sheet, tore it into strips, and gently did as he'd asked.

About an hour later uncle Pete returned with Dr. Huberty, who, after a cursory examination said, "It appears Madus has many open breaks in that leg, and besides that, a fractured arm, and some cracked or broken ribs...God knows what else. Better take him to the train and get him to St. Vincent's hospital."

"But the train won't be in New Franken until half past four," Valtin protested, "and then it would take at least another half hour until it got to the depot in Green Bay. Then we'd still have to get a way to get him to the hospital."

"Valtin's right," uncle Stephan said, "couldn't we just load him on Pete 's sleigh and drive him to the hospital? We could go them nine miles in two hours or thereabouts."

"No no, I'm afraid not, he 'd get too cold and could die of shock. You must know he's not in the best condition as it is.

"He's nice and warm here in the house and I'll give him something to ease the pain. Then you take him on the sleigh to the depot near train time. I'll stop over at the depot and tell them to wire ahead to expect you." with that he gave Matt a shot of morphine and left. The Green Bay and Western was late in coming that day and Matt lay for two more hours on the improvised stretcher with a pillow the doctor had put under his leg to hold the shattered bones in place. The men had carefully loaded the stretcher on the sleigh as train time neared. Uncle Pete drove his team, and uncle Valtin, who 'd said earlier, "I'm goin' with Madus to the hospital," went along. Uncle Stephan had stayed behind in order to bring our horses home and give us the bad news... In less than hald-an-hour: the welcome whistle of the Green Bay and western announced its approach to the station - and help.

"Madus," Valtin said reassuringly, "we 're almost there now. The conductor said he 'd help get you off and in the waiting room. Then we'll take you in that livery sleigh from that store that's real close." Matt nodded, and made a faint attempt at a smile, indicating he was reassured. . .

The horses plodded their way as fast as they could through the snow and manure—covered tracks of the streets of Green bay to St. Vincent hospital. Plodded, with the driver and uncle Valtin seated in front, and their horse-blanket-wrapped patient in the back.

After they arrived at the hospital Matt was diagnosed as having thirteen compound fractures of the left leg, a broken left arm and several broken ribs. While the doctors were successful in setting the ribs and arm (though the latter had to be rebroken and set again in the hospital) the shattered leg never healed properly.

It curved slightly, and was an inch shorter than the other, causing him to walk with a characteristic limp. Besides, it stayed open and draining with black and purple discoloration, causing him to suffer painful memories of the accident for eighteen years --- until his death in 1934...