



A railroad

his story. He lost his leg after he was shot in the war.”

“Yes, sometimes we see him sitting on the porch when we’re walking home from school,” Cal said. “He sits in a chair most of the time.”

“But he can get about on his crutches,” Alan cut in again, “and now there are good artificial legs for people who are willing to learn to walk with them.” He became more emphatic. “Papa is like that! He will never sit still if he can walk, and I know he’ll never stop trying until he does it.”

“And work, too,” Cal added. “You know he won’t give up on his store. It’s his dream.”

Mother listened and nodded. She shared Papa’s dream of owning a house and having a business, which would provide the food and money that the family

needed. The children knew the sacrifices their parents had made to open the store: the long hours that Papa worked, the sewing that Mother did and the extra people that she fed at the house. Once Helen had seen Mabel give Mother a nickel to help with family expenses, and she had wished that she, too, had a nickel to contribute. Now Mother would worry about Papa’s losing his leg and his giving up on his dream.

next chapter—Papa walks

Adapted and reprinted with permission. Written by Helen Marley based on her mother’s stories; illustrated by Thorne Worley. Provided by the N.C. Press Foundation, Newspapers in Education.

WINSTON, N.C., 1910—January was cold and snowy, so the family stayed in doors.

Cal had gone, and Helen was watching Aunt Emma as she pressed Mr. Sharp’s shirts, humming and talking at the same time. The ringing of the telephone startled Aunt Emma and Helen. They heard Mother leave the sitting room where she was sewing and walk to the hall to answer the ring.

“Yes, this is Mrs. Sharp,” she was saying. Then, in a strange voice, she was asking questions. “What happened? ...Where was he? ...When? ...Yes ...yes ... thank you.” She stopped.

Aunt Emma stopped ironing, led Mother to the sitting room and settled her in a chair. After getting Mother a cup of coffee, Aunt Emma picked up Jack and left Mother with the girls.

Mother sat quietly and continued to stare, this time at the fire that glowed in the sitting room stove. Her hands were shaking so badly that Helen took the coffee cup and set it on the table. For a while Mother rested her head against the chair. Next she began to twist her handkerchief and then her hands. She was

talking softly, more to herself than to the girls.

“Your father was worried about a shipment of fruit from Florida that had not arrived. Late this afternoon he walked to the freight yard to investigate. While he was standing near a sidetrack, a switcher engine hit him from behind, knocking him to the track in its path. Before he could move, his leg was crushed by the engine....” her voice trailed off.

Aunt Emma came in the sitting room bringing a hat and coat for Mother. Someone had come in a buggy to carry her to the hospital where Papa had been taken.

Mother rose from her chair. As she put on her coat, she seemed to put on a strong front, one that she would have to wear for a while.

The girls stood quietly in the front hall to say goodbye to her. She stooped to kiss them on the cheeks, giving each of them a quick pat and promising them that Papa would be all right. Then she walked out into the early darkness, stepped into the buggy and rode away.

.....
Later in the evening and

again the next day, Mabel and Harry, who visited Papa at the hospital, talked to the other children about what had happened to him. The story remained about the same with a few details added. Each one would tell how his back was turned, how he had not heard the switcher engine, how some men saw and rushed to help him... and how he cried. Papa’s crying was more than Helen could imagine.

The following evening when Mother returned home, she gathered her family around the kitchen table. The soft glow of the oil lamp held them in a close circle. They leaned in to hear Mother’s news, but she just looked at her children, gazing at each face in the lamplight. At last Harry spoke for her. “Papa’s leg is so badly hurt,” he explained, “the doctor says that he won’t be able to get well unless they amputate it.”

“Amputate it?” Libby asked. “What is that?”

Mabel turned and spoke to the girls. “Well, that means that the doctor will take off the bottom, injured part of his leg because he can’t use it anymore.”

“Will he be able to walk?” Helen’s heart sank as she asked it.

Then Alan stood up. “Just think of the old man who lives on Holly Avenue. You remember

ACTIVITY: Does your local print and/or digital newspaper cover accidents? Study examples. Write a headline and opening paragraph about Papa’s accident.

HISTORY: “Spencer Shops” located near Salisbury repaired steam locomotives for Southern Railway. Today, “Spencer Shops” serves as the location for North Carolina’s Transportation Museum.