

Boys Will Be Boys!

Because electrical power hadn't reached the Carl farm when Norman was a small boy, the family farm had to rely on a wind charger to provide the power to the entire farm place, which included the house, barn and the outbuildings. There was a generator on the top of a 60 foot tall wind charger and since the wind blows all year on the prairie this was an excellent and reliable source of power. The electrical went from the generator to about 10 huge 32 volt glass batteries sitting on the top shelves in the root cellar. They were about 20 inches high and around 14 inches wide and they kept the power on all over the farm.

When 32 volt batteries are charging they give off a high level of nitrogen and so in a root cellar there has to be plenty of ventilation so that it won't explode. The Carl's root cellar had a $2\frac{3}{4}$ inch vent pipe that went up above the surface of the ground. During the summer when Norman and his little brother were about 4 and 5 years old, they decided to drop frogs, salamanders, sticks, and other small things through the pipe to see if they would slide down and come out in the root cellar. Unfortunately, this eventually plugged up the ventilation system.

One evening shortly before Christmas when the family was having a quiet supper, the trapped air in the root cellar produced what is called spontaneous combustion and the batteries exploded. They all heard the sound of the explosion and all of the lights went out. Norman's dad lit the kerosene lanterns and didn't check on things until morning. Needless to say, there was glass and battery acid everywhere. That was the end of the wind charging system. Thank goodness electricity reached the farm about a year later. In the meantime, the family relied on kerosene lanterns and lamps.

After Norman's dad cleaned up the mess, he poked a broom handle through the bottom of the ventilation pipe and realized what the boys had been doing, but he never said a word. I guess he realized that "boys will be boys."

Author's note: Norman says now that he doesn't think anyone could have lived through the explosion if they had been in the root cellar. Perhaps that's why his father decided not to replace the batteries.