

TRACTOR OVERTURN STORIES ¹

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¹ These stories are reprinted here with the written consent of the farmers who told the stories, and with written permission of *Progressive Farmer* and *Successful Farming*.

Introduction

As part of an activity called “My Story,” farmers and farm family members were invited to tell a story about a tractor overturn event that they or someone they knew had experienced. The stories that follow are presented as they were told. The stories describe various ways that tractor overturns occur, unexpectedly and suddenly; the injuries that can result; and the emotional and economic consequences of those injuries for the tractor driver and his or her family.

The Most Difficult Thing in My Life

The event that follows occurred in May 1995 in the late afternoon. The Kentucky farmer, age 47, was going to check on his cattle. The area had been swamped by rain for several days. His wife told this story.

“Why he decided this day to take the tractor, knowing how wet everything was, will never be known. Although the incline was no more than three feet in height, as the tractor tried to climb it, it began to slide backward and to the right. As it slid, the back right tire struck a tree with enough force to cause the tractor to overturn down the embankment into a small creek filled with mud and water. Eric’s head was caught under the back tire and he could not get free. I was told that he suffocated from the weight of the tractor and the mud and water. There were no other marks or injuries except for a bruise from the steering wheel to his chest and a mark from the side fender where the force of the rollover bounced him to the side.

“The impact was horrible for my family as he had no will. We had only been here for a year to the week of his death. I had to wait several months for everything we owned to be probated in court. At the time, I was rearing five children and a grandson. Financially I was drained. Without the help of family and friends I would have lost everything he died for. Emotionally and physically I was drained as I continued by myself (and still do today) to maintain this 100- acre farm, work full-time as a teacher and raise three of my children, ages 14, 17 and 19.

“My whole life changed within a few minutes. It’s hard to explain to people who have not experienced a close death. Before operating my tractor, I had a roll bar installed and a seat belt attached. Probably the most difficult thing in my life that I have ever had to do was to climb up on that tractor seat, the one on which he died, and continue on with my life alone.

“Nothing will bring him back but I honestly believe if there had been a roll bar he would not have died. He may have been injured but not dead.

“This may be unorganized but they are just thoughts.”

In Three Seconds or Less

Ronald D. Doyle told this story about his tractor overturn. Mr. Doyle's name and story are presented here with his permission. The tractor overturn occurred in March 1992, at approximately 7:00 PM on his Park City, Kentucky farm. His tractor did not have a Rollover Protective Structure (ROPS). Mr. Doyle was 49 years old at the time.

"I was spreading fertilizer on the pastures when my tractor overturned three times. The tractor rolled over my body. I received a bad head injury. My neck and shoulders were severely bruised. The lower part of my spine was fractured. My lungs and heart cavity were severely bruised. Nearly all of my ribs were broken. My left wrist was crushed. A piece of bone between my wrist and elbow was splintered. My left knee was bruised, burned and severely cut. My left foot broke from top down and bottom up plus it was cut badly.

"Once I came to, I had to walk approximately 1/4 mile to the house. When I got up to start to the house, I fainted. When I awoke, I took my time getting up to start to the house. I finally made it to house. My wife immediately put me in the car to take me to the hospital. I was concerned I was going into shock and there was not enough time for the ambulance to get to the farm.

"At the hospital emergency room, I was met by a doctor and two nurses. The doctor advised, 'Get a blood pressure reading and start IVs.' The nurse trying to start the IVs commented, 'All his veins have collapsed.' The second nurse gave a blood pressure reading of 70/40, and shortly, trying to get a second reading, let the pressure cuff off and reinflated. She commented, 'Doctor, he has no blood pressure. We are losing him.'

"The doctor very calmly commented, 'I still have a faint heart beat.' Next thing I remember is the doctor telling me that I had severely injured my body and would be transported to a larger hospital that could meet my injuries' demands. I was transported to the T.J. Samson Hospital trauma center in Glasgow, Kentucky.

"Numerous x-rays, a CAT scan, and additional tests were administered. I was advised I would be placed in the intensive care unit. I stayed in the unit two days.

"I developed pneumonia. Thus, they were unable to operate on my wrist and arm until I got over this.

"I was finally operated on, stayed in the hospital 12 days, was off work for a month, and in rehabilitation for 4 months.

"The hospital bills were in excess of \$20,000. I was unable to raise tobacco the first year after my accident. Also my neighbors had to help with my farm work for approximately three months.

"Presently (eight years later) I'm unable to work like I could before the accident. I have lingering pain in various parts of my body due to the accident. I do not try to accomplish as much on weekends or off days from work as I used to. If the task is not completed at end of day I don't worry now like I used to.

"Presently I am more safety conscious. Before the accident, I didn't think there was a way you could turn over a tractor in three seconds or less, but you can."

Father's Death as Told by His Daughter, Age 16

“It was January. Father was retrieving firewood on top of an icy slope. The tractor slid sideways, tipped over and hit him on the way down the hill. He died instantly.”

“My family moved and began to start over again, sold the farm and moved to town. Our family no longer farms.” [Tractor had no ROPS and seat belt.]

Grandfather's Death as Told by a Boy, Age 15

“Grandfather was bushhogging on a hillside, fell off the tractor and was caught in the bushhog and died instantly.”

“It was emotional to me and the family.” [Tractor had no ROPS & seat belt.]

Best Friend's Death as Told by a Boy Age 18

“I was 8 years old. He was 12 years old and my best friend. Coming out of his wheat field to the road, he was hit by a truck coming down the road. He was thrown from the tractor and hit his head on the blacktop causing severe brain damage. Died. Occurred August 1987 about 5:00 PM.” [Tractor had no ROPS & seat belt.]

A Nephew's Death as Told by an Uncle

“It was June 1978. We got the phone call about 10:00 PM. Our nephew, age 19, was dead, killed in a tractor overturn that same evening. He and his family had been haying all day. They were having a barbecue on the front lawn. A wagonload of square bales was still in the field about a half-mile down the hill from the house. It was supposed to rain that night, so before supper, our nephew took a tractor down the road to bring the hay wagon home. The road is narrow and hilly and has a lot of traffic but he made it into the field OK. After he turned into the field, a drunk driver veered off the road. The car struck the tractor and turned it upside down. Our nephew's chest was crushed and he died on the spot. His mom, dad, sister, and brother saw the whole thing happen but there was nothing they could do. It was a terrible thing and it changed everything. Within a year they lost the farm. The family has never gotten over what happened. It still hurts. Hardly anyone had ROPS on tractors in those days. He was a wonderful young man. A ROPS would have saved him, the farm, and a way of life.”

Father Survived a Tractor Overturn as Told by a Girl, Age 15

“Dad was mowing the yard. He was on a deep slope. Turned over 3 different times. Never got hurt because of ROPS & seat belt. Occurred June 1993 in the evening.”

Hopefully I'll Live Long Enough to Pay off the Money

This Kentucky farmer tells the story of how he was thrown off a tractor and run over. His tractor did not have a ROPS and seat belt.

“On May 21, 1990, a Monday, I was driving my TO35 tractor downhill on some scrub land I had just bought. Behind me was a track-dozer, which was to flatten some land for me. On Sunday, the day before, it had rained all day and most of the night, but cleared up nicely that Monday morning. My tractor’s left tire caught into a deep rut, causing the tractor to lean way over— too much to stop the TO35 without its flipping or rolling over. I slammed the gear into low and began to turn hard to the right to get out of the rut. The left wheel must have caught me because next I was lying on the ground between the front and rear tires in the deep rut. I kicked myself out of the rut, but the wet ground was so slick that I slipped back under the tractor. There was no more time so I leaned way over to my right (I was on my back) so it could be an open casket funeral. The TO35 ran me over between my legs and over part of my torso (but not my arms and head). I got up, turned off the tractor and tried to get up the ridge to home. Everything got gray and I fell down, but I couldn’t lay down because of the dozer coming downhill following the tractor (I was sitting in sassafras growth about three or four feet high). The dozer operator saw me, ran back to the house and had my wife call for help.

“The EMS had to carry me strapped on a wire stretcher about a half mile through heavy brush to the ambulance. On the way to the hospital, the ambulance had to fight traffic, which would not move out of the way. (I no longer stop for funeral processions. Why do people stop for the dead and not the dying?) We made it to the hospital with a minute and a half to spare. My stomach and guts had been rolled into my chest cavity, breaking lots of arteries. My left hip was pulverized into small pieces. Months later I learned my back had also been broken. Because of my condition, I could not be moved to a bigger hospital without dying. I spent the next six weeks or so in traction. (My total time at the hospital was 51 days.) It was six months or so before the exterior fixators were removed and another six months or so before the holes from the fixators healed. Twice a day I had to burn the holes to kill the flesh growing from those holes (I still don’t eat much meat).

“I had no hospitalization and this episode took any money we had. The government wouldn’t help; the social security people said I was ineligible for help because I would eventually heal and had too many assets to qualify anyway. To this day, I have nothing but praise and admiration for the hospital staff. And I’m still paying off the bills. Hopefully I’ll live long enough to pay off the money owed. Before the accident, getting “public work” was difficult enough because of my age. Now it’s almost impossible even though I am physically capable of almost everything I could do before the accident. Mentally, my mind is as sharp as before, but I face a daily challenge of not letting prospective employers’ attitudes turn me against people in general. Six of the eight tractor accidents that week were fatal, and I sometimes wonder who was lucky.”

The Hardest Times Are the Holidays

“Eleven years ago my father was killed in a tractor rollover. He had just recently plowed the garden and not taken time to move the wheels on the tricycle tractor before beginning to mow hay. He was almost finished when he started up an embankment next to the creek when the tractor turned over pinning him underneath the seat. The tractor didn’t have a roll bar and seat belt on it and it was a fairly new tractor to him. It was hard for me after my father’s death as I cried almost every day for one year. The hardest times are the holidays when everyone else is home but him. My fathers [sic] tractor has been sold now. My family has learned the importance of having a roll bar and seat belt on tractors and the importance of not being in a hurry.”

Lots of Pain and Lots of Money

“I was driving my tractor like I do everyday. In less than a second, my cab-equipped tractor rolled over on its side. The ROPS kept me from being crushed to death, but my legs were broken when I slammed against the inside of the tractor cab. My medical bills were \$50,000 and I couldn’t work for 9 months. The ROPS saved my life. The seat belt could have saved me lots of pain and lots of money.”

Tractor Accident Survivor

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Tractor Accident Survivor: This young farmer wants others to be careful out there.

It's a farmer's worst nightmare.

You're mowing pastures. Your son is operating another tractor and rotary mower ahead of you. You see him going too close to a creek bank. You yell, but he doesn't hear you. The steep bank crumbles. The tractor, mower and your son drop out of sight.

This nightmare was real for Billy Jeffries of Edmonton, Ky. When he got to the edge of the creek bank, he saw his 13-year-old son, Joseph, with his leg pinned under the tractor. The rollover protective structure bar had kept the tractor from rolling and crushing the young man.

"Without the ROPS, Joseph would have been killed," says his father.

Billy ran to his mother's house and called the Metcalf County Fire and Rescue Squad. Again, Joseph was lucky. Because their farm was at the edge of town, the squad was there in five minutes. The rescuers were also trained and equipped to do the job. They pushed a flat air bag under the tractor and inflated it to lift the machine off of Joseph.

The teenager suffered a blood clot in his leg and burns to his neck and arm. He later needed an operation to remove the blood clot. After months of therapy, he's fully recovered, working with his dad on the family farm and active in his school FFA.

This year, Billy and Joseph participated in their local farm safety camp. Billy was a group leader, and Joseph shared his story with young safety campers.

With its hills, sinkholes and creeks, Kentucky has a high rate of tractor overturns. From 1994 to 1998, 64 Kentuckians were killed in these mishaps.

Nationwide, tractor overturns are the single greatest cause of death among agricultural workers under the age of 25 and over the age of 55. Investigations of farm fatalities in Kentucky suggest that 90% of tractor-related deaths could be prevented by using ROPS and seat belts.

"Now I tell everyone to make sure they have a ROPS on their tractor and to wear their seat belt," says Joseph.

He points out that he wasn't wearing his seat belt. He's thankful that the ROPS saved him from more serious injury and perhaps death. If Joseph had been wearing his seat belt, he might not have been pinned beneath the tractor. Safety experts say that for an operator's full protection, a tractor's safety equipment must include a ROPS and a seat belt, and the seat belt must be fastened.

Billy and Joseph still enjoy working together on the farm. They count themselves lucky that in the long run their nightmare had a reasonably happy ending.

By *BOYD KIDWELL*

Staying Alive