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By Marlene Lang

A Story for Labor Day

How about a Labor Day story, in honor of the holiday just observed?

My father was 36 years old when he died, three days after an on-the-job "accident."

I was one of six children he left behind in 1978.

"Accident" is in quotes because that is what the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) called it. I disagree, as did some of my father's co-workers. The death was suspicious at best, heinous and unconscionable at worst.

Daddy was fatally injured driving a fork lift for a manufacturer of industrial lift trucks and other machinery. When I was an infant he had worked for John Deere, spray painting tractors green. He left Deere's union shop to prepare for ministry work, but when my mother got cancer, our family left the training and my dad returned to factory work, but with another employer. The new job was at a non-union plant. My father was quick to point out to his fellow laborers that, should something happen to any one of them, their families would be ill-provided for.

We found out how ill. Wages were low, benefits were negligible.

My father had been gathering the signatures of his co-workers, aimed at bringing in a union organizer who would negotiate for better compensation. Dad told my mother that he had been called into the "big office" twice and told to "back off." The company owners were clear they did not want a union.

Imagine that.

Employers in the past did not want eight-hour work days, or minimum wages established or to pay overtime, but riots and decades of violence eventually forced their hand. Child labor was outlawed, basic safety legislated: There had to be more than one way out of the shirt factory if a fire started.

"I'm afraid for my life," my father told my mom after his last visit to the big office. My sensible mother responded by suggesting that he back off, but my dad, the idealist preacher, said, "I can't."

Within weeks of this conversation, Daddy was assigned to forklift duty in an area of the plant where large parts were transferred overhead on a pulley system. One of the heavy cables somehow collapsed right over the spot where my young father was working.

Daddy was crushed under the fallen parts. A helicopter rushed him to the trauma center at Madison General Hospital to treat his internal injuries. It was a Friday afternoon, and it appeared over the weekend that he might survive. He was even conscious long enough to write my brother a note: "Find out what really happened," he scribbled.

He died on Tuesday morning, Oct. 31, 1978 of peritonitis; the injury to his bowels took him.

I know only what the adults around me reported; I have never been shown a written record on this matter.

All I have is the account I was given as a teen; OSHA showed up at the factory to investigate the failure of safety, but the inspectors were not granted entrance to the plant until days later. After their investigation, OSHA's footmen ruled the fatal incident accidental. End of story, case closed, let's move on. Daddy's co-workers would not discuss the accident. One fellow turned ghostly white upon its mention by my brother many years later. "It was no accident," he told my brother. The only insurance coverage in play was state Workman's Compensation. The benefit was divided among six children, \$4,000 each, to give us a head start in our fatherless lives.

Years later, as an adult, I called the regional OSHA office in search of the incident report. I was told that it had been too long and that it would be impossible to find records from 1978. I persisted but no one in the entire Department of Labor seemed able to help me find out what really happened.

I cannot prove whether my father's death was accidental and that is why I am not stating the company's nor my father's name.

If my dad were alive today, he'd be 67 and would know his 18 grandchildren and his great-granddaughter.

I am told the plant where he died eventually did get a union. I try to remember that on Labor Day.