

## **A Man Called Grandma**

John started it. I took him in as a partner in my wood-cutting business. I said, "You don't cut wood with me without wearing a hardhat." He didn't argue with that. He knew it made sense. Even if you're so good that trees always fall exactly where you want them to, a top or a branch can break out of a tree and hit you, or a tree can fall into a green tree that throws the falling tree back to hit the man with a saw.

He didn't like it as well when I watched him work and said he was going to have to revise some of his techniques. He'd been falling trees longer than I had. I said, "It doesn't matter how long you've been doing it. Some of your work isn't as safe as it could be. I'm not sure I'm strong enough to carry you out of here if you get hurt or killed, so you go by my safety rules if you want to keep cutting on my contract."

Sometimes, after we sold a load of wood, we picked up my wife and daughters and drove to Sumpter and ate dinner in a restaurant. John usually drank a beer, or several. When he ordered the first beer, I held out my hand, and he deposited the keys to his rig in it. I wasn't, and my family wasn't riding with a driver who'd been drinking. John took all of it well, and it was all by agreement, but some time along the way, he started calling me Grandma. "Okay, Grandma, we do it your way."

I took a job as site manager of a Girl Scout camp in the Rocky Mountains. The camp director, counselors, everyone who works at the camp goes by a camp name. The site manager can or can't. I couldn't think of anything for a camp name, and I didn't care much about it, so as we started gearing up for resident camp, I was just Jon.

Then I had security problems. Too many people knew the combination of the gate lock, and some of them abused their privileges by coming in late. Somebody who came in late didn't lock the gate. I photocopied rules from the manual and distributed copies. I changed the combination and gave it only to authorized personnel.

I lectured everybody about security. I lectured again about visitors. "Read the rules. I have to know who's in camp. If somebody comes to visit without letting me know, they're unauthorized visitors. The counselor who brings the visitor in gets called on the carpet. Clear it with me first, and the visitor is

authorized.”

I upbraided the animal care specialist for tying the llamas wrong. “They have to be tethered on a swivel, so their ropes can’t wrap around anything, or they have to be watched. They could wind their ropes around those trees and choke to death.”

We had a staff meeting, and the camp director asked me, “What’s your camp name?”

I thought of John, and I said, “Grandma.” That caused surprise, so I explained about John; then I said, “I’m responsible for the safety of twenty-five counselors and up to two-hundred and fifty Girl Scouts, and I’m never going to give anyone any peace until I know they’re observing every rule about personal safety and camp security. John thought that concern for safety and the willingness to keep after it was a grandmotherly quality, and he was probably right, so call me Grandma.”

And members of the staff did. And they told the counselors, and the counselors called me Grandma. Most of them. A few of them just couldn’t do it, and that was fine. They called me Jon, and nobody objected. The counselors told many of the scouts, and some of the scouts called me Grandma and seemed delighted that this grizzling, bearded man answered quite naturally to that name.

And something happened that I couldn’t have predicted. That name helped the rest of the camp personnel and I be at ease with each other in a way that otherwise might have taken us weeks to work our way to. I did my best to manifest the positive attributes of a grandmother. It’s all part of my job, but somehow, being known as Grandma made it easier to reassure counselors and help work out ways to keep scouts and adults warm, fed, and at ease when a summer snowstorm weighted down our power lines and short-circuited them.

Bright blue flashes lighted up our small valley. Lights in our buildings dimmed, brightened, dimmed, and appliances went off and on. Then the electricity went off and stayed off all night and half the next day before electricians got it fixed.

The safety switches on the propane were electric and they shut off the gas when the electricity went off, so we didn’t have propane heat. We used the fireplace in the big lodge for heat and gathered everyone there until the electricity was turned on again. Grandma organized everything and reassured everyone that we would come though all problems in good shape, and maybe everyone had a little more confidence in my ability to take care of them because I was their grandma.

Being known to everyone as Grandma seemed to make it easier to work our way through all the emergencies that came up through the summer. There’s something reassuring in calling

Grandma for help.

Some of the counselors delighted in drawing me over in front of parents who hadn't met us before and calling me Grandma. It took practice to keep a straight face, to act totally natural about it, and we all took pride in achieving that.

That summer and that group of counselors are gone from the mountain, and most of this winter has passed. I'm starting to look forward to the time, early next summer, when all the counselors who have been hired meet and I stand up in front of them to explain rules, how to take care of kerosene lanterns, how to use fire extinguishers, and say, quite seriously, "My name's Grandma."