

Leah's Pony
By Elizabeth Friedrich
Illustrated by Michael Garland

The year the corn grew tall and straight, Leah's papa bought her a pony. The pony was strong and swift and sturdy, with just a snip of white at the end of his soft black nose. Papa taught Leah to place her new saddle right in the middle of his back and tighten the girth around his belly, just so.

The whole summer, Leah and her pony crossed through cloud-capped cornfields and chased cattle through the pasture.

Leah scratched that special spot under her pony's mane and brushed him till his coat glistened like satin.

Each day Leah loved to ride her pony into town just to hear Mr. B. shout from the door of his grocery store, "That's the finest pony in the whole county."

The year the corn grew no taller than a man's thumb, Leah's house became very quiet. Sometimes on those hot, dry nights, Leah heard Papa and Mama's hushed voices whispering in the kitchen. She couldn't understand the words but knew their sad sound.

Some days the wind blew so hard it turned the sky black with dust. It was hard for Leah to keep her pony's coat shining. It was hard for Mama to keep the house clean. It was hard for Papa to carry buckets of water for the sow and her piglets.

Soon Papa sold the pigs and even some of the cattle. "These are hard times," he told Leah with a puzzled look. "That's what these days are, all right, hard times."

Mama used flour sacks to make underwear for Leah. Mama threw dishwater on her drooping petunias to keep them growing. And, no matter what else happened, Mama always woke Leah on Saturday with the smell of fresh, hot coffee cake baking.

One hot, dry, dusty day grasshoppers turned the day to night. They ate the trees bare and left only twigs behind.

The next day the neighbors filled their truck with all they owned and stopped to say good-bye. "We're off to Oregon," they said. "It must be better there." Papa, Mama, and Leah waved as their neighbors wobbled down the road in an old truck overflowing with chairs and bedsprings and wire.

The hot, dry, dusty days kept coming. On a day you could almost taste the earth in the air, Papa said, "I have something to tell you, Leah, and I want you

to be brave. I borrowed money from the bank. I bought seeds, but the seeds dried up and blew away. Nothing grew. I don't have any corn to sell. Now I can't pay back the bank," Papa paused. "They're going to have an auction, Leah. They're going to sell the cattle and the chickens and the pickup truck."

Leah stared at Papa. His voice grew husky and soft. "Worst of all, they're going to sell my tractor. I'll never be able to plant corn when she's gone. Without my tractor, we might even have to leave the farm. I told you, Leah, these are hard times."

Leah knew what an auction meant. She knew eager faces with strange voices would come to their farm. They would stand outside and offer money for Papa's best bull and Mama's prize rooster and Leah's favorite calf.

All week Leah worried and waited and wondered what to do. One morning she watched as a man in a big hat hammered a sign into the ground in front of her house.

Leah wanted to run away. She raced her pony past empty fields lined with dry gullies. She galloped past a house with rags stuffed in broken windowpanes. She sped right past Mr. B. sweeping the steps outside his store.

At last Leah knew what she had to do. She turned her pony around and rode back into town. She stopped in front of Mr. B.'s store. "You can buy my pony," she said.

Mr. B. stopped sweeping and stared at her. "Why would you want to sell him?" he asked. "That's the finest pony in the county."

Leah swallowed hard. "I've grown a lot this summer," she said. "I'm getting too big for him."

Sunburned soil crunched under Leah's feet as she walked home alone. The auction had begun. Neighbors, friends, strangers—everyone clustered around the man in the big hat. "How much for this wagon?" boomed the man. "Five dollars. Ten dollars. Sold for fifteen dollars to the man in the green shirt."

Papa's best bull.

Sold.

Mama's prize rooster.

Sold.

Leah's favorite calf.

Sold.

Leah clutched her money in her hand. "It has to be enough," she whispered to herself. "It just has to be."

“Here’s one of the best items in this entire auction,” yelled the man in the big hat. “Who’ll start the bidding at five hundred dollars for this practically new, all-purpose Farmall tractor? It’ll plow, plant, fertilize, and even cultivate for you.

It was time. Leah’s voice shook. “One dollar.”

The man in the big hat laughed. “That’s a low starting bid if I ever heard one.” he said. “Now let’s hear some serious bids.”

No one moved. No one said a word. No one even seemed to breathe.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this tractor is a beauty! I have a bid of only one dollar for it. One dollar for this practically new Farmall tractor! Do I hear any other bids?

Again no one moved. No one said a word. No one even seemed to breathe.

“This is ridiculous!” the man’s voice boomed out from under his hat into the silence. “Sold to the young lady for one dollar.”

The crowd cheered. Papa’s mouth hung open. Mama cried. Leah proudly walked up and handed one dollar to the auctioneer in the big hat.

“That young lady bought one fine tractor for one very low price,” the man continued. “Now how

much am I bid for this flock of healthy young chickens?”

“I’ll give you ten cents,” offered a farmer who lived down the road.

“Ten cents! Ten cents is mighty cheap for a whole flock of chickens,” the man said. His face looked angry.

Again no one moved. No one said a word. No one even seemed to breathe.

“Sold for ten cents!”

The farmer picked up the cage filled with chickens and walked over to Mama. “These chickens are yours,” he said.

The man pushed his big hat back on his head. “How much for this good Ford pickup truck?” he asked.

“Twenty-five cents,” yelled a neighbor from town.

Again no one moved. No one said a word. No one even seemed to breathe.

“Sold for twenty-five cents!” The man in the big hat shook his head. “This isn’t supposed to be a penny auction!” he shouted.

The neighbor paid his twenty-five cents and took the keys to the pickup truck. “I think these will start

your truck,” he whispered as he dropped the keys into Papa’s shirt pocket.

Leah watched as friends and neighbors bid a penny for a chicken or a nickel for a cow or a quarter for a plow. One by one, they gave everything back to Mama and Papa.

The crowds left. The sign disappeared. Chickens scratched in their coop, and cattle called for their corn. The farm was quiet. Too quiet. No familiar whinny greeted Leah when she entered the barn. Leah swallowed hard and straightened her back.

That night in Leah’s hushed house, no sad voices whispered in the kitchen. Only Leah lay awake, listening to the clock chime nine and even ten times. Leah’s heart seemed to copy its slow, sad beat.

The next morning Leah forced open the heavy barn doors to start her chores. A loud whinny greeted her. Leah ran and hugged the familiar furry neck and kissed the white snip of a nose. “You’re back!” she cried. “How did you get here?”

Then Leah saw the note with her name written in big letters:

Dear Leah,

This is the finest pony in the county. But he's a little bit small for me and a little bit big for my grandson.

He fits you much better.

Your friend,

Mr. B.

P.S. I heard how you saved your family's farm. These hard times won't last forever.

And they didn't

Think about it

1. How do Leah and her neighbors save the family's farm?
2. What is Mr. B. like? How do you know?
3. How do you think the people at the auction feel when Leah buys the tractor? Explain your answer.

