



Pop Cliff – One Me and a Million Bees

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I was screaming for Mom-mom at the top of my lungs as I ran for the front door.

Flailing at the swarming horde as I tried to outrun them to reach the safety of the house, my little seven year-old legs pumping for all they were worth. I didn't win. I made it to the front door, where Mom-mom met me, but so did the bees.

She quickly pulled me inside, and tried to get me to stand still long enough to get my t-shirt off – trying to pull it over my head...

Last year Pop just let me ride on the dozer with him, but I was a year older now, (almost a “big” kid), and this year he promised to teach me to drive it.

Today, he was riding with me, but I was the one pulling the levers! This was going to be great!

All last summer I would sit on that big square driver's seat – scrunched beside him, as Pop operated the controls and levers that made this huge steel monster do his bidding. I mean, to me it was a roaring steel monster – to him it was just a bulldozer, the way he made his living.

He was a contractor, he had a couple International's, TD14's, that he used to clear land, fill marshes, knock down trees, and anything else people needed a big dozer to do.

His land was generally level with the land around it. The house, next to the Elk's Club pool, the front yard with the adjacent fields on Schumaker Drive, and the shop with the woods behind it that went all the way to Park Drive, were all level land.

But the back side, behind the house and down to the left side of the shop, was a steep drop off down to the lowland of the City Park.

Pop welcomed loads of fill that he could push over the edge to fill some of that lowland, and expand his yard. Whenever he could get it for free that is.

He always tried to get good stuff – fill that would compact well to build firm ground, but sometimes some junk went over the edge too. Like, scrap steel, used construction timber, or empty 5-gal. oil cans.

Last week Mr. Bennett had sent nine truckloads of fill to Pop's house. Most of it was just dirt, but some was a mixture of dirt, gravel, busted pieces of concrete, and all sorts of other debris that comes from a building demolition site, and it was all sitting there waiting to be pushed over the bank. That was what we were going to do today.

We went to work on those piles with Pop doing the driving first, and me sitting beside him. He was showing me how to top the piles – drive over the dump truck size load and scrape a couple feet off the pile at a time, and push it forward and over the edge of the bank. Even for a big dozer like the 14, these piles were too big to try to push all at once. You had to work at them, tear them down a blade-full at a time.

For a little kid like me it was awesome.

Watching him drive that dozer up the side of the pile, nose and blade pointing to the sky, then dropping the blade just in time to catch the top couple feet, and rumbling over and down until we were treading level ground with a big load of fill rolling before us, heading for the edge.

Then he would back up, around the pile this time – line-up the dozer blade and do it again, until that particular pile was gone.

He was showing me how to keep the blade up just a little, about a foot, as you approached the pile, and then “finesse” it downward as you climbed the pile, so you ended up going down the backside with a full blade.

Black smoke belching from the stack as the diesel roared with increasing power to handle the building load in front of it. Awesome! (awesome was an appropriate word for most things Pop-related) Pop was 10-feet tall, and his steel monster was unstoppable.

He did this to the first two or three piles, pushing them down to level ground – then the next couple he only pushed about half the pile, leaving mini-loads for me to try.

“You ready?” he asked.

Oh Yeah! – I thought in my head. Aloud I just said “Yep.”

He lined me up on one of those mini-piles, then stood up on the sideboard, holding on to the overhead cable housing for support.

“All yours” he said.

The magic of those words was indescribable. From second-grader to dozer operator with just two words! I had the seat all to myself! MY hands were on the levers! I controlled the throttle and blade!

Now what do I do?

Ok, no sweat. Scoot all the way forward so I can reach the gear-clutch pedal and push it to the floor. Left hand moves the gear shift lever into first. Let out the pedal and scoot back on the seat. Right hand forward to raise the throttle lever for power.

The engine roared! No, I don't need full-power yet, back down on the throttle a bit. Pull the track-clutch lever all the way back to start rolling. The engine roared as the governor kicked in for more power as the blade dug into the flat ground in front of us.

Wait! I forgot to raise the blade!

Left hand grabs the track-clutch lever, pushing forward to disengage and stop the dozer. Whew!

Pop was hanging on, but at least he was smiling.

Ok, right hand up, over my head to move the winch lever in to raise the blade – just a little, a foot. No too much, not that high, lever out to drop it back down a little. Right! Yep that's good, about a foot. Now back to the track-clutch, all the way back – and off we rumbled.

Now, both hands on the steering levers.

Going a little crooked. A little pull on the left lever. Too much, let go! Back a little on the right lever, ok, that's better, the pile is in front of us. I'm almost over the top before I remember to drop the blade.

Now, down the backside – with an empty blade. Darn!

Ok. Track-clutch forward, dozer stops. Scoot forward, gear-clutch pedal to the floor and gear-shift in reverse, ok, pedal out, scoot back, and pull the track-clutch lever. Back we go, up and over the pile, in reverse, dragging the blade that I forgot to raise. Again!

Sure is a lot to remember, it didn't look this hard when Pop did it.

A dozen more passes and I was beginning to get the hang of it. The only touchy part was judging when to stop. Most of those passes ended up with the push still hanging at the lip of the bank, not quite all the way over the edge. But it was a long way to the bottom. Better practice a little more before I got too close.

Pop took over and cut the rest of those piles down to mini-piles – my size. He even cleaned up the bank edges from all those hanging pushes I had left.

Riding in the seat beside him again, it was amazing how easy he made it look. He used just a tap on the winch lever, a small tug on a steering lever, or a touch on the throttle bar. I knew now that it wasn't as easy as it looked. He made that dozer roar or purr – power when he needed it, a low idle when he didn't.

The blade seemed to have a mind of its own, knowing exactly how much to raise or lower to get the perfect load.

With me it had been as jerky as a wagon with two square wheels, off-side at that. Pulled by a donkey that didn't know whether to stand up or sit down. Run full-bore, or creep with a limp. But it was still great to do it! Someday I would get as good as Pop!

It was when we took a break for lunch that I found out Mom-mom had been watching us the whole time.

"Cliff, he's too young to be driving that dozer!" was her only comment.

But Pop said I was old enough, adding, "I'm right there if he needs me."

After lunch it was back to the dozer, with me driving again, and Pop riding the side board right beside me.

This was great! I was getting smoother with each pass. Pop only needed one hand on the cable housing now. I was no longer bouncing with square wheels or lurching like a car running out of gas. Even my blade work had improved, I was getting good blade loads and there weren't nearly as many chunks dug out of the ground as before. Plus my edges were clean – my loads were going all the way over the lip of the bank.

I quickly discovered that I didn't need to work the throttle so much, the engine governor would kick in when I needed more power, and automatically back-off when I didn't. I could go easier on the in-and-out of the track-clutch lever, using both steering levers as brakes to slow down when I needed instead.

Gee! Maybe I would be as good as Pop by this afternoon.

Unknowingly I was about to prove the truth of the old adage; *'Pride goeth before the fall'*, (or something like that), and Pop was to be reminded of the dangers of over-confidence.

Now, it's easy to see, but at the time all I was thinking was – Life is good! And I guess Pop was feeling a little proud of his first grandson too.

I had pushed all but the last couple of piles – pretty smooth work too, when Pop tapped me on the shoulder and said, "You got it?"

"Yep" I nodded.

I don't remember why, maybe he needed a drink, or some more chew, (Redman's Moist – gross!), but for whatever reason, he hopped off the dozer and stood aside, watching me push a couple more passes ALL by myself. I must have been doing ok, because when I turned to look again, he was heading off to the shop.

Wow, I grew another six inches taller, and years older instantly, as I realized I was really doing it. I was driving that dozer – Pop’s big steel monster, all by myself.

I was on the next-to-last push when it happened. I don’t know if it was over-confidence, day-dreaming, panic, or just a mistake, but as I came to the bank edge, I pulled back on the steering brakes instead of pushing the track-clutch to stop.

Which only slowed the dozer, it didn’t stop it.

I know what happened next was panic – instead of shoving the track-clutch lever, I stomped down on the gear-clutch pedal. Nothing! Over the edge I went.

The bank wasn’t a vertical drop-off. It was sloped. A steep slope, but still a slope.

Riding that dozer down was like coming off the crest of a roller coaster. The tracks were spinning so fast on the way to the bottom that they acted like a brake on the engine RPM’s. It conked out just as the blade slammed into the base of a tree at the bottom of the bank. I thought the dozer was going to topple over on top of me, but it didn’t. I was lucky.

Everything was so quiet. I was still in the seat, sort-of, more standing up than sitting down – my little white-knuckled hands still holding on to the steering levers, and my right foot still ramming the gear-clutch pedal through the floorboard.

Then my world exploded – again!

When the dozer blade slammed into the tree, it also sliced open one of those old 5-gal. oil cans that had been down here for years.

This one had become the peaceful home of a large hive of Honey Bees. A million of them. And it was no longer peaceful. They roared out of that busted hive looking for their home wrecker – me, and they spotted me pretty quickly too!

I let go of everything – fast, and scrambled over the back of the dozer, leaping off the winch housing and clawing on all fours trying to get up the bank.

If you can, try to picture my little butt, clad in loose shorts, poking up in the air, as my hands and feet scrambled and peddled, trying to get me to the top. That was what the bees saw.

I made it to the top alright, but not without a lot of help from those million bees.

I was trying to do too many things at one time. Knock off the bees that were on me, swat away the ones that were trying to get on me, spit out the ones that flew into my mouth, run for the house, scream for Mom-mom – it was just too much.

In the end, I was just screaming for Mom-mom at the top of my lungs as I ran for the front door. Flailing at the swarming horde as I tried to outrun them to reach the safety of the house, my little seven year-old legs pumping for all they were worth.

I didn't win. I made it to the front door, where Mom-mom met me, but so did the bees. She quickly pulled me inside, and tried to get me to stand still long enough for her to get my t-shirt off, trying to pull it over my head.

Bees were swarming on her too, and falling out of my shirt to the floor. Crawling and buzzing everywhere.

She finally got my shirt off and was using it to brush the bees off my bare body, my shorts and shoes, out of my hair, and using it to swat at the ones buzzing around both of us.

I was crying and screaming, and just generally out of control.

She pulled me over to the stair landing and tried to get me to sit down so she could get my shorts off, but every time she pushed me down, I screamed and bounced right back up.

“Be still!” she said, and pushed me down again.

No way! Another scream and I bounced right back up again.

Finally, in exasperation, she just yanked them down while I was still standing up! Underwear and all!

It was soon clear why I kept bouncing back up. Dozens of squashed bees fell to the floor – out of my shorts and underwear, and dozens more were still crawling on them. Every time she shoved me down on that landing, I was squashing more bees, with my butt, and getting stung by every one of them!

When Pop finally rushed in the front door, there I stood, butt-naked, except for my shoes and rolled-down socks. Tears streaming, body trembling, and dozens and dozens of red-welted bee stings all over my body. Head to toe, and all those sweet tender areas in between. At least he didn't laugh this time.

Once more I was lucky. I didn't have any kind of reaction to the bee stings. A lot of pain and minor swelling, but no major life-threatening reactions like some people have.

It may not have been hundreds, but it was dozens and dozens of stings. The worst agony, after the fact, was when Mom-mom had to use tweezers to pull out the stingers of the ones that had left a little something behind. Just for me.

Ps. Pop had to trailer his other dozer home from the job, and pay a second driver, to help him winch “my” dozer up from the bottom of “my” bank.

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