



## Pop Cliff – The First Summer

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*Author's Note: this is #2 in the Growing Up With Pop Cliff series.*

Dad dropped me off on the very first day of summer vacation. I had just finished the First Grade, I was six years-old, and I was going to spend the whole summer with Pop Cliff and Mom Grace.

They lived in a two-story country-style house right next to the Elk's Club pool, with expansive open fields in front, and a huge drop-off to the low lands of the Salisbury Park and Zoo behind. It wasn't quite like a cliff, but the slope was so steep you had to climb it on all fours.

Pop was constantly trucking in fill material from some of his excavation jobs, and bulldozing it over the edge to expand the useable area of his yard; fill dirt, busted-up concrete, and anything else that could be used to fill in the low land. A fair share of junk found its way down there too. Old bulldozer parts, scrap steel, construction timbers, even empty 5-gallon oil cans.

It was one of these empty oil cans that would play a part in one of my most painful memories of Pop's house.

Pop was a bulldozing contractor. He had a pretty good size work shop building, (which made for great explorations by his new six year-old boarder), and it seemed like he was always working on one of his dozers or work cars in the yard beside the house. His "good" car was always a Chrysler, (he wouldn't own anything but a Chrysler), and his *work* car was usually an older one that used to be his "good" car.

That is until he started buying used Rambler station wagons. They were rugged, and had plenty of room for all the stuff he needed for his bulldozing work. Mainly 5-gal. oil cans, 3-gal. grease buckets, spare parts, a chainsaw, and a huge toolbox. (the tools used to work on bulldozers were big)

It seemed like those Ramblers were always breaking down though. When one was too far gone to keep fixing, he would just go out and find another used one, keeping the old one around for spare parts. He was pretty hard on those old Ramblers, driving them into the rough ground of freshly cleared forest land just like they were heavy-duty 4-wheel drives built for the task. Which, obviously they weren't.

The point being, Pop Cliff was very mechanically inclined, and had plenty of tools and stuff that a young kid would find fascinating.

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Knowing I was coming for the summer, he found one of those kid's pedal tractors somewhere and thought it would be good for me to play with around the yard. A three-wheeler, all steel with solid rubber tires. Not like the plastic kind kids get now days.

But the pedal chain was missing, and instead of just getting a new chain, Pop decided we could put a motor on it instead of using the pedals to make it go.

Our first project that summer was hooking up some power to my new kid's tractor

Most six year-olds would get something like a battery-powered 6 mph Power Wheels or something – not me. We're talking about a 5 hp Briggs & Stratton gasoline powered, pulley-belt-driven, no-brakes kid's tractor!

Most of the drive parts were made from the pulley system of an old washing machine, and with all the stuff he had in his bulldozer workshop – what he couldn't scavenge, he made.

The motor sat right behind the rider's seat, (the seat was a kid's size version of those triangular metal farm tractor seats), attached to a flat board he bolted to the tractor frame. I mean *right behind* the driver's seat. If I leaned back too far I got burnt on the hot motor.

He welded a pulley on the rear tractor axle and used a v-belt to connect it to the motor pulley. Then he attached a special pulley assembly he made to apply the tension needed to transfer the power from the spinning motor to the tractor-axle. Similar to what some people would call a jack-shaft, except that this assembly was hinged to the mounting board, with a handle, (another part from the old washer), that I could pull to tighten the belt tension and make the tractor move forward, or release to make it stop.

It was only a minor concern, but this motorized kid's tractor lacked two usually necessary components; a throttle, and brakes! When you started the motor, it ran at whatever speed the throttle was set on to get it started, and because it was an old, hard to start motor, and that was usually full-throttle. That meant that when I pulled the tension pulley lever – I went from standing still to fast, - very fast. Not a problem for me, I loved it. As for the missing brakes, Pop just said to release the tension lever and put my feet down, Flintstones-style.

Unfortunately for me, Pop has been an early riser all his life, like dawn-type early. Not what I was used to. Like most young kids, I liked my sleep, but getting such an early start meant *our* project was finished and ready to test right after lunch. Out to the driveway we went.

That's when we discovered a small design flaw - weight distribution.

With that heavy Briggs motor projected from the back, when I let go of the front of the tractor, up it went, and there it sat. The motor board resting on the ground and the front wheel dangling in the air. I was crushed, but Pop had an answer – counterweight. I just needed more weight on the front end.

He came out of the shop with an empty tin Maxwell House coffee can and three bulldozer track pins. A track pin is solid steel. About 10 inches long, 2 inches diameter, and weighs about 10 pounds. He wired that coffee can to the front of the tractor and stuffed it with those track pins.

Bingo! It worked. Just like the counterweight systems on real farm tractors. Except that these were sitting in a can on top of the tractor hood, in plain sight. Pop even told me that since I was using a Maxwell House can, and displaying their brand name, they would probably send me a royalty check for the free advertising.

I looked for that check for two whole summers.

Time for a test drive.

Pop had a tear-drop shaped drive way in front of the house that was mostly hard-packed dirt, but there was also a lot of sand in some places. I could make a circle around it, almost like a real race track.

He even gave me a pair of his Acetylene cutting goggles to wear. I didn't care that the glass in them was so dark I could barely see - they made me look like a real race car driver!

Uh-oh. This part of the driveway was deep loose sand, and when I turned the steering wheel, that single front tractor wheel just went sideways – plowing a furrow in the sand, while me and the tractor kept going straight.

Straight into a big clump of Azalea bushes.

But at least they stopped us, because as the bushes pushed me backwards off the seat and onto that hot motor, they also caused me to release pressure on the tension pulley, which stopped the motor power to the drive wheels. I didn't know the worst jolt was yet to come.

As I twisted to get off the tractor, out of the clutches of the Azalea bushes, and away from the hot motor that was burning through my thin summer t-shirt, I accidentally put my hand down on top of the motor, right on the sparkplug.

Well at least I was off the tractor.

The muscle spasm from the sparkplug shock landed me several feet away from both the bushes and the tractor. Which, by the way, was still running. Good ol' dependable Briggs & Stratton.

There's more.

Pop was running to help me, but when he saw that I was getting up and was alright, the image of me trying to get away from those bushes and hot motor, and then putting my hand on the spark plug was too much for him. He just stopped in mid-stride and started laughing so hard he had tears in his eyes. That was HIS mistake ...

...because Mom Grace had been watching my test drive from the front door.

She was dashing out the door to what she knew had to be her poor little grandson's dead body when she saw *HER HUSBAND* standing there laughing at my tragedy.

I think that was the only time I ever heard her cuss. All she said was, "Damn you Cliff!" but for her that was like a twenty minute sailor's tirade. I'm pretty sure Pop slept on the couch that night.

But I was alright after a few minutes, and learning to control my new motorized tractor just involved a short learning curve, and the good sense not to try to turn in the loose sand.

Plus keeping my hand off that spark plug! I have to admit it took a couple more jolts that summer before I remembered to remember not to put my hand back there to get off the tractor.

I spent a lot of great summer mornings and afternoons proudly parading by the chain-link fence around the Elk's pool so all the other kids could see the magnificent motorized tractor that MY grandfather had built for me.

Plus I wanted all the Maxwell House visibility I could get. I wanted that royalty check.

That's also the day I learned getting a little hurt could have its upside. Mom Grace made Pop go out and get me French fries and pizza, (he hated pizza, could not even stand to have the smell in the car), and ice cream for dinner that night. Come to think of it, those dinner instructions may have been the only words she spoke to him for the next couple days.

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