



Pop Cliff – The Chicken Did It

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Author's Note: This is #4 in the Growing Up With Pop Cliff Series

“The chicken did it,” I sobbed. Over and over, as my little six year-old body was wracked with burning pain, that’s all I could say, “The chicken did it.”

Mom Grace tried to calm me down so she could examine my leg, but I didn’t want her to touch it. There were pieces of skin just hanging loose.

She had to remove those and clean the rest of it, but I wailed like I was dying every time I even thought she was going to touch it.

Pop Cliff was gone that day. I don’t remember why I wasn’t able to go with him, but some days were like that. Some days he had business that didn’t accommodate a little kid tagging along.

Spending my first summer with Pop Cliff was a great adventure. As an independent bulldozing contractor, if he wanted his young grandson, (his first), tagging along on the job, then I did.

Back in the 1950’s, OSHA and the Insurance companies – or some “regulating” government bureau, weren’t the “kings” of the job site that they are now. So I went to work with Pop almost every day, and spent the time riding in the dozer seat with him, or target shooting with my rifle, a 22 cal. single-shot Pop had given me earlier that summer

He had a couple dozers that first year, both Internationals –TD14’s with 12-foot blades. One cable-blade and one hydraulic-blade. I liked the cable-blade best because it had a heavy steel enclosed cable channel overhead, from the blade winch on the back all the way to the front where the cable came out over rolling pulley wheels and attached to the blade.

All that apparatus made it look bigger than the other dozer, and when you are riding a roaring steel monster –bigger is better.

That’s what riding a dozer with Pop felt like too. These were pretty big dozers, not as big as some of the ones Caterpillar made, like the huge D-9, but still big enough to rumble into the woods and knock down all but the most massive trees.

Sometimes he had to use his chain saw to cut down a really big one, and dynamite the stump later when the lot was cleared, but mostly we just rolled in and bulldozed them over.

Consider this; the rumbling roar of that big diesel engine causing the whole machine to shake

and vibrate, belching dark exhaust from the vertical stack, and me climbing up on cold steel track plates that were almost as big as cafeteria trays, to get to the larger-than-life man sitting up there controlling this beast we were about to ride into the forest.

For a six year-old boy, this was nirvana.

Grabbing the track, I climbed up to the seat with Pop. The seat of power where he pulled the levers that controlled the power of the big diesel engine and blade.

Now days, most pieces of heavy equipment have steel and glass enclosed cabs with heat and air conditioning, and the controls are buttons and joy stick-like levers. Not then. Our seat of power was an open square-cushioned bench seat, and the controls were real steel levers coming up through the floorboard, and massive manual foot pedals.

There were three levers and a gear shift coming up from the floor. The one on the left was the track-clutch lever, it made the dozer go and stop. The two in the middle were steering levers. To steer the dozer left or right, you pulled back on the corresponding lever, which applied a braking force that slowed down the appropriate track, while the opposite track continued speed. That's how tracked dozers turn, they pivot.

The gear shift lever was between the steering levers, and the shift-clutch pedal was on the floor, on the right. When you wanted to change gears, you had to press down that steel pedal and use the gear shift to change the gear, then release the pedal – just like in a truck or car.

The throttle was a smaller horizontal lever coming out of the “dashboard,” you moved it up or down to make the beast roar. The dashboard was a simple affair with a starter button, an oil pressure gauge, and the throttle. No complicated gauge sets or calibrated response meters. A button to awaken the beast, and a dial to watch its blood pressure, that's all Pop needed.

The last lever was the most important one - the winch lever. It controlled the dozer's blade, up or down, and how much. It was a horizontal bar that protruded from the back of the dozer, forward, over the operator's right shoulder.

Unlike the other controls – which were pretty much brute force levers; in or out, pull or push, get a full grip and move it, – the winch lever was a finesse control.

I can still see it now, Pop with is right hand raised to that lever, just a couple fingers on it to tap a little left for up, or a little right for down, controlling that blade to fractions of inches as we rumbled along.

That was my seat of power when I rode the dozer with Pop. Tossing and bouncing, ducking branches, and bulldozing through the trees.

Life was good!

But I didn't like the snakes very much! And the wooded flatland of the Eastern Shore has a lot of

snakes. Not a lot of poisonous ones, but a lot of Black snakes, (Big Ones!), and smaller Woods or Garden snakes.

Of course, with our beast rumbling through their home, they did a lot of moving. They were even in the trees. It wasn't unusual to see a big Black snake come thrashing by me, some part of its body caught in the track plates as they rolled over the ground, or having one of the Woods snakes falling onto the dozer from the trees we were knocking down.

Mostly they just fell on some part of the dozer, but once in awhile they would fall right onto the seat or floorboard where we were.

Nope, me and snakes didn't get along very well, but maybe that's why Pop loved them so much.

In later years, after Pop had taught me to drive the dozers, he would let me do some clearing by myself. He would just walk along behind or beside the dozer, watching to make sure I was doing it right, or jumping up to help if I needed it, (he could climb on a moving dozer easier and quicker than most people could on one that's standing still).

But if he saw a snake, he was like a cat after a mouse, and before I knew it he would have grabbed that snake and tossed it right up on the seat with me!

Somebody had to go!

Me and the snake could not occupy the same space. But I couldn't just jump off a moving dozer, so most of the time it was like a scene from a ballet ...

– both of us pirouetting to get away from each other.

I would be out of that seat and standing on one of the sideboards in a flash, or standing on the seat or scrambling onto the fuel tank behind it – depending on where the snake landed – while still trying to hang on to whichever control lever I needed to control at the moment.

In the meantime, Pop would be over there dying with laughter. Tears streaming out of his eyes. Looking back, I'm probably lucky I survived those summers with Pop Cliff. But I am sure I was lucky to have had them.

But, back to the chicken and the match ...

I couldn't go with Pop that day, so I had the whole day to explore and get into stuff. Pop's work shop was a treasure trove of nooks and crannies to explore, and cool stuff to mess with. It was also a pretty good-sized building, big enough to drive a dozer in to work on.

In case you don't remember, Pop's house was on acreage of land. Not like a suburban lot with houses next to each other.

His work shop was about a hundred yards from the house, and there was a big cleared lot behind it where he kept his construction and heavy equipment, and all the other things that go with an excavating and land clearing business.

Stacks of marsh mats to climb on, piles of big steel equipment parts to scramble over, and fuel cans and tanks to thump. A veritable playground for an independent six year-old like me.

Sometimes he even had farm animals too! You never knew what Pop was going to bring home. Like a crate of live chickens, (he cleared a lot of land for new chicken houses, so there was a ready supply of chickens running around), or a couple boar hogs, (that's another story by itself).

Once he even brought home a pony, but that didn't work out. It was a mean one, and one of us had to go. Mom Grace decided that. Good Bye Mr. Pony, go bite someone else. No more nips on Mom-Mom's favorite grandson.

But the chickens get the blame this time. It's their own fault for ambling all around the yard.

I was exploring Pop's shop when I found a partially filled 5-gal. can of gasoline. Boys, and fire. This isn't going to turn out good.

Besides the sparker for his torches, Pop also had a box of those wooden strike-anywhere kitchen matches in the shop to light them, or whatever else he might need to light. And I found them.

Now I had gas and matches. Hmmm... A little more looking around and I found another one of those infamous tin Maxwell House coffee cans. I took it to the front of the shop where he drove the dozers in, and found a clear spot on the floor where nothing else could catch fire, (I was a "safe" firebug).

All the while a couple of those chickens were walking around the shop too. Pecking and scratching.

I poured a little gas in that coffee can, struck a match, and Bingo!, I had my own little puddle of liquid flames dancing and fluttering in the semi-darkness of the shop.

I heated little metal rods and "wood-burned" my initials in the shop workbench, I melted little rubber and plastic pieces of stuff, and just did whatever other stuff a kid could think of to do with a can of fire.

After a while it was time to move onto something else. I was ready to put out my fire and go play in the yard. Maybe ride my motorized kid's tractor. Here's where the "kid" part comes in. I didn't know that you can't put out a gas fire with water.

We are all very lucky that I had only poured a little gas into the coffee can, and a lot of it had burned-up while I played with the fire, because when I poured the water I had scooped up from a rain bucket outside the shop onto that fire – flames splashed everywhere!

I was dressed in shorts, a t-shirt, and tennis shoes and socks. Most of the splashing gas flames went onto the bare floor and quickly went out, but a huge glob of it splashed on my right leg, covering my shin and foot from the just below the knee and down. As I was dancing away from the flames I grabbed one of Pop's shop rags and swatted out the flames on my leg and shoe.

Right then, I wasn't in pain yet, but I was terrified by what had just happened.

It was while I was thinking everything was ok, all the flames were out, that I looked at the shop rag in my hand and really freaked out. It had big pieces of skin hanging from it. My skin! I looked at my leg and my shin was red and bubbly, with loose pieces of skin on, and hanging from it, like pieces of wet tissue paper.

"Mom-Mom, Mom-Mom," I was yelling at the top of my lungs as I raced to the house. She met me at the door, took one look at my leg, and immediately pulled me in the house and sat me down on the first stair landing so she could look at me closely.

Again I was lucky. The gas flames had burned the layers of skin down to the meat, but I had swatted them out before they could cook the meat like what happens to victims of a house fire. Even as she was trying to sooth and calm me down, and I was sitting there sobbing and scared, my evil little mind was working.

After a few minutes, I calmed down enough for her to go get what she needed; some cool damp clean cloths, some butter, and gauze bandages.

By the time she came back, the devil in me had a plan. I knew I would be in trouble for playing with fire, and like most little kids trying to avoid punishment, lying seemed like a good idea. Except that I was not a very good liar, a creative one, but not a very good one.

When she had the immediate issue taken care of, she asked what happened. I didn't even hesitate, I was ready.

"The chicken did it Mom-Mom, I knocked over a box of matches in Pop's shop and before I could get them picked up one of the chickens scratched it, and some gas caught fire."

Epilogue:

I'm not sure if it's a testament to how much she loved her first grandson, or her wisdom, but she never even blinked, never pressed me for the truth, and even told Pop Cliff that's how it happened when he came home that night.

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