

Summer Job

I have never been a morning person. The end of the school year meant the end of adhering to the classic workday. I'd usually wake up, eat lunch, then start working. All of my jobs had off-hours. Since I was 15, I cleaned offices on the weekends and worked at a restaurant as dishwasher, then as server (usually 4-11 PM). But my summer job, or rather *seasonal* job, was a position I labeled "Grounds Maintenance Manager." Team of 1, flexible hours, transportation and fuel provided. Simply put, I mowed grass and weed-trimmed my dad's slew of properties. He owns a lot of out buildings. And he has this preoccupation with keeping his properties looking neat, which included weed-eating around an old rotten outhouse that was listing hard to starboard and sinking slowly stern-first into the swamp.



(The outhouse may not be usable, but the grass around it sure looks great, doesn't it?)

Occasionally I did other odd jobs like fixing fences, piling brush, raking and hauling overgrown grass to the cows, painting, trash removal, equipment transport, finding tools I'd misplaced, fixing things I'd broken, etc. But living in the humid flatlands with plenty of lakes, rivers, creeks, swamps, and rain (most years), the grass grows whether you want it

to or not, so mostly I sat on my 25-horse powered Simplicity (with a hydraulic lift on the 5 foot mower deck, and locking rear differential for ditches and swampy parts) and tried my best to avoid rocks, remember to check the oil, and tried to make what I did look difficult so I wouldn't seem so replaceable.

I had a rotation. It was usually based on location to additional properties, also factoring in depth to the water table, rain received in the last week, and what my dad said needed to be done. I had to prioritize, make the travel time between properties minimal, and factor in time to weed-eat every other trip. I also had to try not to break anything; even so, I was still on a first-name basis with the local farm implement repair guy: Jimmy.

Before I had my license, I had my big mower. And a job to do. And miles between jobs. So, my dad got me a Farmall Cub Cadette (the baby tractor in my dad's fleet of tractors) and a big red 8-foot oak plank trailer.



The road most of my jobs were on was a 1.5 lane, no center line, no shoulder lines kind of road. So after my lunch, I'd pack my fanny pack (don't laugh) with my Walkman (extra batteries), favorite cassettes (this was before portable CD players had skip-delay), headphones, bug spray, Mountain Dew, and snacks and hop on my bike to wherever I'd finished up previously and stashed my tractor, trailer, and mower. Usually I'd try to park at the Planer Building. It had the most amenities of all the locations I mowed and I loved it there.

Behind the door was an old white Frigidaire; probably 1930's-ish. Still worked great. And that was the end of the luxuries the Planer Building had. Uninsulated, no landline phone (my dad did have a bag phone in his truck for emergencies, but it hardly had service anywhere), no bathroom; just a place where work got done. There was no other reason to be there.

I'd stick my Mountain Dew in the fridge if I was going to mow the Planer or the rental down the road. The Planer took 4 hours to mow, between the upper area on the hilltop and the lower swampy area around my dad's rows of lumber piles, stacked anywhere from 4 to 15 feet high. When I was younger, I'd climbed the tallest stacks, using the stickers as a ladder. (Queen of the Hill!) The flatlands offered few vantage points, so I took them where I could find them. Trees, gravel or topsoil mounds, deer stands, the top of the cab of the dump truck...

But now I had a job to do. My mower was parked by the west door, so I unfastened the sliding door and opened it to let more light in while I got set up. I took off my fanny pack and wrapped it around the mower seat's backrest. I found a full gas can, got my funnel

(because I could hardly handle 40 pounds of gasoline and frequently splashed), and filled the tank behind the seat, trying not to pour too fast and remembered to check the oil. Good to go.

I sat on the seat and got out my Walkman and headphones and fenagled my special blue ear protectors over the headphones. I always hung them on the steering wheel of the mower and got rather rabidly offended when they went missing. One year for Christmas I got my dad several sets of over-the-ear hearing protection just so everyone would leave my blue set alone.

It felt like a radio kind of day. I tuned to the local station that recently went from being an oldies station to a country station. Mom was pretty disappointed, and mad at me when I told her “the people had spoken.” The station played the newer country that I liked and had games (“Be caller #5 and guess the correlation between the next 3 songs!” which turned out to be: “Neon Moon”, “Bubba Shot the Jukebox”, and “Straight Tequila Night”), Turbo Twin-Spin Tuesdays where they played 2 songs back-to-back of each artist, and carried the Brewers games with the immortal verbal idiosyncrasies of Bob Euker and the lesser enthusiastic and somehow calming Jim Powell. I began mowing my usual route, singing until I was hoarse, or until the Brewers game came on. I am not a great singer. I could do a little better than “carry a tune in a bucket”, and it was probably not inaccurate to be labeled “caterwauling.” Not having an audience and mowing on a gravel road off of a dead-end gravel road off of a 1.5 lane, no lines paved road boosted my bravery.

Probably because I was distracted belting out America's Top 40 country songs, no matter how many times I mowed it, I still hit the rocks I knew were there, then got mad at myself for not paying attention. Papa would have to sharpen my blades this week...

I'd get the upper portion done around all the outbuildings, lumber stacks, and fences around the Planer Building, then mow the ditch on the south side of the swamp as I went down the road to the lower area, and the north side on the way back up after I'd finished. Because the water table was so much closer to the surface, the grass grew thicker and I had to go slower. I usually missed missing the rocks here too, but if he had to sharpen my blades this weekend anyway, I suppose a few more dings didn't make much difference... And at what point did the rocks begin to *sharpen* a dull blade? Surely if you scrape a blade against a rock like I watched my grandpa do with his scythe, it sharpened it... Maybe Papa didn't have to sharpen my blades this weekend after all.

But every time he'd hoist up the mower and pull off the blades, I was astounded that they cut anything at all. My poor mower was trying to cut grass with the equivalent of a 3/4" braided metal cable like the skidder used to reel in the logs. A hammer handle had a sharper edge. Papa would just purse his lips and I would duck my head while he sharpened away until some semblance of a cutting edge could be found on the blade.

I didn't trim as often as he liked. I preferred being out in the heat and humidity by sitting and singing in shorts, t-shirt, and sandals as opposed to walking in pants, a long sleeve shirt, and work boots with my gloved hands vibrating, forearms aching, and arms about to relocate from my body. Even if I listened to music while I trimmed, I didn't dare open my mouth; we have some pretty big, juicy insects in the taller grasses, and I'd no sooner have a

deep thought and sigh and I'd hit the biggest grasshopper I'd seen all week. I'd taken to wearing my chainsaw helmet because the flip-down screen visor helped with some of that.

The weed eater was a Stihl. Push the bulb 5 times to prime, choke, one pull (fire and die), choke off, one pull while holding the throttle and throttle lock and away we'd go. Loading the string was more of a pain, but I got a technique down that simplified things... as long as I didn't lose any parts. And I usually did. Thank goodness I'd mowed first. I eventually learned to take the head apart on the tailgate... when I had Papa's truck to run around with.

Papa had an '86 Ford F150 single cab. The air conditioning was a blessing, as was the radio. My Cub tractor with all 3 gears and reverse was nice but being able to do the speed limit and get places in 5 minutes instead of an hour was pretty awesome. The bed had a toolbox under the cab's back window that opened at both ends and had a slider tray.

Trimmer string, pruners, crescent wrench, hammer, tape measure, bungee cords, and other whatnot went into the tray, which was mostly what I used. The remainder of the full-length bed was Tonneau-covered, so at least the gas cans, weed eater, small tarp, and assortment of rakes and shovels could stay dry.

And me, too. More than once I'd been caught in a rainstorm, trying to finish up a location before the rain hit, but in the flatlands it's hard to tell how fast a storm is moving and accurately predict how long before the mower bogged down with the wet, thick grass. Most storms that rolled in during the day were over fairly quickly. Some required a reassessment of priorities.

The rental next door was no quick job, either. It took me a little over 3 hours to mow it, depending on the amount of rain we'd received. It was literally on the banks of the swamp, and I could only get so close without getting sucked in. There are some spruce and pine trees in the front yard that were just far enough apart to produce grass between them and look terrible if *not* mowed, but just close enough that I'd get a face-full of needles if I didn't address the situation from the right angle.

The next and most northerly property was Tingo's; a farmhouse I mowed until Papa sold the house, then I just mowed the front of the long equipment shed, barn, and between the barn and the pole shed. It was this location that prompted me to start carrying an old paperback book in my fanny pack. Not because I had so much time to read it; I had no interest at all in the book itself. But I realized I had my grandmother's knack for finding 4-leaf clovers.

My cousin Allison who was all of a year and a half older than me told me that she'd learned in her *high school* science class that 4-leaf clovers were just mutated regular clovers. It made sense. There are chemicals on farms that could probably account for the patch I'd found. I'd even found two 5-leaf clovers! I didn't care what they were genetically, they were lucky, right? And sharing something with my grandma who'd passed away 5 years before (whom I still missed very much) was pretty neat, too.

This spot only took me an hour and a half to mow, but I stretched it out another 15 minutes or so by avoiding the special clover spot and studying it each time I passed it by. I have given quite a few of them away over the years, but I still have probably a dozen 4-leafers and one 5-leafers left; pressed in a book that I will never read.

From Tingo's I'd go to the southern extreme of my domain to Dirk's; right off of an honest-to-goodness County Highway with a centerline and everything. I enjoyed mowing Dirk's. When Papa bought the property and we walked it the first time I told him I wanted to build my house on the hill in the back.

Dirk's, from the highway, was a little more than a small open field between a swamp and a well-maintained and nicely developed hobby farm. A large jack pine and a larger white pine with sprawling lower branches blocked most of the property from view, which was just how I liked it. A few years after Papa bought it and a few years before I started mowing it, we'd planted 1 acre of Christmas trees just behind the white pine in neat rows at about 6-foot spacing. The Christmas trees ended about halfway back; where the field ballooned out on both sides and followed the high ground back to a large maple tree set in a pile of rocks like it was planted there. The maple turned red every fall. I would definitely factor in that maple when building my house.

The "road" accessing the property from the highway to the maple was hardly more than beaten grass, and ran through the middle of the long, sprawling field past the maple to the tree line. From there a walking trail led to the river. The trail was so shaded, it didn't need mowing. What did need mowing was the highway frontage to the sprawling trees, between the Christmas trees, and the road plus a good 5 feet on either side all the way up past the maple to the walking trail. At the tree line, I mowed a turn-around. It's a quarter-mile from the highway at the turn-around.

It was here that I did most of my dreaming. It wasn't hard; even in the heat, it was beautiful. There was a lot of field that I didn't mow with my mower. Papa would take care

of that in the fall with his tractor with the sickle mower. So I got to watch the Metamorphosis of the Wildflowers. I had the idea one year to press each flower type that grew here and the approximate days it would bloom, but between the overlap of the blooming and thinking I had all the time in the world to document it (since I was going to live there), I never did. My favorite time was when the daisies grew so thick they looked like snow drifts, interspersed with the double-headed Indian paintbrush's red-orange hues.

From here, I'd go home. Ironically, I was not allowed to mow our own lawn. I'm still not sure why. When we moved there, it was nothing but an acre of mounds of topsoil Papa had hauled in. He eventually bulldozed the mounds, shaped the yard, raked, picked rock, raked, seeded, compacted and waited. An acre of lawn was born. Ah, but remember his penchant for nice-looking property? Each year after that he'd expand the lawn. First, he added the other side of the driveway. Then around a garden site. And a back yard (everyone needs a back yard). And a side yard to join the garden and the back yard. Then after Mom's horse passed away, he added the lower portion of the front yard, where she had kept the weeds trimmed nicely. And then he started mowing in the woods adjacent to the back and side yards; all of this added another 2 acres. After that he started down the road, which is what I mowed.

He called it a safety issue, and it was. Really. Where our gravel road meets the pavement was on a corner; to the left was a little clearing that always had deer hiding in it and woods hiding the oncoming traffic, and on the right the slight hill impeded a good line of sight. So, I started mowing the clearing. And weed-eating the ditch.

A few years later Papa bought a little piece on the river that was just down from our house. That had to be mowed or it would be overgrown with small trees in no time. And the folks next door were only there occasionally, so I mowed that, too. By then, the Planer was overdue.

For all the trips around and around doing the same thing over and over, year after year, I was rarely bored. Things were constantly in motion; ever-changing. There were always fawns to watch grow up, clouds and sunsets, puddles and flowers, less stacks of lumber (more area to mow), snakes, migratory birds flying north-- then south again, dry years with more acres but less grass to mow and flood years when there was hardly a break between clouds to find time to mow. I liked that I was surrounded by more life than death and things looked better when I was done than when I arrived (except perhaps my mower blades themselves). I now live in an area where you have to fight tooth and nail to *have* a yard of grass, work to keep the weeds out, pay to water it, and I actually look forward to mowing it. And don't even get me started on our battery-operated Dewalt weed eater...

And I'm *still* not allowed to mow my parents' lawn!