

Tractor Time

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One of my favorites books when I was little was Stephen Meaders' **Bulldozer** (1951). At the start of the story Bill Crane finds an abandoned D-2 Caterpillar tractor in a pond, rebuilds it and then develops an earthmoving and excavating business. I loved the story, the theme of salvation and self-reliance, and the dozer. My dreams never died, and when I got to UC Davis as a graduate student I signed up for Ag Practices 49A: Field Equipment Operation. This was one class I was always eager to get to! A very interesting selection of tractors and equipment and a somewhat terrifying pedagogical approach. Jack Hanna believed in see one, do one, teach one. This kept everyone on their toes listening to him. After barely learning how to drive a beast you had to teach the next student. Controlled mayhem at times but slow moving and with time for the instructor to step in before buildings or fences were flattened.

Now that I was "experienced" I became a driver for hay rides around campus, one of many perks of being a residence hall advisor in the grad dorm. This led to other adventures as well and I fondly remember the equipment maintenance staff and their unflappable attitude. One night a gate had been locked that was supposed to be open as I returned after a hay ride out to Putah Creek. I wasn't able to back the trailer up where it needed to go to turn around so I tried to just turn the trailer in place on the gravel road. I quickly discovered that the trailer tongue was much weaker than the force required to spin the trailer. After bending the tongue about 20° off normal I stopped, trudged back to the equipment lair and was pleased to find someone working late. With no fuss or fanfare he walked back with me, unlocked the gate and helped me get the tractor and trailer home for repair.

Another night found us out by Putah Creek again with a full trailer load of cheerful (full of liquid cheer) graduate students. After the hay ride out and a campfire at the picnic ground, we headed back to campus. As I slowly putt-putted down the road looking carefully ahead into the darkening road I was suddenly shocked to feel a tap on my shoulder. One of the more 'adventurous' students had walked down the trailer tongue to say hello. I stopped and gently advised everyone that, while impressive, 'tongue walking' was off limits. Taking off with a bit more speed to discourage any repeats I was carrying a too much speed on a downhill stretch and lightly touched the brakes only to discover the problem of braking a heavy load with a light tractor. Fortunately I sensed the jack knife before it went sideways and I don't think any of my passengers ever knew. I eased off the brakes and we went around the corner faster than I would have liked. Experience made me an ever more cautious driver on future events.

Later I was able to use 4wd tractors for restoration work, and one day got to use a big cat. It was a rougher ride and noisier than expected. Dreams changed to just a 4wd Kubota or maybe a Unimog.....



Restoration project Marine Corps Air Station, San Diego