

Country Real Estate, #293: August 8, 2013

Dodging is more luck than art

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Since the bullets of life hurt, most of us try to dodge as many as we can. We have a chance at ducking those we see coming. The ones that strike unexpectedly smack us twice, first with surprise and then with pain.

The unpleasantness of taking a life bullet is a good reason to avoid shooting yourself in the foot.

Of course, we all know one or two risktakers who tease The Big Marksman by rock climbing without ropes, running with the bulls or going all in with a pair of twos. They find reward in not getting hit.

Routine farm life is always up for taking aim.

This week Melissa was trail riding alone in our woods on Devil's Backbone when she stopped in a sunny opening to give her horse, Spirit, and our Yellow Lab, Nellie, a breather after a long climb. At 3,700 feet, Melissa was a mile uphill from Wimer Mountain Road. I was at the farm another two miles away.

No one was even close to being within earshot.

As she sat on Spirit, Nellie wandered around sniffing for anything that could be chased, eaten or rolled in.

Suddenly, Melissa heard a frantic buzzing. She looked behind her. A timber rattler lay coiled and vibrating no more than three inches from Spirit's back hoof.

Female rattlesnakes like to bask in the sun just before giving birth. Males prefer the cool temperatures they find near rotting logs under the forest's canopy. So what else is new?

Rattlesnakes have poor eyesight and no hearing. They can sense movement and feel ground vibrations. They depend on their infrared receptors to pick up heat radiating from prey or predators. This system has a range of about 12 inches, roughly their strike distance.

They evolved tail rattles to scare off predators. Rattling is defensive. But raising a ruckus has become a liability, because it reveals to an enemy the snake's location.

Rattlesnakes living near people have learned to rattle less so as to not draw attention to themselves. Keeping quiet and getting off stage fast are their preferred ways of coping with threat.

The Devil's Backbone rattlers see too few people to hush up. The one next to Spirit must have been totally freaked out: "MAXIMUM DANGER! IT'S THE GIANT FOUR-LEGGED MONSTER WITH TWO HEADS! SHAKE YOUR BOOTY, STUPID!"

For reasons unknown to this reporter, neither Spirit, the horse, nor Nellie, the dog, paid any attention to the snake's commotion.

Melissa, however, did.

Had I been sitting on Spirit, I would have tried to keep him motionless and give the rattler a face-saving retreat. Instead, Melissa persuaded Spirit to move away.

Despite everybody being too close to everybody else, there was no strike. Just a lot of shake, rattle and roll.

Had the rattler popped Spirit, any number of disasters might have followed—Melissa could have been pitched and injured; she could have landed on the frantic snake and been bitten; Nellie could have been struck; or Spirit could have broken his leg in the melee.

A rattler's venom is designed for small creatures—garter snakes, lizards, mice and chipmunks. It would not kill a horse, but it would cause pain, swelling, anxiety, tremors and minor bleeding. It could kill Melissa or Nellie. The nearest antivenin was 30 minutes away in the best of circumstances and more than two hours in the worst.

Even without being bitten, Melissa could have been on the ground and unable to move for five or six hours. I would not have started searching for her until dusk.

This rattler is too high a risk to our safety. I've been looking for it in this sunny patch for the last couple of days. They tend to hang out where they've been successful in feeding themselves. I do the same, notably around the refrigerator.

Melissa says I should leave the snake alone, that she will protect herself in the future by being more observant.

As an ambush predator, rattlesnakes have evolved perfect camouflage that might possibly even defeat my wife's heightened vigilance.

She and I have different opinions about risk and prevention.

I try to "engineer" risk out of any hazardous situation to increase the effectiveness of individual carefulness. She thinks that responsibility for avoiding danger falls more heavily on the individual than on making circumstances more foolproof.

She blames Eve for listening to the serpent; I blame Adam for not insisting that Eve wear hearing protectors.

This week I gathered 30 hardwood sawlogs -- ash, black cherry and sugar maple -- at the level landing by the woods entrance. I then hauled them in three trips to a collection yard about nine miles from where the lady-and-the-snake drama had played a few days earlier.

I cut the nine-foot-long logs out of trees that had blown down during the last year, mostly in last summer's *derecho*. The yard bought 20. I hope to mill the rejects into boards for bookcases, which we may need in the future for books we have yet to purchase.

Our house is evenly divided on the need for more bookcases, which, it is alleged, will encourage the presence of more books, which will create the need for more bookcases and so on.

“Would you rather have a bookcase full of books that you’ve read once and forgotten or a bookcase full of knickknacks that you have to look at every day?” I’ve asked...myself. (I use knickknacks only for the purpose of illustration. I mean bookcases could be filled with potted plants, worthless collectibles and vessels full of bothersome pennies. Imagination runs wild with an empty bookcase.)

Lacking additional bookcases, we have neither more books nor more knickknacks, which amounts to the next best alternative for each of us.

I use the ATV or my 1957 Ford tractor to skid each log to a place on a woods trail where I can lift it with the tractor’s front hydraulic forks.

I cradle each log and shuttle it down to the landing rather than drag it as much as a mile. Dragging is easier and faster, but it roughs up the roads more than I like and embeds dirt and pebbles in the log.

The Ford’s antique hydraulics can lift about 1,000 pounds when push is combined with shove. The heavier the weight on the forks, the harder it is to steer, particularly around sharp curves. With a heavy load on the forks, it’s almost impossible to turn the front wheels when standing still.

Power steering would solve this problem. Chrysler was the first automaker to commercialize it in the 1951 Imperial, calling it “Hydraguide.” My utilitarian Ford was not outfitted with such luxuries. It was not even outfitted with a padded seat.

Going down a steep hill with a load held high enough so that I can see ahead can produce, what was referred to in fourth grade as, a “forward roll.” Tractors are not gymnasts by nature or choice.

But traveling with a log load held low risks catching a protruding end against a rock that’s been lurking by the roadside for just such an opportunity.

Consistent with my belief that I'm better at preventing accidents than surviving them, I log slowly and take my time hauling them out of the woods. Given a choice I will make two light trips rather than one heavy one.

But there are exceptions.

The last two sugar maple logs were 10-footers and heavy—maybe 450 pounds each. I cut them from a blow-down about 100 yards uphill from where Melissa would face the rattler.

I'd been logging all day and was tired. I'm prone to mental and physical mistakes when I'm played out, in addition to all other times.

It was getting dark. For perfectly defensible reasons I'd put off getting the headlights operational for several years. Good judgment suggested that I not drive on a public road in pitch blackness with only "this little light of mine" available for illumination.

The first 1,000 yards through the woods were the trickiest. Near its end was a very acute, inward-sloping, right-hand turn that contained about a dozen feet of the steepest incline.

A red oak anchored the inside of this curve. If I went too far to the outside, I could catch a rear tire and roll the tractor over into some spare rocks that Nature was stockpiling for future deployment.

I could have made one trip down with one log and then gone home. But I hate leaving a job unfinished. It would mean that I'd have to blow 90 minutes the next day fetching the last log to the landing. This offended my sense of efficiency, which I often offend. I wanted to button up the logging then and there.

So I got both logs on the forks and secured them to the frame with a logging chain. Rigged this way, I could carry the load low going down the grade without the logs rolling off.

It occurred to me that I was very good at enabling the circumstances of my own disaster.

With the front-loaded log weight, I felt the back end of the tractor lighten up, which I optimistically attributed to recent weight loss in my rear seat. This rebalancing gave me less traction from the back wheels.

The Ford has a worn third gear that has been known to slip into neutral without warning under a load going downhill. Bulldog first gear -- my choice -- had never slipped, but I was aware that I was counting on lubricated metal teeth that were almost 55 years old.

If something gave way -- if first gear stripped and I found myself riding a runaway, if the brakes failed, if a hydraulic line popped, if whatever -- I planned to stop by dropping the loaded forks on the ground. If I was in gear, I'd turn off the engine. If I was running free in neutral, I planned to

place a permanent curse on efficiency. I knew that using the brakes to stop a free-rolling tractor would start me sliding downhill out of control.

I crept the Ford down the woods road at less than three mph. It was steep, but straight. I centered the Ford and drove between a rock and a hard place without clipping either.

The bad right-hand curve was coming up. I knew I had to kiss its outside edge while turning hard. If I didn't get it just right on one pass, I would have to try an emergency stop or risk going over the side. It would be impossible to back uphill with weight on the forks. I would have to unchain the logs without becoming a pie crust to their rolling pins. Plan B and Plan C were much less appealing than Plan A.

As I came into the banked curve, I felt the tractor pick up speed. It could have been a blistering seven mph. I cranked hard to the right. The additional speed gave me more ability to steer, but things were also happening faster.

I hit the steepest spot straight on. I felt the back wheels come up. For a second, I was riding a two-wheel tractor. Then it settled.

I missed the inside red oak by inches and the outside edge by less than that. But miss is what's important.

It wasn't a piece of cake, exactly, but it turned out that I hadn't bitten off more than I could chew.

Was the risk worth the reward? Of course, it wasn't.

Dodging bullets is like gambling in casinos: you lose big if you keep playing.

But, occasionally, you're just lucky enough to make you think you're better than you are. And therein lies the real danger in every bullet dodged, particularly those that you aim at yourself.