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The hole is the thing

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I tore down an old fence this weekend in anticipation of relocating the line where it would not be broken under drifting snow or catch the back legs of leaping deer.

Two opposite philosophies are available for demolishing a farm fence.

The preferred approach is to acquire a bulldozer.

This allows you to direct a loud, smelly, shaking machine that does the work. You start at one end of the line pushing locust end posts and line stakes out of their three-foot-deep holes, along with fence wire and whatever else is attached, semi-attached or just hanging around gawking like groupies.

The dozer makes one big anarchic pile of mixed junk. You either leave this mess as-is in the field or haul it off, depending on whether you want to establish a monument to the genius who invented the six-way dozer blade or remove an eyesore.

A modest dozer will take down a 100-yard-long fence consisting of 30 eight-foot-long stakes, four big end posts and wire -- high-tensile, woven or barbed -- in about 30 minutes.

The non-preferred method, which I prefer, is to dismantle the fence by hand—salvaging and reusing while imagining the convenience of a bulldozer.

The first step is to use a fence-tool pliers to pull out the 340 n-shaped, galvanized, metal staples that hold the wire to the wood—10 staples per stake or post.

A fence tool has two wire cutters, hammer head, two wire holders and a prong for digging under and leveraging out old staples. Good ones work well; cheap Chinese knock-offs are worthless.



If I'm wrestling with rusty woven wire, I cut the four-foot-high fence into 30-foot lengths. I fold each section into a package that I compress by stomping it as flat as I can. (I'm nothing if not high-tech.) I sell the steel for recycling, which reappears as cheap Chinese knock-offs.)

If it's smooth, galvanized, high-tensile wire, I use a spinning jenny to recoil each line for a second life. I wrap the coiled loops in four places with electrician's tape to keep the reroll from behaving like a berserk jack-in-the-box.

(Haywire was the light wire used 100 years ago to bale hay. Left to its own devices, it scrambled itself into an impossible tangled ball—hence the expression, “go haywire.” A “haywire outfit” was a logger or excavation company that held together its very-used machinery with hope, prayer and haywire.)

I chain each stake/post to the front forks of the tractor and lift it out of the ground. I cut them into next winter's firewood.

I walk the line holding a large magnet on twine to pick up any stray metal scraps. Cattle eat old staples for reasons they've never explained to me, or anyone I know.

And then I fill in the fence holes with rocks and dirt so that neither cattle nor I will break an ankle.

It might take me three days or more to remove the same 100 yards of fence that a bulldozer could pile up in a half hour.

When I'm done, the pasture is clean and safe. No piles remain—a tiny consolation to a farmer without a dozer.

The argument for the bulldozer wins the day, because it's faster, easier and cheaper, too, if you don't count its purchase cost, which only a sourpuss bookkeeper would do to rain on a boy's parade. You should also not count all the hours when the dozer is not being used.

As I filled holes with rocks on Sunday afternoon, I was thinking about all the mindless handwork I've done over the years.

Some argue that each hour spent this way is one hour less that could have been spent on something else, maybe even, something important—like campaigning for nuclear non-proliferation or dancing with the stars.

But I realized as I filled each black hole that mindless work is done, because it needs doing.

If you don't seal a hole in your roof, you get a leak, which ruins the ceilings on two floors, which rots the walls down to the basement, which destroys the sills, which causes the whole house to collapse eventually in a cloud of moldy debris, which endangers several species, which might get you into trouble with the federal Fish and Wildlife folks.

If you don't sweep the floor, dirt collects like interest at 10 percent per month.

In contrast, we do many things that do not need doing. Some are interesting; some satisfy our creativity; and some are stupid, wasteful, costly or frivolous. I do many unneeded tasks, which is just one of my many character flaws I'm pretty sure.

On Sunday morning before I got to my rock-dropping assignment, I spent four hours working another kind of hole.

I was a volunteer maple-donut fryer.

Highland County holds a Maple Festival on two weekends in mid-March. Maple-glazed donuts are arguably the celebration's iconic food.

The Mill Gap Ruritan Club started serving maple donuts -- one donut and coffee -- from a member's house in 1960. Today, a long trailer houses an assembly line of several dozen volunteers who produce 7,000 to 8,000 donuts altogether, or about 250 an hour. Profit funds community groups and worthy projects.

Three of us worked the deep fryer. On my right, Jeremy took a floured board that held as many as 25 risen donuts from the warmer and slid them into the tank of 357-degree oil.

The floating donuts cooked on one side, then George, standing opposite me, and I flipped them. When they were done, we lifted them into metal drain baskets to my left.

We would typically be cooking about 75 donuts in one of three "pens" at any one time.

From the fryer baskets, the donuts were fully immersed in maple glaze, boxed and sold warm. It takes a little more than an hour to go from ingredients to sale.

George and I held a round stick about 20" long in each hand that we used to manipulate the floating donuts. Think long chopsticks.

When the donuts were fully cooked, we had to spear each one through its hole. A fryer with 40 years of experience showed me that he could impale five or six donuts in one lift.

As a virgin fryer, I could only manage two at a time.

I got my right stick through one hole and my left through another. Then the trick was to cross and hold the tips of the two sticks together as I lifted both donuts into a drain basket.

A number of "my" donuts suffered abdominal stick punctures. I hoped the maple glaze filled in these unintended wounds.

If I didn't hold the stick tips against each other during extraction, the slick little buggers would drop back into the hot oil, possibly splashing George.

Over my shift, I dropped two. I apologized profusely, even though George, who dropped none, avoided any splatter through quick footwork.

In my mind, I had become a serial splasher. It'll probably get around.

Frying donuts is a repetitive job but not a mindless one. It required my full concentration, particularly on the holes. Stickwork was an acquired skill.

Frying was not boring. Assembling boxes to hold a dozen donuts each would have been.

The jobs I dislike are those that are repetitive but also require a minimal amount of attention to prevent something bad from happening. If your mind wanders, you might hammer your thumb or do the task incorrectly.

Truly mindless work allows you to think about something else. I plot murders, for example, on the morning treadmill.

Poet Ezra Pound once said that he discovered a different consciousness when he realized that he should stop paying attention to the ticking of a clock and, instead, listen to the silence between each tick and each tock. I'm not sure how Pound's consciousness would be affected by digital watches.

Most holes in life do not evade you like floating donuts. You just need to stuff them up and move along.

I'm sure a bulldozer is just what the Mill Gap Ruritans need to clean up the donut trailer when the Festival is over.

I will need several years of mindful effort to deduce how a dozer might be applied to setting up the donut line.

I need to concentrate a little harder on filling this hole in my thinking.