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Hay seeds fight over sign
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I'm the only guy I know with a two-wheel hay wagon. Everyone else has more sense.

Mine is pretty much a homemade job, which began with an axle and wheels rescued from an old-truck hospice.

A conventional four-wheel wagon with a bed 8 feet wide and 16 feet long -- the kind that everyone else has -- would have cost about \$1,000 used back then. I thought I could make one cheaper...and just as good.

I was wrong on both counts. Sometimes the herd is right.

For a two-wheel wagon to work right, the bed has to be situated on the chassis so that the wagon -- loaded or empty -- is balanced forward. My wagon balances forward but not quite enough. It's a little heavy in the rear end, much like its designer.

As a result, if I don't build a load correctly, the wagon can seesaw in place when I walk on it. It rears up with its long tongue pointed toward the sky and its big butt on the ground. After taking a few rides like this, I finally asked our local genius welder, Steve Good, to work up an adjustable kickstand for the back end. This stops the teetertotter—as long as I remember to deploy it.

When I'm hauling, the wagon's heavy steel tongue clanks up and down with the smallest bump. (Another one of my design innovations was to leave out springs.) This herky-jerky samba serves to remind me of the difference between something done exactly right and something done sort of close.

My wagon is also harder to hook on to whatever's pulling it, because I have to lift its forward-balanced weight to align the tongue hole with the hitch hole. Conventional four-wheel wagons have a light-weight pivoting tongue that requires no back strength.

The one advantage of my straight-tongue wagon is that it's easy to back up. The four-wheelers with a pivot tongue can't—at least, I can never get them to do it.

I've been thinking about asking our local genius welder to turn my straight tongue into a swivel job. What I really want is a swivel tongue that can be locked straight when needed. This type of plastic surgery would find a strong market in many places beyond Blue Grass.

I have a notion of how to do this. Everyone, of course, has dreams.

Oh, did I mention that I now have about \$1,500 in my wagon, not counting quirks?

My wagon sits idle almost all the time. Then I ask too much of it. A year of sitting still for an hour of combat.

The wagon and I have been hauling big loads during the last few weeks.

We carried 25 nine-foot-long, round locusts posts, each weighing between 100 and 250 pounds, about two miles from the woods to the farm where they'll be used in a new cattle pen. I lifted them three at a time onto the wagon with the front forks of my tractor. I set them down on parallel skids and balanced the load slightly forward.

In building a "tent" of Lincoln logs, I made sure that the posts locked against each other enough to not roll off, which all of them agreed was what they were supposed to do with their lives. I did not want to be next to two tons of posts that decided it was time to rock and roll.

I tied them down with heavy load binders, which are ingenious ratchets that snug a chain. And then I crawled the wagon home—all downhill, at less than five miles per hour, in bulldog first. With a load that heavy, I had three backup plans for dealing with a runaway, only two of which involved the phrase, "Jump, you idiot!"

Over the years, I've developed a couple of ideas about moving heavy stuff. First, go very slowly. Speed makes every emergency harder to control; slow avoids emergencies that speed causes. Second, engineer prevention into how you're doing something. Don't count on quick reactions and fast feet. Third, anticipate and avoid chancy circumstances. Stick with the safest way, even if it takes longer and requires more work.

These ideas can also apply to money, politics and what used to be called, "interpersonal relations."

The wagon and I also hauled hay this week, about 70 large square bales, about 15 miles. It's good horse-quality hay, and I'm pleased it's in the barn.

With a wagon like mine, you need to have a Slow-Moving-Vehicle (SMV) triangle sign on the back. Otherwise something like this might happen in local traffic court where my wife, Melissa, prosecutes innocents like me:

Her: State your name.

Me: Doe, John.

Her: Do you know what perjury is?

Me: Can you prove Doe, John is not my name?

Her: Well, not at this precise moment.

Me: So ha ha. Your whole case against me is just as bad.

Her: Objection!

Judge: The witness will refrain from gloating over cheap, meaningless points.

Her: Were you stopped by Trooper Kindheart on the afternoon of August 28, 2010 at approximately 5:30 pm for failing to have an SMV triangle on the back of your hay wagon?

Me: I'm not sure the time is correct.

Her: What were you doing at that approximate time?

Me: I was hauling hay home for my wife's two hindgut fermenters, which she insists on calling "ponies." It was a good deed, by me. A little dab of kindness on the scab of modern life.

Her: Did you have a triangle on the back of your wagon?

Me: My triangle has hung on the wagon's same bent nail for approximately 20 years.

Her: Then why did Trooper Kindheart testify that you did not have such a sign?

Me: Maybe he'd been drinking.

Her: Objection!

Me: Can you prove that he wasn't? Without breathalyzer results, we'll never know for sure.

Judge: The witness has been warned about this line of defense.

Her: Did you or did you not have a triangle on the back of your wagon when Trooper Kindheart stopped you for not having a triangle on the back of your wagon?

Me: Yes, I did.

Her: You heard Trooper Kindheart's testimony, that he stopped you for not having a sign properly affixed to the wagon itself?

Me: That's his story.

Her: Was your sign visible to the public?

Me: It depends on where the public was standing...and looking.

Her: Was the sign affixed to the back of your hay wagon so that it was plainly visible to the public behind.

Me: I can't say what the public behind did or did not see.

Her: Was the sign plainly visible to a vehicle following?

Me: You'll have to subpoena those vehicles and ask them directly.

Her: Was the sign affixed in a proper position at the time of the stop.

Me: Yes it was. Then Kindheart slid it between two bales like a slice of baloney.

Her: Trooper Kindheart testified that he found your sign between two hay bales. It was not on its nail. Did you put the sign between the bales?

Me: That's your theory. Numerous other theories also explain the facts. And all of them pin the blame on a party other than me. My theory is that

Kindheart did it.

Her: We have entered into evidence a photo taken by Trooper Kindheart of the back of your wagon. It shows no sign.

Me: What's your point?

Her: The sign was not there when he took the picture.

Me: That doesn't prove that the sign was not on the nail when I was hauling the hay. It only proves that the sign was not on the nail when he took the picture.

Her: It proves that you did not have a sign plainly affixed to the back of your wagon when the Trooper stopped you for not having a sign plainly affixed to the back of your wagon.

Me: He must have snapped the picture after he slipped the sign between the bales, before I got around to the back.

Her: Are you accusing Trooper Kindheart of framing you?

Me: It's a compelling explanation of events. Had I slipped the sign into the hay while the Trooper had me stopped, he would have seen me do it. Since he didn't see me do it, I think the Judge should presume I didn't do it.

Her: Did you see Trooper Kindheart insert your sign between the bales?

Me: No, but I wasn't looking at him the way a cop eyeballs a perp. I was looking at the load. The bales were nervous in his presence, very twitchy. Anyway, he was behind the wagon where I couldn't see what he was doing. By the time I got there, he was holding the sign in his hand.

Her: Did you put the sign between the bales when you started your trip home from the hayfield? Did you forget to hang it on the nail?

Me: Not that I recall. It's far more likely that Kindheart did it.

Her: What possible motive do you advance for Trooper Kindheart fabricating evidence against you?

Me: He hates old, bald guys from Blue Grass. It's common knowledge.

Her: Trooper Kindheart is an old, bald guy from Blue Grass.

Me: Self-hatred explains many seemingly irrational behaviors.

Her: He's your best friend.

Me: Don't let that stand in the way of pursuing justice against him.

Her: Why should the Court believe you rather than the Trooper and his picture?

Me: This event can be explained in contradictory ways. That means there's reasonable doubt about my guilt...and, therefore, reasonable doubt about Trooper Kindheart's story...and his innocence.

Her: This is preposterous. The Commonwealth rests.

Me: The Defense rests.

Judge: Guilty. You are sentenced to drive home in a very slow-moving vehicle with the Commonwealth Attorney.

I finished this column, balanced forward on my chair in front of the computer. As long as I don't lean back, I don't have to be reminded of the sign I'm wearing.

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