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Road rocks don't rock and are hard to remove

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, VA.—I've been digging rocks out of my forest roads since before July 4th. I do this for several reasons, some of which even seem semi-rational.

Road rocks stick up where Melissa's horses might trip over them with her aboard. It would be my fault if one of "my" rocks caused a spill. I would feel bad, even though all these rocks are jointly owned.

The second reason is that it's a great workout. These rocks are usually like icebergs. Some ledge or hump protrudes, but 99 percent is below the surface. Lots of getting dirty, sweating, grunting, cursing and having what passes for a good time back here.

The final reason is that when I hit one with my brushhog blade, it's like Donald Duck striking the Mouse Club gong when it's fixed and solid. I, too, vibrate for five minutes while the audience laughs.

I use a steel rock bar to pry them out. Mine is a bit over six feet long and weighs 16 pounds. Its shaft has a flattened bevel edge at the pry end and a knob at the effort end. Melissa gave it to me many years ago for our anniversary; a more sentimental girl you couldn't find.

The roads are shaded in the late afternoon. I'm wearing shorts, leather work gloves and steel-toed logger boots that are calf-high. I've wrapped a red sweat bandana around my forehead and have pitched my shirt. I observe local wildlife fleeing to distant counties.

Evidence from the field confirms that the lever-and-fulcrum principle still works. My rock bar is what's known as a first-class lever: you push down on one end with relatively little force to get a big weight at the opposite end to move up.

The lever is one of six "simple machines" that are the basis of all of our complicated machines. The others are wheel and axle, pulley, inclined plane, wedge and screw.

Archimedes, the ancient Greek genius, explained the lever, but did not invent it. I use the screw that he did invent -- an auger in a cylinder -- to empty corn out of a silo.

If I can jam the bar's bevel end under a big, buried rock, I can generally pry it

out using a wood chunk as a fulcrum.

But I can't get under the real monsters, the ones I can only imagine.

My rock bar and I can wiggle embedded rocks weighing more than 300 pounds, but they're usually too heavy for me to pull out of their holes. A good wiggle has value in its own right, but success requires that the rock be broken free from all that keeps it stuck.

Excavating rocks in this fashion is good job-training for writers. Case in point, as the lawyers say.

About a month ago, a writer friend suggested that I send an earlier column to The New Yorker. I was flattered that he considered it worthy, but dubious. Blue Grass would be seen by the magazine's editors as being farther from 4 Times Square than Kabul.

Anyway, I'm too old to be discovered. My connections are all disconnected by now. And the magazine's 23 year old with a bachelor's degree in linguistics from Bryn Mawr who reads the slush pile is not going to get my stuff. We know different rock bars. Mine is a quiet opportunity for penance and self-improvement; the other offers nothing but risks and damaged hearing.

My daughter thinks I get off a good line every so often; that's usually sufficient validation.

But...I was willing to risk postage. The New Yorker occasionally runs a "letter from" an out-of-the-way place, usually by a writer who's not. Maybe, I thought, someone on the current staff would remember E.B. (Andy) White's pieces from his Maine farm.

So I mailed several columns of the usual stuff—my idiosyncratic combination of resignation, anger and bemusement at life's absurdities, packaged in humor that should be slyer and thinking that should be deeper. My cover letter read:

I'd like to pitch an occasional Letter from Blue Grass.

Here are the reasons to reject this idea.

The pieces are likely to have nothing to do with New York, New Yorkers and the New York scene. (That, of course, is why your readers would find them intriguing.)

The pieces are likely to have nothing to do with celebrities, fashion and the

currents of events, save for a here-and-there swipe at our broadening plight. (Absence of such subject matter might be considered a virtue, or at least a respite.)

Finally, I no longer know anybody in your set. (Draw your own conclusions as to how this might be a reason to agree.)

I write two weekly columns. I've included several that would be comparable to what I would send in.

Here's what you should know about me. I operate a couple of farms, cattle and timber, in the mountains of Virginia. I run a consulting business that helps buyers research large tracts of land. I've written a couple of books and other things. I'm married to one of two lawyers in a county of 2,500 residents, and my daughter is a reporter for Bloomberg News in New York. I was voted second funniest in my high school class.

There's one reason to give this a go: I come out of the same place that Andy did.

My preprinted rejection slip arrived this week. The Editors announced: "We regret that we are unable to use the enclosed material."

The slush-pile reader wrote a kind note: "Some interesting snippets of stories. Why not find a way to combine all of them into one, cohesive narrative? Best of luck!"

Why not, I replied to myself, write a collection of snippets that form one, cohesive narrative, and each of which appears in The New Yorker, and for which I am paid? Andy did. Oh well.

I'm considering changing my name to Snippet Seltzer. My tombstone might read: "He spent a lot of time looking for one, cohesive narrative."

The hardest task for an in-the-sticks writer is to pry open the cultural rock that seals off an unknown editor's mind to something atypical. I got this one wiggling, but failed to pop it free.

Archimedes said that he could move the world if he had a long-enough lever and a place to stand.

Editors are harder.

Archimedes never broke into The New Yorker's pages.

Still, I do have a place to stand. I guess I just need a longer bar.

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