

LESSONS FROM A SHOVEL

By John Duncklee

Learning is a wonderful process. Some say that you have to go to school to learn something. Others maintain that you go to school to learn how to learn. I became aware at the early age of 12 that teachers are not necessarily college graduates with letters behind their names to prove something. An old Mexican cowboy, who spoke little English, taught me the rudiments of conversational Spanish while I watched him shoe horses.

Later in my young years, I worked on the E4 Ranch outside of Big Horn, WY. In spite of the hard work and long hours, I loved every minute. There were three old men with whom I shared the old log-built bunkhouse. Roy Neal was the "mule man". Any time there was a need for a team of mules for whatever the job was at hand, Roy would be there with Tip and Ada, a pair of prime Missouri mules. Roy taught me a lot about mules. Bill Armour tended the bountiful vegetable garden that provided the ranch with fresh produce during the summer and plenty for canning for winter.

Frank Traub drove the 2 1/2 ton truck whenever or wherever anything needed hauling. Frank wore denim overalls, stout work boots that he kept clean and well oiled always, and an "engineer hat" that he always placed squarely on his head full of steely gray hair. In the left chest pocket of the overalls, Frank kept a package of Beechnut Chewing Tobacco. The package was always open at the top end so that it was handy for Frank to reach in with his thumb and index finger to grab a fresh supply when needed. Mister Gallatin, the gracious owner of the E4 Ranch had retired all three of these old timers when they reached 70. They didn't leave the ranch



or the bunkhouse, and continued working. Mister Gallatin continued their monthly paychecks. These old-timers worked every day alongside the rest of us. They were a valuable part of the crew.

At 19, when given a job to do, I would tear into it and get it done as soon as possible. I had grown up with an old-fashioned work ethic that I still abide by at 83. But back during that time on the E4 I learned a lot about work and a lot about living. One morning at breakfast, Wendell, the foreman, explained a project to Frank and me that involved hauling red shale from a shale pit off the highway to Buffalo, to spread onto the surface of the main ranch road along the hay and grain fields. When wet, the road got rutted from vehicular traffic, so Wendell had decided that a six-inch layer of shale on the surface of the road would prevent it from getting too soggy after rainstorms.

Breakfasts at the E4 were full-scale dinners. Wyla, Wendell's wife, was an excellent cook who always provided us with more than enough food for all meals. However, I had never before been offered such a great variety of dishes for breakfast. There were always eggs cooked several ways, potatoes baked, fried or mashed, bacon, ham, sausage and beefsteak. Home-baked bread accompanied every meal. There was always a choice of two different kinds of pie. Should anyone leave that table hungry, it would be no fault of Wyla's. One could say, looking back at the E4, "There were very long hours, but it sure was a feeder."

After breakfast, Frank at the wheel and me sitting in the passenger seat, started for the red shale pit. It turned out to be about 10 miles from the ranch headquarters. After looking around at the pit, Frank maneuvered the truck to a good position for loading. We got out of the truck and grabbed our shovels. Frank used a No. 12 broad shovel. I had brought along the No. 2 long-handled shovel

used for most everything, especially for digging postholes. Frank's shovel carried four times what my long-handled shovel could do.

We commenced loading the truck with red shale. I began with my usual fast pace. I noticed that Frank worked quite a bit slower than I did. In my youthful mind I figured that at 70, he would not be able to keep up with my 19-year-old pace. We shoveled and shoveled. It was not long before I began to tire from the strenu-

ous activity. I held my shovel upright and leaned on it as I rested. Frank just kept on shoveling and spitting out tobacco juice in between shovelfuls. This went on for about three hours. I rested on my shovel every 15 minutes. Frank just continued shoveling at his slow but steady pace. It was on the trip back to the ranch when I began serious thought about the differences between Frank and me at the end of our shovels. Frank's steady but deliberate pace was far more productive



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than my almost frantic pace. I was sure that Frank, at 70, had shoveled far more shale into the truck bed than I had.

I continued thinking about this all the way back to the ranch and even as we unloaded the shale onto the ranch road surface. I reached a definite conclusion; my fast pace at shoveling was counterproductive because I gave out sooner and was forced to rest whereas Frank's steady pace, slower with his large capacity shovel, was, in the end, far more efficient than what I was doing. It took a couple of more loads for me to adjust my pace toward more efficiency, but I have never forgotten that shoveling lesson. Thereafter, I set my pace for myself, disregarding anyone else's who might be working alongside me. Another adjunct lesson gleaned from the shale hauling job was that in spite of the truck's ability to dump all of its load, Frank elected to unload the shale by hand to avoid an uneven layer should the truck lurch while dumping with its bed slanted upward. I understood his theory because I had witnessed his tendency to put sporadic pressure on the accelerator at times.

At another time, Wendell sent me out with Frank to haul a load of oats into Sheridan to be steam-rolled at the mill. Frank drove the truck to the granary where the oats were stored. We began shoveling the oats from the granary into the truck bed that had sides that were almost two feet high. That truck bed held a lot of whole oats. I had learned how to pace my shoveling. The amount of grain kept growing as we shoveled. When the load of grain reached a level in the truck bed that was three inches from the top of the sides, I paused and suggested to Frank that we stop filling because when oats are steam-rolled they expand, and at the amount we had already loaded the steam-rolled oats would fill the bed to the top of the sides. Frank had never hauled oats to be steam-rolled. And neither had I. He spit out a mouthful of tobacco juice and said, "Let's fill-'er-up." I knew better than to argue with Frank so I left him to shovel oats while I went to the close by barn where I knew there were burlap sacks in a pile by the barn door. I made a quick calculation and gathered 30 sacks and tied them into a bundle. By the time I had done that, Frank had filled the truck bed with oats so I tossed the bundle of sacks onto the oats.

We headed for Sheridan. Frank dumped the grain into the grated hopper that took it to the steam-roller. We both stood on the truck bed waiting for the steam-rolled grain to come rushing out of the galvanized iron pipe spout that we pulled around to make an even load on the truck bed. The grain started and I could see that this was all new to Frank. It was all new to me as well, but I had a pretty fair idea what was going on. When the level came within two inches of the top of the side boards, I went and got the bundle of burlap sacks, untied them and one at a time brought them over to the spout



and filled them with warm steam-rolled oats. I placed each full sack vertically along the edges of the truck bed, leaning them slightly inward to keep them from falling to the ground. In between sack fillings and placings, Frank guided the spout still full of flowing grain. I worked as fast as I could filling sacks and placing them. There was no time to sew the ends, and besides I hadn't brought needles to do that. I was fast enough so the entire perimeter of the truck bed was lined with full sacks. Frank, becoming a tad wide-eyed by the amount of steam-rolled oats that were still coming from the spout, kept guiding the spout as the load increased up the lengths of the vertically placed sacks. I went around and pulled the sacks slightly toward the center of the bed to increase their stability.

The oats finally stopped when their level reached half way up the sacks, six inches from the tops of the sideboards. Frank spit out more tobacco juice, took off his old engineer's hat and wiped his brow with the sleeve of his work shirt. "By gollies, that load sure got bigger," he said, and we drove back to the ranch granary. That time, Frank learned something from a 19-year-old. The lesson I learned from that project was that there are times when someone might not believe me for whatever reasons they might have, so I must go the way I know is best even though I must modify the procedure so that the project doesn't fail for want of some factor for which I might suggest a remedy. A good mind is to be used, never flaunted.

Lessons learned while doing one thing can last a lifetime and become pertinent as one branches out to varied activities. The shoveling lesson taught me steadiness and persistence. I learned later that while writing, my mind would too often get ahead of my writing, and sometimes I would lose my thought in the scramble. I have never been a fast writer, either by hand or machine. However, after many years with two fingers on

the keys of a computer, I can accomplish a fairly good number of words in a day's writing. Of course one reason for this is that I love writing and telling stories. I love searching and delving into my acute imagination to make up fictional stories, whether full-length novels or short stories. In order to not allow my mind to outrun the writing, I stop and take down what I call "thought notes", to return to once my writing has caught up with my mind.

What made this possible and effective was realizing that I have a relatively quick mind that is full of ideas that are sometimes over-anxious to get out into a story or even a conversation. I have learned the art of pondering so that I don't anger who I am talking with, because most of the time I am way ahead of the conversation. Self-realization is very helpful for a lot of accomplishment, written or oral. The written is most important, because most conversations lapse since I have found that a lot of people only remember what they have said and little of what others in the conversation have contributed.

Those old-timers never went to high school, much less college. They did not have letters behind their names or "teaching certificates", but I learned more from Roy Neal and Frank Traub than I learned from most of the college professors I tried to listen to. Many years later, after I finished my Navy enlistment during the Korean War and after I had done a few years cattle ranching, buying Mexican steers in Sonora, Mexico and breeding quarter horses, I went to a university, got a couple of letters that I never write after my name, and got a job teaching. While waiting for classes to begin, I sat at my desk and thought about Roy and Frank, and the way I had learned from them. Those memories influenced me greatly in deciding how I was go-

ing to teach. Lecturing was the first method I rejected. Discussion groups within the classes became my chosen method. I often chose topics that helped those students to learn how to think and solve problems, but never memorizing. I never gave examinations because I did not, and still do not think, that examinations prove anything in my chosen method of teaching.

After four years of teaching at an Arizona university, two weeks before the fall semester began, I received a "memo" from some vice president in charge of something I couldn't quite understand, because it was written in administrative language that rarely resembles English. I did understand the 'memo'. It said, "You will give four examinations a semester and a final. You will keep copies of the final examination on file for five years."

I was quite surprised at such a statement, the likes I hadn't seen since getting discharged from the military. I turned over the memo and with my pen, wrote, "I resign my position, effective immediately."

I think Roy Neal and Frank Traub would have been proud of me. 

