



On backhoes and front-end loaders

Jackie can't understand how I can serve Christ with a huge Allis-Chalmers

Sooner or later my wife, Jackie, is going to have to come to some understanding of my obsession with backhoes.

"Why can't you be like the other men in our small group?" she asks whenever I bring up the subject of those big, beautiful, yellow earth-diggers.

"Take Gene Berrey, for instance. Gene and Jane do things together, like fishing.

"Or like Dr. Hester. On his day off he takes Von and they go to the river and catch crabs.

"Al Reed helps Sandra finish antiques. Frank and Shirley go to musicals. Brooks and Laura work on jigsaw puzzles. But not you. You want to go off by yourself on a backhoe and dig holes."

Actually, I want a backhoe with a front-end loader. But it's taken years for Jackie to distinguish between a backhoe and a road grader, so I don't get technical with her.

My obsession with backhoes goes back to the time I first started working with church committees. In fact, the first year after I graduated from seminary I began dreaming I was a backhoe operator.

It was one of those recurring dreams, usually coming the night after I sat through a frustrating deacons' meeting.

In the dream I would find myself astride a huge yellow Case or Allis-Chalmers. The legs on the backhoe would be planted soundly and I would be at the controls, touching levers, pushing pedals, digging holes and piling the dirt neatly to one side.

As soon as I got one hole dug I would turn around in the seat, raise the legs, move the machine to another location, and dig another hole.

One day I shared my dream with another Baptist preacher. He was a disciple of Carl Jung and quickly said my subconscious was digging graves for deacons.

"I don't vent my own frustrations at obstinate church members through dreams," he bragged, "but I recognize the syndrome.

"Actually," he confided, "I take out my anger on the golf course. Would you believe I have increased my drives almost 75 yards by imagining the golf ball is the chairman of the deacons."

I suspected his interpretation of my dream was filtered through his own abnor-

malities and looked further for an explanation.

A Presbyterian pastor, an admitted Freudian, said my dream had sexual connotations.

I stopped dreaming of backhoes years ago. But the desire to own one of those machines has never left. In fact, it increases each year.

This last Christmas, as with many Christmases in the past, I came down the

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stairs hoping to find a big, yellow tractor with a backhoe on one end and a front-end loader on the other sitting in the front drive.

I had hoped I would get one this Christmas. But, alas, I was disappointed again.

It's like that cowboy suit I wanted when I was six years old, the one I used to wish for on the evening star, it never has materialized.

Now here I am, grinding through middle life, wondering if I'm ever going to have my own backhoe.

Three years ago, unable to afford the real thing, I bought a 15-horsepower Yanmar diesel tractor—with a small grading blade that fits on the back. With this I can go out and smooth out the bumps in our long dirt driveway. But that does not satisfy the deep yearning for the genuine article.

To sit on one of those wonderful machines, dig holes and ditches, then pick up the dirt in the front-end loader and spread it smoothly . . . ah, that would be the ultimate.

"Tell me what you would do with one if you had it," Jackie asked last week after

we walked through the Christian community where we live and watched a friend put in a septic tank using a beat-up old Massey-Ferguson.

"I'd dig holes with it," I answered curtly—sensing the hostility which seems to appear everytime I bring up the subject.

I reminded her that Brooks and Laura had bought the property next to ours in the community and wanted to build an earth house—mostly underground.

"Me and my backhoe would be there to serve my neighbor, just like the Bible commands.

"I'd take it out in our pasture and deepen our pond. I'd shape the sides. I'd take the dirt and use it to raise the driveway so it wouldn't be under water every time it rains. I'd go down the road and dig holes for our friends in the community. I'd . . ."

"Remember the time you got the bulldozer stuck in the bottom of our pond," she interrupted rudely, giggling. "And tried to pull it out with the Datsun."

I wished she hadn't brought up the bulldozer. Actually I was not the fellow who got it stuck. I had promised one of our neighbors in the community he could have some fill dirt. The water level was down and the pond was dry. It was a good time to dig. So I rented a bulldozer from the local bulldozer store.

One of the other men in the community volunteered to run the machine. He said he used to operate heavy equipment in the army. I should have known we were in for trouble that Saturday morning when they delivered the big Caterpillar 'dozer and my friend took a look and said, "Where's the steering wheel?"

Not only didn't he know much about bulldozers, but he was unfamiliar with Florida soil. Down here we have sandy topsoil. Under that is a hard clay base called "hardpan." Underneath that—sink-holes.

Within an hour he had broken through the hardpan. The bulldozer began to sink. I heard him screaming. By the time I got out in the pasture it was up to the top tread in mire—and seemingly going under.

That was when we tried to pull it out with the Datsun. After losing the rear bumper

and stripping low gear, I called the bulldozer store.

"Happens all the time," the man said. "Just lower the blade. That will raise the treads. Put all of next winter's firewood that it took you three months to split under the treads. Then the dozer will crawl out of the hole."

"That little Saturday afternoon episode cost you the annual royalty of two books," Jackie said. "And you want to own a backhoe?"

She just doesn't understand. What I really want is the satisfaction of doing something—anything—that doesn't get undone.

That's why I had all those dreams after committee meetings. For years I've made plans, dreamed dreams, only to have them changed, denied, crushed, altered and reshaped by committees. How wonderful it would be to have the kind of job so that when you dug a hole—it stayed dug. When you piled dirt one day—it would be there the next morning.

How I envy bricklayers, painters, even dentists. When they do something, it stays done. They can go back the next day, or the next time the patient comes in the office, and nod with satisfaction.

But when you work with people in a church. Or even with an editorial board . . .

That's the reason I want a backhoe. Just so I can come home from a day of negotiating, walk out to the shed, climb up on that big beautiful yellow piece of machinery, turn the switch, hear it roar to life, lumber out to dig a hole, and know it will do exactly what I tell it to—without talking back.

I don't need a reason for digging holes. In fact, I just might go back the next day and put the dirt back in the hole. But God knows, even if my wife doesn't understand, how desperately I need—every once in a while—to do something that will be the same tomorrow as it was today.

Maybe next Christmas I'll come down the stairs and there, sitting in my driveway, will be a big, yellow Ford 750.

WHOOEEE!

Until then, if you need me, I'll be down at the construction site.

Drooling. ➡