

# **D**OODLE AND THE RUNAWAY TRACTOR

*or*

## *An Adventure in Spreading Manure*



I was not in any rush for the school bus to get home this March day. Farm chores were always plentiful, and I knew it was the time of year that we must clean the horse and mule stables of accumulated manure and straw. This was a chore that had two purposes – one, to make it better for the work animals, and second to spread the manure on certain areas of the farm as an effective fertilizer.



The farm implement used for this purpose was a two-horse box wagon, modified to be pulled by our farm tractor. I believe the tractor was the third and last one Dad owned, if so, it was a Minneapolis-Moline, commonly called an “MM”. It was easy to drive; it had a hand clutch and a hand throttle. You will see the significance of this later.

After dawdling as long as I dared while having an after school snack, I changed from school clothes to work clothes. I then hitched the tractor to the wagon and moved it into the hall of the barn in front of one of the stable doors. And without a lot of enthusiasm I am sure, I began the smelly task of loading the wagon.

Somewhere in this process “kid sister” appeared, as she usually did if I was working around the house or barns. She occupied herself climbing the ladder to the barn loft, and other such shenanigans, which was not too bad for her at this time. If she began to bug me too much, I would just throw a shovel full of manure on her – wet or dry – whichever was my choice to match the level of pestering from her.

Although her name is Delores, we all called her “Doodle”, which was short for “Doodle-bug”, a nickname Dad gave her when she was a baby. It stuck as did Mildred’s nickname “Toots”, also given her by Dad, and my nickname “Pap” given me by Grandpa Brownlee. She was full of what I thought were dumb questions, smiled all the time, and giggled a lot. I note that the maturing process has not changed her much. I don’t believe she was barefooted that day, it was too early in the spring. Mom usually would not allow going barefoot until after the first day of May.

We decided she would accompany me to the field to “spread the manure”. Some might argue that we were pretty good at that. But understand I had to manually spread the manure on the field. I let her stand on the tractor beside me on a small level portion of the metal covering the rear axle housing, lean against the rear fender between the large rear wheel and the driver’s seat, and hold on to the fender with both hands. This went pretty well.

We arrived at the field for unloading. The process was to stand on the load, fill a fork (either a pitchfork or hull-fork), and in one long swoop scatter the stuff evenly and

as far from the wagon as possible. Then move the wagon forward and continue the process covering the approximate same width as we moved along. The wind was blowing and you have heard of “getting it blown back in your face”, well I was certainly getting it blown back in my face. I repositioned the tractor and wagon so the wind would be to my back as I spread off the back of the wagon. Doodle was still standing on the tractor.

I had an idea. I would let Doodle move the tractor and wagon forward when I needed it. Therefore I would not have to get down off the wagon, climb up and start the tractor, move forward about 15 to 20 feet, shut off the tractor, climb down, then climb back up on the wagon, and continue to spread the manure. This idea, I soon learned, was a terrible mistake. Although I thought it was time for Doodle to learn something, so she could perhaps begin to make a meaningful contribution to the family work effort on the farm, I was clearly wrong. While it may have worked with some kids, I had obviously over estimated the maturity, ability to understand simple instructions, and the manual dexterity of kid sister. It went something like this.

Me: Doodle I want you to help me.

Doodle: Help you. Wha’cha want me to do? I can’t shovel that stuff.

Me: I know that. I want you to drive the tractor.

Doodle: Drive the tractor - I can’t do that! Hee hee, ha ha.

Me: Yes you can. I’ll show you how. All I want you to do is move the tractor and wagon straight forward about 15 to 20 feet when I tell you to.

Doodle: I don’t know how far that is, - and I can’t drive this tractor! But I’ll try, hee hee, ha ha. (I should have stopped right then.)

Me: O K, get in the driver’s seat and I’ll show you what to do.

Doodle: I can’t reach the pedals. What is this thing? How do I stop? (I should have listened to that warning – I didn’t)

Me: You don’t have to reach the pedals, it has a hand clutch and hand throttle.

Doodle: What’s a clutch? (There’s that warning again.)

Me: Now watch. This is the throttle. It controls the speed of the engine and the tractor. This is the clutch. It makes the tractor go when it is in gear (I was trying to keep it simple). Push this clutch lever forward to start. Pull it back to stop. Hold the steering wheel straight and you will go straight forward – no need to turn. I’ll leave the tractor running and in gear.

Doodle: What’s that mean? (There’s that warning again)

Me: It means its ready to go.

Doodle: Oh.

Me: Here I’ll show you.

I was standing on the hitch-bar, so I reached over her, held the steering wheel, moved the throttle forward, pushed the clutch lever forward, and the tractor and wagon moved forward. When I reached the desired location, I pulled the clutch lever back (it stayed in either position when moved), the tractor and wagon stopped without braking. I then moved the throttle back to idle position.

Me: See how easy that is, when I tell you to go, move the throttle forward a little, push the clutch lever forward, hold the steering wheel straight – simple. When I tell you to stop, pull the clutch lever back, and pull the throttle back, OK.

Doodle: OK, hee hee hee.

I returned to the wagon and begin to spread the manure in the area from where the wagon was last stopped up to where we were, covering about the same width as before. When I finished I squatted down in the wagon holding on to both sides, and turned to Doodle and said, “OK, move it up”. Now I didn’t know it, but I was about to begin the most unexpected and unusual ride I had ever had in that, or any other wagon, and I had been in some when the mules “ran away”.

Doodle: Is this the hickey I move? (This was probably the last chance to heed the warning.)

Me: Yeah.

Doodle: And now this long lever makes it go.

Me: Yeah, and be sure and hold the steering wheel straight.

She pushed in the clutch and we were off.

Doodle: Ha ha ha, hee hee – I’m scared (as she looked back at me).

Me: OK, that’s far enough, stop. Stop! STOP!!

Doodle: I forgot how, as she continued to look back at me, hee hee, ha ha ha.

Me: Look where you’re going! Stop! Don’t turn the steering wheel!! STOP!!

Doodle: “I forgot how to stop, hee hee, ha ha”, and looks back at me as she begins to turn toward a terrace.

Me: Pull the clutch lever back!

Doodle: “What”, as she continues toward the terrace.

Me: LOOK WHERE YOU ‘RE GOING! DON’T CROSS THE TERRACE! TURN LEFT – LEFT!!

Doodle: Which way is left, hee hee, ha ha ha?

Me: STOP - - - TURN - - - !!! (Oh God am I in trouble)

She is starting across the terrace and as the MM crosses the front wheels cut right, jerking the steering wheel out of her hands. She is totally out of control. About that time the wagon crosses the terrace at an angle, and the wagon box, with me holding on to each side bounces up out of the stanchions, and almost throws me out. I figure this is not going to get any better, but I continue to try to get her to stop.

Me: STOP!!! Pull the clutch back! Pull the throttle back!!

Doodle: “What”, as she looked back at me, “hee hee, ha ha ha”?

For some unknown and merciful reason the tractor was now headed between and parallel to the terraces. I figure its time for heroics – no, I panic is what I do. So I jump off the wagon. Now what – she is going across the field by herself, giggling and laughing as she goes. Where will she end up with that load of mule manure? I’ve got to

stop her. I'm trotting along behind the wagon making hand signals that mean absolutely nothing to her. I have an idea (yeah, another idea). I'll grab hold of the back of the wagon and hold it back and stall the tractor. Yeah – right. That MM could pull a five disc plow all day long, and I'm going to stall it. So I'm holding the back of the wagon with my heels dug in and I'm making two furrows with my heels, and the rocks ain't being too kind to me either. I almost fall. This ain't working. I gotta do something. I turn loose of the wagon.

I run past the wagon. I decide to jump onto the moving tractor. I have to time this just right. I must dart in between the wagon and the tractor, jump or step up on the tractor hitch-bar, reach up and grab the back of the tractor seat, reach across Doodle and grab the steering wheel. I did. Whew. Then I stepped around and reached the clutch lever and pulled it back. The MM stopped. I pulled the throttle back to idle position. Kid sister and the load of mule manure was saved, and probably my 'behind' too.

Me: #\*&+\*####\*!! Why didn't you stop??

Doodle: Hee hee hee, ha ha ha, I couldn't remember how.

Me: Just go to the house!

Doodle: Why can't I stay and ride back?

Me: Because!

Doodle: Because why, it was your fault. I'll tell Mama.

Me: It was not my fault – you dumb ox – you should have listened – and you should have stopped – and on – and on ---.

I finished unloading by moving the MM and the wagon up myself each time – as you can guess I had learned that it was much safer that way. I returned the wagon and MM to their respective sheds, with Doodle riding with me on the MM holding on to the rear fender.

Mama: Where have you been young lady? I've been looking all over for you.

Doodle: I've been helping Pap.

Yeah, right – some help. I don't recall that I ever offered to let Doodle drive the tractor, or anything else, again. Experience is a hard teacher, but I do learn faster than kid sister.

Thomas H. (Pap) Ewing

(My own story)

January 1998

Post script: On February 19, 1998 after learning that a sub-division was being built on the farm, I drove over there. I knew it had to happen sooner or later. After all the grading, it's hard to tell exactly where things used to be. Although at this time only a portion of the farm is in the development, I could tell that it does include a part of the field where

this escapade took place. Progress erases everything but the good memories of those of us who were fortunate enough to grow up there on the farm and experience it.

Serious accident rate on the farm was, and still is, very high. As I look back at the things I did in every day farm work, I wonder how I escaped a serious accident – how did I ever grow up. But it was routine – all farms were involved in essentially the same chores, with all the same risks. Maybe others were not as persistent or daring as I was. Hummmm?

