

# Excerpt from “The Meatloaf Incident”

## Sideshow: Adventures In Farming



Summer wasn't all fun and games. A few of us had jobs at Tucker's Farm doing the kinds of things that no one else had the time or the desire to do. Tucker ran his entire farm with the help of just two full-time employees, one of whom was his son Duane. The other farmhand was our boss, an 18 year-old high school drop-out named Herbie. With these people, Tucker had to milk 125 cows, maintain two double-sized barns, cultivate six fields, and do all of the other hundreds of things needed to be done to keep a farm going. That's why he hired us to do such things as mending fences, clearing brush, and stacking haybales.

Because we were only part-time help, we only worked when Tucker needed us, which turned out to be about twice a week. We didn't mind working once in a while during the summer because we were always broke. The only problem was, even after we earned some money at Tucker's, we weren't too good at saving it.

“It just doesn't make sense,” whined Mel as I came out the back door to get my bike out of the woodshed. “We work our tails off to earn some money, and then we waste it on nothing.”

“Well,” I replied, checking the tire inflation, “we could always try saving it.”

“Save it?” he asked in disbelief, as if I just suggested that we set his hair on fire. “What kind of fun would that be? Save it, he says. Wow.” He shook his head in disgust as he retied his sneaker.

Tucker's Farm was a mile away on Chamberlin Mills Road. The ride down was a lot easier than the ride back, which was bad because on the way back we were usually tired and sore after a hard day's work. There were times when we just waited for Mel's father to get done with work so we could put our bikes in the back of his truck and ride back. Duane gave us a ride home once in his father's truck, but he was such a bad driver that we didn't think it was worth the risk to do it again.

Duane always gave the impression that he didn't care about anything. If a cow kicked him in the shin or the tractor stalled in a field that was a mile from his house, he acted like nothing happened. Even when we played war, he was always very calm and seemed like he wouldn't mind if the Sentinels took over Indian Head Lookout or not. The only sign that he enjoyed the war was the fact that every time a battle was scheduled, it would take a major event to keep him away. In fact, on the day we fought the Battle of Indian Head Lookout, his father's truck had died near Nelson's Dance Hall on the way over, and he didn't bother telling anyone until the battle was over.

Duane was usually waiting for us whenever we arrived at the farm, and today was no exception.

“Where’s Sam?” he asked when he saw that it was just the three of us.

“He’s working at Sheldon’s today,” Dave replied, not sounding too broken up about it. Ever since Sam had gotten in trouble for not having any money, he started working two jobs and saving every penny he earned. I guess he finally realized that the only way he would ever get away from his large family would be to save up enough to buy himself a car. Although the work he did on Tucker’s and Sheldon’s farms never added up to more than 30 hours a week, he figured that by the time summer was over he would have enough money to buy the car of his dreams, providing it didn’t cost more than two hundred dollars.

We stowed our bikes out of the way in the sawdust shed as Herbie waddled his way over to us from the house. I could tell just by looking at him that he wasn’t in his best form. His short, five and-a-half foot high body had to be pushing 280 pounds, most of it made up of fat. Farmers never had the chance to get overweight due to long work hours and hard labor, but Herbie was the exception to the rule. He worked just as hard as anyone, but for some reason he just couldn’t lose any weight. Not that he was trying too hard. One time I witnessed him eat an entire chicken, and that was before Mrs. Tucker had even served the main course.

“What’re you boys up to today?” Herbie asked amiably, adjusting his dirty Skoal cap atop his head.

“I guess that’s up to the boss,” I replied. “What does Tucker have in store for us?”

“Burnin’,” Herbie answered with an anticipating smile. “A whole lotta burnin’.” He rubbed his hands together and headed for the tire pit without another word. Dave, Mel, Duane, and I followed, not much looking forward to the day’s activities.

“Great,” Dave said. “Now I’ve gotta take another bath when I get home or the whole place will smell like smoke for a week.”

We all grabbed a tire from the tire pit and headed across the road towards the cornfield. Tucker had been expanding it for quite a while at the expense of the surrounding forest. The big tree trunks were left to dry out to be used as firewood for the winter, while the branches had to be hauled away and burned so that more trees could be cut down. Tucker had hired a man named Getty to clear the woods beside Chamberlin Mills Pond. He sure didn’t waste any time, virtually doubling the size of the field to seven acres in one week. That made for a lot of burning to be done, and we were the people that always got stuck with the job. At least one of us didn’t mind.

“This is gonna be awesome,” Herbie said to us as we approached a huge pile of branches that towered above our heads and stretched many yards away.

“We’ve got to burn this?” Mel cried, dropping his tire in amazement. His eyes were wide with horror. “We’ll be here all day!” he wailed.

“Not with this!” Herbie said, lifting a large can from the ground that he had brought there earlier.

“What the heck is that?” Dave asked, still holding his tire.

“Pure gasoline,” Herbie said, sounding out the words slowly to savor every syllable. “This here’s our ticket to a quick and painless job. All we have to do is stick them tires

under the pile like we always do, sprinkle on a little fuel, and in a few minutes we'll be on our way home to eat lunch. No fuss, no worry."

We could only watch as Herbie placed the tires under the brush and prepared to try his new time-saving experiment. Using tires to keep the fire going was always a good idea, because once you got them going, it would take a lot to put them out again. You could put whatever you wanted on top of them and watch it burn to a crisp. This gasoline business was new, though, and I just hoped nothing bad would come of it.

"Don't you think that's enough?" Mel asked when Herbie showed no signs of stopping even after he had emptied about two gallons of gasoline on the pile. "Heck no!" Herbie said, aghast at such a thought. "This wood is all green, and besides, it just rained last week. We don't want t'be burnin' all day, do we?" he said, looking around for support. Duane just sat on the ground with his eyes half-closed, while Dave started choking on a piece of grass he had been chewing on. Mel looked like he just swallowed a bumblebee.

"Well I sure as heck don't," Herbie cried over Dave's coughing. "Just leave me alone, for pete's sake. I know what I'm doin'." He continued pouring the gas over the pile in a jerking fashion in an effort to cover each and every twig.

When the five gallon container was finally empty, Herbie surveyed his work with obvious satisfaction. "Now this is gonna be a fire," he promised as the fumes rose from the depths of the pile, giving me a headache.

"Just light the darn thing before I pass out," I said, taking a few steps back to get away from the powerful odor.

"Everyone make way!" Herbie said, spreading his arms like a magician. He dramatically removed a matchbook from his pocket and gently touched a match to the striker.

FOOM! The entire pile ignited at once as a huge sheet of flame burst like an exploding sun thirty feet in all directions. Herbie, who had been standing nearest to the fire, was momentarily covered in a wall of fire that rose at least ten feet into the air and sent waves of scorching heat pounding down on us like a sledgehammer.

I threw my arms up over my face and fell back in alarm, thinking my life was over.

"YEOW!" yelled Herbie as he galloped away from the inferno, running in such terror that he collided full-force into an oak tree.

"Oof," was all he could manage, before collapsing like a sack of chicken feed onto the ground with a thud.

"Herbie! You okay?" I asked, running over to see if he was still alive. Dave took control of the situation by getting down on his knees and punching Herbie in the chest with all of his might.

"Wha, what happened?" Herbie asked, opening his eyes and staring at us like he thought we were aliens.

"Nothing much," Mel said. "You just almost killed us. No big deal."

"Man, it was terrible," Herbie said, ignoring Mel. "Here I was, minding my own business, peacefully trying to light a match, when all of a sudden, the pile exploded. I thought for sure I was a goner," he added, exhaling in wonder.

“What a bonehead,” Mel muttered just loud enough for me to hear him. Meanwhile, Dave was still pounding Herbie on the chest.

“All right Dave, enough!” Herbie said, pushing him away. “I’m awake!”

“Just making sure,” Dave said, regretfully stopping and leaning back, humming to himself.

“Well, you said it would be awesome, and darned if you weren’t right,” Duane observed with satisfaction. “You sure don’t see that every day.”

“I wouldn’t want to,” Herbie said, apparently losing all interest in using gas to start fires. “It’s bad for yer health.”

I finally looked away from Herbie’s smoking cap to take a look at the fire. “Holy cow!” I shouted in alarm.

Everyone turned and saw the size of the fire Herbie had started. In the brief time we were talking, it had completely covered the entire pile, roaring like a runaway freight train. The core of the fire glowed white with heat, causing the ground below to explode into small shards of flying rock. The flames shot into the air, threatening to ignite the nearby forest at the slightest change of wind direction. Smoke from the tires and the green wood billowed away in thick clouds, blocking the view in all directions. Worst of all, the fire was beginning to spread to the growing stalks of corn only a few feet away. We could almost see thousands of dollars of crops going up in smoke before our eyes.

If we had been clear and calm, we could have gotten the whole thing under control within minutes. We kept shovels nearby to dig small ditches around the fire to contain it, and throwing dirt into the flames to smother it. Unfortunately, we weren’t clear or calm. Instead of acting in a decisive manner, we did the only thing we knew how to do, which involved uncontrolled screaming, running around in a random fashion, and flailing our arms about as if hailing the gods to come and rescue us from our own destruction.

At least I had the presence of mind to do something useful, by running over and kicking dirt on the fire that was advancing into the cornfield. Herbie had jumped up and hurled his massive body at the fire with a heart-stopping scream and began stomping on any flame that came within his reach, yelling every time he did so. Dave jumped into the foray with a small stick and began swatting at the core of the fire, with little result. Duane, in an uncharacteristic show of emotion, ran around in circles, yelling at the top of his voice, as if it had been bottled up inside of him for years. Mel had been so startled by the sight of the fire that he ran straight into a bee’s nest, causing him to run about the field in pure terror, yelling louder than the rest of us put together.

I glanced at Mel in alarm as he ran by me, frantically swatting at the air with both hands, but I knew that his situation was not as important as the one we were facing with the fire. We needed help and we needed it now, or 30 acres of prize cornfields and forests could be destroyed before the firemen even showed up.

I looked towards the house and realized we were too far away to be heard, and everyone was probably too busy to glance in our direction and see the smoke. Even if someone did see it, they probably wouldn’t think much of it anyway, since we were supposed to be burning. I decided the only way to get out of this mess was to run for help and hope that Tucker could think of something.

I paused as Mel swung by again, yelling for help over and over again.

"I'm going to get Tucker!" I shouted after him. "He'll help us!"

"Tell him to bring some bug spray!" Mel shouted back before disappearing into the trees of the forest.

I ran as fast as I could back through the field and over the hill, listening to Duane and Herbie scream various curses and oaths at the fire and at each other. Without pausing to look back, I sped across the road and past the tire pit towards the farmhouse. I leaped up the steps in one jump and crashed through the screen door, taking a head-first dive onto the carpet and knocking over a floor lamp.

Mrs. Tucker ran in from the kitchen to see what was going on.

"Timothy!" she cried, clasping her hands together. "Are you all right?"

"Fire," I panted, unable to talk in complete sentences because I hadn't breathed the whole way down the hill.

"What?" she asked. "What about the fire?" Her eyes widened like she knew what I was about to say.

"The fire," I gasped, still sprawled on the floor, clutching my chest like a wounded soldier trying to reveal valuable information before dying, "it's, it's..."

"It's out of control?" she asked, her face becoming framed in terror, much like Mel's was when he ran by me followed by a swarm of angry bees.

I took a few more breaths. "Bingo," I said before letting my head fall to the floor with a thump. Next time, I had to remember to breathe while I ran.

"Oh my lord!" Mrs. Tucker wailed, wringing her hands in anguish. She always was rather emotional. Just then, Tucker came down the stairs from taking a shower and looked at me in wonder.

"What the heck is going on here?" he asked, looking from my lifeless body to his wife's fear-laden face to the mess I made when I burst in.

"He says the fire is out of control!" Mrs. Tucker said. "Hurry! Go see what's happening!" she pleaded.

"Call the fire department," he told her. "Tim, come on," he said to me as he strode purposefully out the door. I scrambled to my feet and followed, hoping that we wouldn't get sued if the cornfield was gone when we got there.

Tucker led the way to his tractor, a two year-old John Deere that could pull a 30 foot tree out by the roots as if it were a twig. He jumped on and started it up, quickly throwing it in reverse as I climbed on after him. As soon as we were out of the barn, Tucker engaged fourth gear, and we hurtled our way over rocks and tractor ruts that nearly threw me off. On the way, he stopped to hook on the tiller, which was sitting conveniently next to the hay barn. Then we were speeding our way across the road and towards the fire, wondering how bad it would be when we got there.

What a sight we saw as the fire came into view! Herbie was still stomping on the fringes of the fire with grim determination, his clothes covered with soot and his cap wildly askew. Duane looked like he had taken up exercising, wildly jumping up and down, crying out like a lunatic. Dave was still swatting at the center of the fire with his stick, which was by now quite a bit shorter. Mel suddenly burst from the trees and

startled us with a scream that echoed back and forth across the hills before disappearing into the cornfield, his arms waving madly above his head all the while. It looked as though everyone had gone completely insane.

The fire itself was huge, and had grown larger during the time I was gone. The edge of the forest was in danger of becoming ignited, while almost two acres of corn were glowing orange with flames. A gigantic cloud of smoke hung in the air, covering the entire field and a good part of Chamberlin Mills Pond.

Tucker engaged the tiller and shifted the tractor into high gear. Then he moved it to a part of the field that was as yet untouched, and began digging a wide ditch that would hopefully stop the fire from going any further. The tiller churned up half-grown corn and clouds of dust that mingled with the smoke of the man-made disaster, cutting visibility to only a few yards.

Duane finally stopped dancing around when he saw his father trying to stop the advancing fire. Even Dave stopped beating the flames with his stick. A huge grin broke out on his face, and as we went by he yelled, "By the power of the great John Deere, we WILL get by!"

Tucker steered across the plain and back towards the woods, where he hoped to cut the fire off before it hit the forest. Herbie, who was too absorbed in his activity to concentrate on anything else, almost didn't see the tractor bearing down on him. He dove out of the way at the last minute, landing squarely on a giant anthill. Before long he was screaming even louder than Mel was.

I doubt Tucker would have stopped for anything. If the fire reached the trees it would go on burning no matter what the firemen did, and some of that forest was protected by the state because of some of the animals that lived there. I hung on for dear life, knowing that if I fell off, it was unlikely my boss would stop and see if I was okay when much of his farm was about to be burned down. He was in a race that spelled certain financial ruin if he lost, and he wasn't about to slow down for the world.

A bystander would probably have been stunned at the scene he was witnessing. The sounds of the roaring fire, the straining tractor, the churning tiller, and the yells of Dave and Herbie blended together with the clouds of smoke and dust to create a havoc that scarcely passes through Hebron once in a lifetime. The normally peaceful field was choking with noise, smoke, dust, and flames.

Tucker drove the tractor recklessly along the border of the forest, nearly causing us to tip over twice in his mad dash towards the edge of the field where he had begun tilling. As soon as he completed one circle, he swung around again for another pass to make sure the path was wide enough. I hung on for dear life, wishing that I had walked over instead of catching a ride with Tucker.

Just as we were about to complete the second lap, Mel burst from the cornfield again with another wild yell that scared me so bad I almost lost my grip on the edge of the seat. I was impressed with the stubbornness of those bees, still chasing him after all that time.

At last, Tucker engaged the clutch and let the tractor roll to a stop as Mel went screaming by. He scanned the fire anxiously to see if it jumped over the wide ditch he had made to stop it. The fire still burned with rage, but seemed to have been halted by

Tucker's clever action with the tiller. Duane and Dave approached the tractor as I wearily let myself slide off and fall to the ground. I laid there for quite some time, basking in the fact that my body was no longer being tossed around like a hot potato.

After a few minutes of watching the burning fire silently, we heard the sound of sirens coming from the distance. I sat up and watched as a group of firemen made their way over the hill carrying lengths of hose and large shovels. When they saw Tucker sitting on his tractor, they stopped running and dropped their gear.

"Sorry to make you come all the way out here," Tucker said, "but I think we got a handle on it."

"It looks that way," the Hebron fire chief said, glancing at the fire. "It's easy for these things to get out of hand." Tucker nodded. "You want us to put the fire out while we're here?"

"That's all right. Might as well let it burn. I'll keep an eye on it."

"No problem, Mr. Tucker."

"Thanks for coming, but everything's under control."

Just as he said it, a loud scream came from the woods to our left. The trees began to shudder, and all of a sudden Mel burst into the field. He wildly ran around and yelled so loud that the firemen instinctively ducked their heads and stared at him in alarm. He was still waving his arms, but every once in a while he would stop running and drop to the ground and roll about before emitting a high-pitched scream. Then he'd jump to his feet and continue across the field.

"What in blue blazes is that?" asked one of the firemen, his jaw hanging open in awe of such a display.

"Mel. He ran into a beehive," Dave answered with a brief smile as he swung by us with a terrorized look on his face.

Then another sound pierced the air, and we all turned around just in time to see Herbie emerge from the woods with a yell that would have made the hair fall out of a gorilla. More jumping than running, he bounced his way towards the stalks of corn, furiously scratching himself like he had a bad case of poison ivy.

"Who haaa!" he yelled at us before turning and disappearing into the cornfield, where his shouts became muffled as he put more and more distance between us.

"What in Sam Hill is wrong with Herbie?" asked Tucker as the firemen shook their heads in disbelief.

"It's called a just punishment," I said with a smile.