

# Bent Pipes

By Jim Turner

Life for a 15-year-old is a less complex journey if he or she can create small places to stop along the way. But imagining the world beyond your own small neighborhood, much less how you can be a part of that bigger picture, can be a daunting prospect. At least that was true for me in 1958. For me, growing up in a small Piedmont North Carolina town with an economy built around tobacco and cotton mills, and in a time long before instant and 24-hour news, the only things that mattered were those happening within walking or biking distance from our own modest home. Never mind those school duck-and-cover drills. It seems surprising that we never realized just how little protection that desk was going to provide when the big bad Russians dropped a nuclear bomb on our roof. In a few short weeks my granddaughter will be 15, and the contrasts between her world and the one I experienced when I was her age are enormous. I marvel at her ability to gracefully manage her challenges—and I remember my own 15th year and how inept and insecure I was.

“Deployment” was certainly not a part of everyday conversation when I was a teenager. Families were relocated because of job requirements or they moved about for other reasons, not necessarily militarily related. In today’s world, being flexible about where you live is an absolute requirement for the whole family, but in my youth we made friends and, for the most part, we all grew up together until high school graduation when we faced the variety of decisions the event bestowed upon us. My family was one of those that moved “for other reasons,” and although the distance of the move in actual miles was short, the new home seemed a continent away in terms of culture. Among other things, the move meant starting a new school, making new friends and having a new identity other than Billy’s younger brother. I would soon learn that it was okay to be smart and it was also okay to make mistakes. I found out that there was this place called college. If I worked hard maybe I, too, could continue to be a student wrapped in that warm little cocoon of higher education.

My 15th birthday found me trying to understand my new status as a country boy. Our family had moved from town life to farm life before the new school year started, and I was quickly introduced to manual labor of the most honorable kind. At first glance I felt we might as well have moved to Venus. I had no clue about how to be a farmer. On-the-job training took care of that very quickly. I joined our neighbors in the harvesting of their tobacco crops and learned that it took a village to grow and harvest and to prepare for the winter months to come. I was a quick learner, partly because all the new stuff was just plain fun. The multitude of chores seemed more like adventures than real work. There were so many different experiences to share almost every day. Those early days of my farm life creep into my memory from time to time and the thoughts almost always bring a smile.

A friend recently shared a book by former President Jimmy Carter entitled *An Hour Before Daybreak*, and while I read of his memories of his childhood days on his father’s peanut farm in rural Plains, Georgia, many of my old farming memories rushed back once again.


Young boys who live on farms learn how to drive by necessity. For me, as with all other farm duties, driving was an adventure. I was told to get behind the wheel of a large International Harvester truck and make it go forward without running over chickens. When I’d learned to go forward, we would work on backing up. Now, all 15-year-old boys know intuitively that being able to drive will ultimately lead to being alone in a car with a girl, and the possibilities that offered were pretty awesome. What greater motivation could one need to learn something new? Needless to say, I picked up the driving thing rather quickly, but not without some tense moments trying to see over the steering wheel of this giant tank of a truck. I was told to let out on the clutch slowly while pushing on the gas pedal. Then the big truck would start to roll smoothly. Unless, of course, it started to buck and bounce up and down. If the bucking and bouncing happened, it might also be accompanied by some scraping noises. Once again, pushing on the clutch would relieve the pressure and all would be calm. Well, maybe so and maybe not. The small problem here was nobody explained where a clutch was located and, come to think of it, how much pressure should be put on the gas pedal.

We learned during our first year of farming that we needed to help Mother Nature by spraying water on the crops. Garden hoses won’t reach over a 15-acre field, so once again, the village got busy helping. The team of workers moved methodically, one farm after the other. Irrigating crop land is a labor-intensive task and requires lots of busy hands to move the aluminum pipes from field to field and from farm to farm as the fields become sufficiently saturated. There was good news in all of this for me, though, since it became the time for me to show off my newly acquired truck driving skills. Each piece of pipe, about four inches in diameter and 25 feet or so in length, needed to be twisted and uncoupled, lifted from the middle of the rows of crops and tossed on a truck bed. Then it would be transported (by me) to the next field. There the pipes would be offloaded, re-coupled and connected to the pump, which was set in place at our farm pond. This action was repeated over and over again as we progressed through all the fields of all the farms. All went well for a while. I got pretty cocky with the truck clutch, with moving the monster forward and, by golly, I was even able to make the beast move backward without bucking and jumping. Maybe I was dreaming about the girls in the cars or just not paying attention when I heard some people shout, “Stop!” That command was followed by a crunch, which was followed by some hysterical laughter from the other young guys working with me.

Behind the truck I found two guys rolling on the ground laughing and pointing at the three sections of aluminum pipe that I had killed. Big trucks have big tires and big tires leave big dents in thin aluminum pipes. Water would never again be able to pass through these joints. Three young boys stared at the mess, with two of them still cracking up and the third one (me) mentally writing my own obituary. It is true that three heads are better than one, especially when the three heads are also pretty devious.

A plan to dispose of the murdered pipes quickly took shape in that tobacco field. Three pieces of pipe were to be buried at sea, or rather at pond. So, we tied the three pipes together with some rope, and then tied the rope to two cinder blocks. Like pallbearers, the three of us walked the contraption into the pond until the water was up to our necks, and we dropped it and waited to be sure it would not float back to the top. When we were satisfied the evidence was destroyed, we erupted into laughter.

What I remember most about that day is how good the water felt. I had imagined the feeling of being consumed by the fires of hell for my crimes. Instead, those flames had been doused by the waters of a muddy little country pond. The three of us took an oath of silence before we walked from the pond, and I have kept it for 58 years. I have no idea if my brothers in crime ever told the story. Even though I am now confessing to the deed, I will never, ever reveal the names of the other members of the Bent Pipe Gang. Those names are tied to a cinder block and lodged in mud.



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