



Fathers Day 2013 At Wise Acres

Now that Slim is operating solo at the Wise Acres spread, Fathers' Day has undergone a fundamental change. These days it means simply getting out of bed and getting with the program, which boils down to getting one of my four (that's right, FOUR count 'em FOUR) internal combustion-powered grass-cutting machines to run, and then running that one until the gasoline is gone or it's too dark to see the grass that still needs cutting.

This year, because of a series of circular circumstances too circumspect to explain here, the Great Fathers' Day Mow-In coincided with the annual Re-Awakening Of The Mowers Ceremony, in which Yours Truly uses every last tool in his garage, every last minute of sunlight in the day, and every last ounce of ingenuity in his head to coax some semblance of functionality back into his motley collection of beat-to-hell but inexpensive mowers which have spent the last Fall and Winter quietly rusting away under plastic tarps around the yard. That 6-month hibernation period is essential because it furnishes the incubation time necessary to fully develop all the maintenance issues that guarantee the Re-Awakening Of The Mowers Ceremony will be an uninterrupted 18-hour orgy of busted knuckles, spilled hydrocarbons, futile cursing, and heatstroke.

This year marked the forced retirement of the front-line mower which traditionally did most of the grass-cutting around here: a 10-horsepower Murray rider with a single 30" blade, which was worn out when I bought it and whose lifespan I have ingeniously extended over the last 25 years, until it finally went out for its last total shit right at the end of last year's fun-filled mowing season. It will re-enter the narrative a bit later on, but for now it will suffice to explain that it has been supplanted with a less worn-out Murray rider that Bo Gast and I retrieved from Shedd last weekend.

Unlike any of my other mowers, the new/used Murray started when I turned the key and mowed the shit out of my yard until its tank ran empty, leaving the fence lines and other nooks and crannies for the smaller rotary mower that I push around the yard for finishing purposes. It too was used when I bought it 10 years ago to replace the similar mower that I destroyed by hitting an iron pipe with the blade at full-throttle, which bent the crankshaft beyond my capacity to straighten it back out. So the first order of repair business on Sunday morning was to get the small mower running, and do all the trim work with it.

Naturally it would not start after I pulled it out from under its tarp and I was deep into the process of tearing it to pieces when one of my old engineering friends, Tom Minot, showed up to offer advice and assistance. As he watched I tore the ignition system completely apart, and not having any way to test the spark voltage, I simply grasped the spark plug in one hand and spun the magneto around with the other to see if it could produce enough high voltage to furnish me with an electric shock.

It did.

After a brief recovery period I put all that back together and turned my attention to the carburetor. It was full of a mixture of water, partially polymerized gasoline left over from last October, dead insects, and rust. Using my air compressor, Tom blew out all the teeny little ports and passages in the body of the carburetor while I did my best to flush all the spoiled swill and chitinous exoskeletal remains out of the gas tank. Reassembling it was a struggle, because all of the original rubber seals and gaskets had rotted out years before and had been replaced with stuff from my salvage stash that didn't fit right, but eventually we got it back together and re-attached it to the engine.

Half the screws for attaching the engine housing were stripped out during earlier repair jobs and several of the mounting holes in the housing itself were torn out or hopelessly mangled so it took a significant amount of finessing to get it all back together- and then it still wouldn't start. At this juncture I was all out of aerosol starting fluid and instead tried to use a plastic eyedropper syringe to squirt some raw gasoline down the little bugger's throat, but all I managed to do was drop the syringe down into the gasoline can from which I was attempting to fill it. I had a second eyedropper syringe in my junk box and upon retrieving it, I managed to drop it into the gasoline can too. Now I was sorely perturbed.

But at this point Tom grabbed the whole damn lawn mower and tipped it up on its nose so the carburetor throat was pointing straight up, and he implored me to take the gasoline can and pour a swash of Iraq's Best straight down into the engine via the carb throat. Upon accomplishing this, Tom then set the mower back down and began furiously pulling the start rope.

And it STARTED, and shaking and quaking like a dog shitting a peach pit, the thing roared to life and sprayed our pants legs with oil droplets and last year's grass cuttings. I had to shut it down because I could see that the engine mounting bolts were so loose as to allow the engine block to describe an orbit significantly different from that of the mower deck, and Tom and I went back to work. When done, it refused once again to start, so Tom picked that sucker up again, tipped it over, and I poured another 2 shot glasses of raw gas down into it, and in this way we got the thing to start up once more.

But the starter cord, which normally retracts itself back into the starter housing on top of the engine block, did not, and I stood there at the push bar of the mower with the rubber handle of the pull cord in my hand, the cord dangling slack, and the engine running at full speed. Tom and I looked at each other, and then all at once the engine engaged the starter clutch and jerked back on the cord with sudden violence. The cord snapped off inside the starter and the loose end of the cord flew straight back at me and delivered a stinging rebuke to my arm and hand.

The engine was still running wide open. I stood there with the start cord handle in my hand and the broken end of the cord dangling from it and realized that I now had no way to restart the engine if it should stop, so I simply held the cord out to Tom, who took it away, and I began to mow. Tom returned with the gas can and with the engine still running, we topped off the fuel tank. Tom departed and I went to work. And so I mowed until it got too dark to see what I was doing, and that is how I spent Fathers' Day.

In the same sense that I have come to define "vacation" as a brief period during which I am allowed to go to bed when I am tired and not get out of bed until I am not tired, I have defined "heaven" as a

place where I do not own any lawn mowers.

Next time I will describe my thoughts upon tearing down the old mower for recycling, but for now, this is Slim's story and he's sticking to it.