

BOGGED, BUGGER IT

Laughing at adversity is a tradition in our family, especially when it's someone else's. Dad didn't have a lot of patience, so he spent a lot of time with a grip on his temper. A muscle used to twitch in the corner of his jaw when his patience wore thin, a sign that it was time to disappear and watch the fun from afar.

In September 1969, we moved onto a new property – 7,500 acres of flat scrub country on the Moonie River. The pumping hole in the river at the house was good for swimming. The house wasn't much : a diesel generator for power; a long-drop dunny; a coke-fired stove, and a chip-heater for the bathwater. And there was a phone. A party line - a single wire strung from property to property from the telephone exchange 15 miles away as the crow flies. Everyone had their own ring – Morse code style. Ours was 1-2-S: three shorts. You could ring up and down the line or call the exchange with one long ring.

In November, it rained and rained and rained us in. The roads were dirt in every direction and the river rose fast, so we had a week off school.

The bloke next door rowed across to see that we were all right because 'the phone was out'. He and Dad determined that the line must be down somewhere further up. Dad would check it and fix it. He was pretty handy at most things. He got together some fencing tools, the axe and a small coil of wire while Mum made him a couple of sandwiches just in case he was away longer than expected, then he headed off on the little Ferguson tractor.

We watched him go. There wasn't much else to do. About three hundred yards from the house, the Fergie stopped. Dad got off and walked around it a couple of times, then got back on and revved. Mud flew but the Fergie went nowhere. To bog the Fergie, the little, go-anywhere, do-anything, fat-wheeled Fergie, was unheard of. The scene had our total attention now. Dad walked briskly back, collected two shovels and us, and returned to his bogged tractor.

He cut a pile of green branches and stacked them by the back wheels. First, we tried pushing it out, feeding the branches under the tyres, but what with slipping in the slush and dodging bits of mud, this was doomed from the start. The next plan was to dig it out, but that didn't work either. By this time, the tractor's chassis was resting in the mud. The only place it was going was down. There seemed to be no bottom to the slush. We boys, reminded of bodies disappearing in quicksand in black-and-white westerns, wondered between ourselves whether it mightn't sink completely.

Dad was not happy. The crawler, a steel-tracked, D4 Caterpillar dozer, was parked three miles away on the back cultivation. It was a long walk in the mud but he had to get the Fergie out. Two hours later, we heard the growl of the crawler and walked up to meet Dad. The deep yellow of the old dozer appeared through the pines on the sandridge. As a ten-year-old, I was in awe of it. As it left the ridge, however, forward motion slowed and downward motion started. Dad leapt to the ground yelling for us to grab logs, sticks, anything. The crawler sank slowly while pandemonium reigned supreme. When it finally came to rest, it looked a strange sight – a mirthful sight perhaps, but Dad's twitch was going hard. Mum sent us back to the house. She was puffing nervously on a cigarette but Dad didn't want one. They walked back to the shed, talking intently. Or at least, Mum was talking intently.

Parked in the shed was the green, Thames body-truck. Dad reversed carefully and drove slowly up the road. Fifty yards from the tractor, the truck began to slew. Fine mud sprayed from the spinning wheels. It was hopeless. The Thames bogged, perfectly blocking the road to the house.

Mum met Dad on his way to the shed. There was a short, heated argument about the car. When they came in for a cup of tea, Dad's twitch was working overtime. We made ourselves scarce. Out of hearing behind the shed, we could safely vent the laughter.

Soon, Dad came out to the shed while we stood shyly back. I didn't know the word 'grim' but I could sense it: Dad's face was grim. He strode away with a wire cable over his shoulder. We were undecided what to do. Mum found us and explained the plan as we walked up to help him if we could. A 'Spanish Windlass', it was called. Twenty yards behind the tractor stood an old box tree. Dad ran the cable from the Fergie, round the tree, and back, tightening and tying it off into a long loop. He cut a six-foot length of sturdy sandalwood and was ready to go. The idea was to insert the sandalwood into the loop and turn it, shortening the loop and pulling the tractor out. Ingenious!

Mum had us standing well away, just in case the cable snapped. Dad started. Tension grew. The cable tightened. Dad was starting to strain. Eyes darting, we watched for any sign from the Fergie. CRACK! The cable burst apart and whipped across the grass. Dad hurled his hat in the mud, grabbed up the axe and chopped the hat up. We ran for cover, bursting.

Next morning it was raining again. Dad ignored the bogged machinery, but every time we looked at it, we got the giggles.