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Driving Tractor through Moments of Wonder

Winter in the Sacramento Valley rarely freezes. Farmers work the soil through the winter and have it ready for early spring planting.

I drove tractor in the northern Sacramento Valley that fall, winter, and spring. I worked several large fields, pulled a chisel plow, a disc, a harrow, or a land plane all the way down the field, turned, and did the same thing going back, over and over for ten hours, sometimes for twelve hours. The hardest part of the job was to get through the work day without shriveling from boredom.

A tracklayer, the type of tractor that runs on its own steel tracks rather than on wheels, has no steering wheel. It pulls steadily down the field, with little interference from the driver. If the machine drifts a little from straight ahead, a pull on a lever interrupts the drive to the track on that side and causes the machine to turn gradually toward that side. For a sharper turn, apply the brake to the temporarily undriven track.

To keep going in a straight line down the field, find a far away, easily recognizable point, perhaps the peak of a hill on the horizon, line the machine up with that point, and refer to it often enough to keep the machine straight. Turn in the seat and look at the implement coming along behind often enough to make sure it overlaps the last run, but not so much that we waste work.

I drove both kinds of tractors that year, but I prefer a tracklayer over a wheel tractor, because on a tracklayer, I can stand up, flex, bend this way and that, dance a little, find some variation from sitting in the seat. On a wheel tractor, I can't stand up and dance. The steering wheel is in the way. Unless I stay seated and hang onto the wheel, the tractor will veer, and it will be difficult to straighten up the work pattern without wasting work.

Birds of many different species live abundantly in the Sacramento Valley. They brought color, activity, and wonder into my otherwise monotonous day and exercised my mind away from boredom. Red-winged blackbirds, egrets, thrushes, all birds who eat worms or anything else that normally lives

under the surface of the soil follow an implement with their active appetites, soon satisfied as soil beneath the surface is stirred into winter sunlight, exposing all manner of delectables.

Moments of wonder rewarded me for sticking with the monotonous work. Every morning before I started work, I stood and looked south, to the refuge. Canada geese and whistling swans flew up, out of the refuge, divided into V flights, and spread out across the valley, where they found the day's provender. How can a hundred blackbirds leap from the ground, fly as a group, then turn, so precisely together that every right wing reflects sunshine to me at the same instant?

One morning, just at sunrise, I watched a fox hunt voles in the grass growing by the ditch at the side of the field. She listened, then leaped up and came down with her forepaws together and then snapped sharp teeth on what she had located by sound and caught by her speed. The tractor carried me down the field, toward the big drainage ditch where burrowing owls lived in the bank, stood outside their burrows and watched the yellow tractor roar and clatter into its turn and head away from them.

Three days that fall, I didn't go to work, busy with Juniper's birth at home one early morning, then unable to leave Laura and Juniper, struck even deeper with the wonder and the joy of our family.

Amidst profuse assurances from Mike, the farmer I drove for, that someone of his family would be constantly by the phone and would notify him if Laura called and needed me, and he would drive high speed across the field and get me, I went back to work driving, puffed up and dancing with the wonder of life all around me, the wonder of life in my family, with gratitude that I participated in growing food for my neighbors and received an income to support my family, this and some of the best bird watching in the valley as a white egret flew three feet above me, escorting me from the shop to the field, and blackbirds turned as one and reflected sunlight to me as I danced with joy on the rattling, rumbling, yellow tracklayer that pulled a chisel plow to stir soil down the long field.