

## *A Day in the Life of a Blade Operator*

Provided by **Myron Moteberg**, Steele County Highway Superintendent, 701-524-2131 - excerpt received from Ken Skorseth, SDLTAP – era 1990

Letter to the Editor  
Les R. Ravelezze  
THE PIONEER REVIEW, Phillip, SD

Dear Les:

A few years ago I had the good fortune to be offered the opportunity (some might call it a dare) of operating a patrol (motor grader) for Haakon County. My original intent was to run it until I could find a more lucrative prestigious line of work but much to my surprise I discovered that I actually enjoyed doing it. In any respect, I would like to share an experience I had the other day with you and your many readers.

I had just started blading a gravel road when a taxpayer stopped me and leaped out of his vehicle. Our conversation went something like this:

Me: Good morning sir.  
TP: What the !?#!@ do you think you're doing? You can't reach out there on the shoulder of the road like that! It makes the road too wide!  
Me: But there's gravel out there. The traffic kicks the gravel out and I'm trying to get it back.  
TP: Dummy! There's weeds and grass out there too you know!  
Me: Believe me sir, it's !?#!@ hard to get one without the other.  
TP: You're making the road too wide! Knock it off!  
Me: Yes, sir. You're right of course.

After biting me on the ankle the taxpayer drove off. I went another mile or so when another taxpayer stopped me. Our conversation went something like this:

Me: Good morning sir.  
TP: When are you going to do something about this road? It's too !?#!@ narrow!  
Me: You're right sir. It is too narrow. Maybe I should reach out there on the shoulder and pull that gravel back in. That way I can get the gravel and make it a little wider too.  
TP: Good idea! This road's too !?#!@ narrow!  
Me: Boy, I'll say. Why if two guys met riding bicycles one of them would have to take the ditch.  
TP: This road's too !?#!@ narrow!

After tweaking my nose with his thumb and index finger he drove off. I went another mile or so when another taxpayer stopped me. Our conversation went something like this:

Me: Good morning sir.  
TP: How come this road has so much crown on it?  
Me: That's my fault sir. I try to leave them higher in the middle so the water will run off.  
TP: Is it raining?!!  
Me: No sir. Not now.  
TP: Then it doesn't need to be so high in the middle does it?!!  
Me: No sir.  
TP: How much do you country boys get paid anyhow?!!  
Me: I work for a dollar a day and all the gravel I can eat.  
TP: That's too much!!

With that he slapped me squarely on the cheek and drove off. A mile or so later another taxpayer stopped me.

Me: Good morning sir.  
TP: This road doesn't have enough crown on it. What is the matter with you?!!  
Me: Nothing sir. I'm perfectly healthy.  
TP: You must be blind! This road doesn't have enough crown on it! I wasn't born yesterday you know.  
Me: I believe you sir. Nobody could get as stupid as you are in just 24 hours.  
TP: County dog!

He slapped me solidly on the cheek and drove off. A mile or so later another taxpayer stopped me.

Me: Good morning sir. Your boots look a little dusty. Let me buff them up for you a bit.  
TP: Forget my boots, gravelbreath! Going to a fire?!! You're driving too fast!  
Me: You're right of course. Second gear is too fast. If I blew a tire I could be killed.  
TP: All you guys blade too fast! All the time! They should take road gear out of those things!  
Me: That's stupid. Road gear is indispensable for plowing snow, getting rid of small windrows in the fall and for traveling from place to place.  
TP: Traveling from place to place you say! That's the only place I ever see you guys, running around the county with your blade up! And why do you always spend your time on the same road? Don't you guys know anything?!!  
Me: I know what year the War of 1812 was fought.

He raised his hand as if to slap my face.

Me: I warn you sir. I absolutely will not tolerate another slap on the cheek.  
TP: Don't worry!

With that, he bonked me squarely on top of the head with his fist and drove off. Less than a mile later another taxpayer stopped me.

Me: How the !?#!@ are yuh.  
TP: Ignorant swine! You're blading too slow! No wonder you guys get paid by the hour!  
Me: You're right of course. I will speed up.  
TP: See that you do! I've got to go now, I'm in a hurry!  
Me: You couldn't be. You were only going about 80 or so.

He stomped on my foot and drove off. A short while later another taxpayer stopped me.

Me: Nice day for a hanging.  
TP: You dummies!! Why does this road have so much big course rocks on it? Look at my windshield! It's cracked!  
Me: I see that. How did it happen?  
TP: Peon proletariat! A car tire picked up a rock and threw it into my windshield! Also my oil pan! I've ruined 37 tires, 12 transmissions, 4 turbochargers and 3 parachutes!  
Me: Parachutes? What do you need a parachute for?  
TP: What do you think I need a parachute for? I tie it on the back of my car so I can get slowed down!  
Me: How fast do you drive sir?  
TP: Seventy-five of course! Are you stupid or something? Isn't that the speed limit on county roads?  
Me: No sir. The absolute hardest thing in the world on a gravel road is to speed. Chops up the gravel, makes ripples; blows all the binder out. Of course, when it's dry the binder blows out anyway but excessive speed makes it triply bad. That's way there's nothing left but loose rocks.  
TP: You sure have all the answers don't you?!  
Me: No sir. Just the ones that are obvious.  
TP: Sure, sure, I want you to know right now that I'm paying my taxes under protest!  
Me: We're even. I'm blading this road under protest.  
TP: Never thought I'd see it, but this road is rougher than the Caribbean.  
Me: I can't help you there. The Caribbean is in the Milesville District. Maintaining the ocean isn't my job.

He picked up a small rock off the road the size of an overinflated basketball and hit me on the head with it.

I met six more taxpayers that morning. One said the road was too dry to blade; one said it was too wet; one said the gravel was too clean and would never pack; one said the gravel was too dirty and would become slick when wet; one said I had to have a windrow when blading in order to do a good job; one said I didn't need a windrow at all. And so even though the road I was blading was too wide and too narrow, too wet and too dry, too rocky and not rocky enough, crowned and not crowned enough, I bladed that too clean and too dirty gravel as fast and as slow as I could.

When I got home that night I stopped and talked to a tree for a while, spun the propeller on my beanie a few times, hummed a few verses of "Hail the Sons of Norway" and took a sponge bath in the kitchen sink.

I'm only kidding. Ninety-nine point nine percent of the people in the Midland district are the best people in the world. It's like Frank Tyger once said: Listening to both sides of the story will convince you that there is more to the story than both sides.

Sincerely,  
Matt Scholfield