

California Trucking Tales



by Bob Benton, Porterville, California

Climbing up out of Kelso Valley in my 1968 Pete, headed for the Piute Mountains

EVEN THOUGH I SPENT MOST OF my adult life teaching diesel technology and theory at Porterville College, my true love was driving trucks. I worked my way through graduate school by driving a truck, and went back to it almost every summer for many years. I hope you enjoy reading about my adventures as much as I enjoy telling the stories.

Peaked out load

Late one summer we were hauling logs from a landing on a southern exposure, which meant that the logs would contain less moisture and therefore less mass. When it was my turn to load, the only logs on the landing were cedar logs, which tend to be very light compared to pine or fir logs. I told the loader operator to peak out the load as high as he could, but it couldn't be over 14 ft-6 in high because of a power house flume which we had to travel under on our road to the mill. After the logs were

loaded I measured the height, and it was exactly 14 ft-6 in. Upon arriving at the flume, I very slowly rolled the load under the big timbers supporting the flume while the bark on the cedar logs left little scratch marks on the timbers. Now it was clear sailing to the mill, or so I thought. As I was traveling down the state highway, my buddy Mr. J., the local Commercial CHP man, called me on the CB radio and said, "Hey Professor, let's take it to town." He followed me to the scales where I drove onto the scale platform. He went inside the scale shack, and in about a minute he came back out and walked around the truck. I knew that he was checking to see that all the tires were on the scale platform—that trick had been used on him before. A couple of minutes later he came back out and said, "Bob, that's a mountain of logs and it only weighs 68,000 pounds. Something is wrong here, but I can't put my finger on it."

I said, "Well, Mr. J., these are dry cedar logs and they are very light in weight." I was hoping he would not notice that the load was very over-height. He was used to seeing 50-foot pine or fir logs which were usually about stake high, so this tall load had him in a state of confusion. I believe his brain went into "100,000-lbs mode" when he saw my mountain of logs rolling down the highway, and after seeing 68,000 lbs on the scale, his brain couldn't reconcile the difference. He finally told me to take it to the mill, and I lost no time at fulfilling that request. As I pulled off the scales he stood there and watched me leave with my mountain of logs while shaking his head, "68,000 pounds! What the heck? Something is wrong here!"

My \$5.00 ticket

Roaming the roads and byways in the Dinuba and Reedley area was a Commercial CHP man named Mr. S. He was a short little fellow with

a great personality, and I loved him in spite of his choice of vocation. One day he weighed my log load and wrote me a ticket for 1500 lbs overload on the drivers. A few days later I received the paperwork in the mail from the local municipal court. It was all typed up neat and clean, and all the spaces were filled in except the space that showed the dollar amount of the fine—it was blank. Now being a good citizen and wanting to pay my debt to society, but also enjoying a bargain price, I typed "\$5.00" in the blank space and sent the paperwork back to the municipal court along with a \$5.00 check in the provided envelope. I never heard back from the court, but several weeks later the \$5.00 check cleared the bank. I explained to my wife my renewed faith in the American justice system!

Drive-Line Hill

Very high on the eastern side of the Sierras was a 24-percent grade that we encountered while loaded. For obvious reasons it acquired the nickname "Drive-Line Hill," as far too many log trucks left broken parts beside that grade. Most broken parts were caused by driver error, as many tried to downshift on that steep hill with a full load of logs in the bunks or stalled out and tried to restart on the grade.

The hill was short, only about 50 yards or less, with a half-left turn towards the top, and the road surface was packed with decomposed granite, which made tire traction a little squirrely. The only reasonable way to negotiate the grade was to start at the base in low gears with enough available engine torque to be able to back out of the throttle as the truck rounded the half-left turn. If you didn't back out of the throttle, the steer tires, when turned, would continue to travel straight ahead, even with 12,000 lbs of weight on them. This is because the dual driving axles,

under tremendous torque, tend to continue taking the truck in a straight line even though the steer tires were attempting to turn the machine. In a failed attempt to reach the top, the only sensible and sane thing to do was to back the vehicle to the bottom of the grade and try again, perhaps in a lower gear. Patience is a learned virtue in the woods with these types of situations.

Tire wear

Two of the state highways that wound into the southern Sierras were very steep and crooked with non-skid asphalt surfaces. Steer-tire wear on these two highways was severe for many drivers. Many times I observed a new set of steer tires on Monday

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morning that were well worn by Friday evening, ready for the recap shop and trailer service. You might think that traveling downhill loaded was the cause of steer-tire wear. However, it was the speed and applied power on the uphill curves with an unloaded truck that caused the steer-tires to scuff on the rough surface of the highway, and many of the sharp corners were covered with a layer of rubber just like an asphalt race track after a race.

The secret to long steer-tire life was reduced power on sharp corners, especially uphill corners, as this reduced tire scuff caused by dual-drive's tendency to power straight ahead. On all sets of dual axles the trailing axle always has greater tire wear tendencies because the leading axle is the pivot point

of the curve radius, and the trailing axle scuffs along behind. To keep tire wear even on all axles, repeatedly rotating the tires is necessary—a never-ending job.

It's the people!

For 17 seasons I operated logging trucks, mostly my own, but during several seasons I drove for other truck owners. As a people person, I always enjoyed observing the actions and spirits of the loggers and drivers working deep in the woods. Although I was working in an environment that was sometimes very hostile, where safety and lives were at risk, I was always impressed by the helpful, kindred spirit of the loggers and truckers. Everyone looked out for each other, and a welcome hand was always ready to assist when needed. In retrospect, I think I enjoyed logging because the forests became a sanctuary from the hallowed halls of academia where I toiled much of the year surrounded by professional jealousy, pettiness, degrees, egos, and self-righteousness. These attributes never followed the loggers and truckers into the deep forests. This is not to say that loggers didn't have differences of opinion or get into scraps. But these were quickly settled because only unity in the camp can accomplish a safe and productive logging "show."

Most of the logging contractors ("gyppo loggers") were contracted to the large mills and they in turn hired log truckers ("gyppo truckers") to haul the logs to the mill. Usually the mill would run its own logging show and hire gyppo truckers, also. Some of the gyppo loggers would have new, modern logging equipment and lots of it, while other gyppo loggers would have old junk equipment and not much of it. However, it was really not so much the equipment that affected log production as it was the equipment operators' willingness to work as a team.

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A mishap in the Kern River Canyon on St. Rt. 178. The driver of the R. C. Power truck stated, "A big rock from the canyon wall just reached out and grabbed my trailer!"

Accidents will happen

During my seasons of logging I witnessed the remains of at least fifteen logging trucks that were totally demolished in accidents of various kinds. Luckily, I only saw one fatality and a few injuries. In the woods we frequently encountered situations that tested our fortitude. One evening I left the landing loaded and headed down the grade. This was in a very remote area of the southern Sierras, where very few visitors or campers ventured to explore. In the near darkness I rounded a corner on the narrow dirt road and came upon an overturned motor home completely blocking the road. I could hear screams—loud screams! The only door to the inside was at the top of the overturned rig, so I clambered up over the axles, wheels, and driveshaft and threw open the door. Inside was a 15-year-old boy screaming at the top of his voice while his father lay in a pool of blood. I quickly realized that our only hope was that the boys back at the landing had not turned off their CB radio and retired for the night. I yelled a "Mayday" at them and they came back really quick. I told them about the grim situation and that we would need both their pickup and the loader. However, before coming to the accident site they needed to go up to the peak and see if they could get out by CB radio to a

trucker on I-5. Many times we talked to truckers on I-5, some 70 miles to the west, but it depended on the atmospheric conditions. Luckily they were able to contact a trucker on I-5 who was only four miles from a pay phone, and he agreed to stop and call the Tulare County Sheriff's Department. (Remember, this was before the days of cell phones!)

Years before, I had been drafted into the US Army and had been trained as a battlefield medic. Now it was time to put my taxpayer-sponsored training into practice again. I crawled back into the motor home carrying the first-aid kit from my truck—the first order of business was to stop the profuse bleeding. The boy calmed down enough to tell me that his dad had accidentally shot himself in the leg, and that the boy had tried to drive the motor home for help but had crashed it. The pistol was a large caliber, and the bullet had entered his upper thigh, traveled through the knee, and exited his foot into his shoe. By this time he had lost a great deal of blood, and I knew it wouldn't be long before shock would overtake him. I could control the bleeding with pressure and compression bandages, but the shock had me worried.

About this time the logger crew arrived in their pickup. We broke the large rear window of the motor home with my cheater pipe, pulled out

some seat cushions, cleared the pickup bed of grease buckets, oil cans, tools, and debris, and threw the seat cushions onto the dirty floor of the bed. We then evacuated the wounded man through the broken rear window and put him on the cushions in the back of the pickup, covering him with blankets. Within several minutes the loader came around the corner and quickly pushed the motor home into the ditch so we could drive past. By now the night was dark and the sky shone with a million stars. The pickup drove the injured man up over Portuguese Pass and down to Sugar Loaf, where they had arranged to meet the ambulance. Happily, the man lived!

There was rarely a dull moment in the woods, though sometimes I wouldn't have minded a little boredom. One evening a walking beam broke on the suspension of my truck in the Kern River Canyon. Luckily, it happened in a wide spot on the road where I was able to park off the pavement, and I caught a ride to the mill with a trucker behind me. The next day, armed with chains and heavy jacks, I chained up the walking beam and "spider-webbed" the axles with chains. Late that night, after the traffic had diminished, I slowly and cautiously limped out of the canyon and on to the mill. Again, my guardian angel had worked overtime!

Keeping the road smooth

During several seasons we hauled logs from the southern parts of the Sequoia National Forest south and east of Lake Isabella, out of the Piute Mountains. This route brought us down the east side of the Piutes through the high desert of Kelso Valley and into Weldon. There we picked up St. Rt. 178 past Lake Isabella and followed it down through the narrow Kern River Canyon into Bakersfield. It was a 9-10 hour round trip into the mill at Terra Bella, so we usually made two trips one day

and only one on alternate days—or sometimes the boys and I camped out overnight at the landing. We loaded mostly 50-ft logs so the loads would not be so top-heavy going down through the canyon.

To keep the 25 miles of dirt road smooth, the logger we were working for had a large 8-ft diameter tire from a mine truck with a chain attached. If the tire was at the bottom of the hill in Kelso Valley, the trucker was to hook on and tow it up to the landing, thus smoothing the road. When leaving the landing loaded, a driver would pull the tire back down the hill. This saved the logger from needing a full-time road grader, plus it kept the dirt road smooth and the forest service boys happy. The truckers were compensated in their rates for the smooth road service that we provided.

Female log truck drivers

During several logging seasons we were blessed with three different women log truck drivers in the woods—very petite, attractive, and feminine. All three could throw their own wrappers over the tallest load and tie it down. They were all cautious, courteous drivers and never held up a parade. Just like the men drivers, they experienced their share of problems, including slippery roads, spin-outs, and squirt-out logs. It was sort of nice to have a feminine presence in the woods, which was usually a totally male environment, and I never observed any ill feelings from any of the men. Everyone worked together, as it has to be in the woods.

The one thing that I did observe was that, although the women were good drivers, they had very little knowledge of the working mechanisms of the truck. But many men truck drivers are in the same category. In the rough, backcountry woods, a driver's knowledge of the component workings of his truck

Driving down the east side of the Piute Mountains, the tall timber is left behind as we drop down into the high desert and Kelso Valley. It was just a couple of miles below this spot where the female trucker-buddy got stuck and spent the night on the mountain.



may sometimes get him out of a tight spot.

One evening while we were hauling out of the Piute Mountains, which are southeast of Lake Isabella in Kern County and very rugged country, one of the lady truckers was the last to load and start down the narrow dirt road. About 15 miles from the landing was a steep, uphill switchback corner that was sloped to the inside wall for drainage. The truck spun out in the switchback because the drive tires on the up side could get no traction in the loose gravel surface of the road. That location happened to be a dead spot for the CB radio, so she couldn't reach any of the trucks going down ahead of her or the logging crew back at the landing. There she sat all night, blocking the narrow road a hundred miles from the mill in a very remote location. Not one vehicle came by that entire night.

I was scheduled to be first to load the next morning, and as I climbed the narrow road just at daybreak, I came upon her sitting in her truck. She jumped out and gave me a royal welcome—she was glad to see another human being. She explained her plight, so I grabbed a wrench and said, "Let's crawl under the truck and talk about it."

Although she was puzzled, she crawled under the truck after me. I explained that the power path on a differential goes to the wheel

with least resistance, which, in this case, happened to be the drivers on the high side of the road. We could counteract that action by tightening up the brake adjustment on the high-side wheels, which would cause the differential to divide the power more equally to both sides of the axles. After the brake adjustment we crawled out from under the truck and I said, "I'll back my truck to a wide spot where we can pass, and you can pull on up the hill."

She gave me a very doubtful look, but did as I said. I backed up and waited while she drove her truck up the hill with a huge smile on her face. After another brake adjustment, I shared some lunch with her and she was finally headed down the hill to the mill—15 hours late! About a month later she told me at the mill, "I got un-stuck yesterday by myself, just the way you showed me, by tightening up the brakes on the loose side!" She was thrilled and very proud of her accomplishment.

Most of my experiences while driving in the woods were pleasant ones, and I enjoy recalling those times. Of course, over a period of seventeen years unpleasant things happened now and then, but the good outweighed the bad. I enjoy reliving some of those times.

