

(Or the day I sawed my knee cap)

It was the summer of 1996 or thereabouts. I was cutting alder brush in the low ground east of the farmstead. It was more than 95 degrees and 100% humidity. A lot of people don't know that we get such weather in Minnesota, but we do. It just doesn't last too long. I was sweating so hard the salty water was running into my eyes and the salt burned.

I love working on days like that.

Over the years Gail has purchased three sets of good quality chaps for me. They have taken some hits. Gail has a shoemaker sew leather patches on them. They all are in usable condition but on this day all were hanging in the shop. It was just too hot for heavy chaps.

In case you are not familiar with logging chaps, they are much like cowboy chaps in appearance. Made of heavy outer material and filled with thin strands of tough, string-like plastic. The chaps provide protection by choking the saw as the chain penetrates the outer layer and grabs the strands. They work well.

Well, I was not wearing them on this particular day. Cutting alder brush requires a lot of motion. When I get into a good working rhythm, I swing the chainsaw quickly, sometimes cutting a swath of individual small trees and at other times cutting a thick clump of stems. The brush stems are generally from one to five inches in diameter. The wood is soft and cuts easily. With a good saw and a sharp chain it's like cutting butter. Small trees of about 25 feet in height are falling all around. It's fun in a way.

I've hit my legs before so this was not a new experience. Nevertheless, it was a special sensation when the chain dug into and tugged on my left knee cap. That was new. The cutting chain on a chainsaw moves incredibly fast so the first blade I felt was probably the tenth or twentieth blade to make contact. Because of their shape the blades carve out and then discard material quickly. It's much different than a cut from a knife or an axe. Chain saws can produce a deep wound in a fraction of a second. Of course if you have seen the right horror movie you know more about this than I do. I could never bring myself to watch the chain saw massacre stuff. Too close to home.

My leg still worked so I knew I had not cut tendons. There was blood but not enough to indicate that I had cut a major vessel. I wasn't going to die and I wasn't going to be crippled but I knew I was going to catch hell from Gail. I should have worn the damn chaps.

The wound was full of tiny wood fragments but I could see the knee cap clearly. It was messy. I needed to get it cleaned up and sutured or it would not heal well.

I walked to the barn, put the chain saw away and located a roll of duct tape. I've thought about writing Red Green about this new use for duct tape. He's the comedian who duct tapes everything on Canadian TV. I found a couple of cotton chore gloves, the thick yellow ones, and taped them over my knee. There was a long horizontal cut in my jeans. I just taped the whole works together and got into my truck.

Gail was home and working in the house. I still didn't feel like getting scolded so I drove to the Monticello hospital. It's about 20 miles and by the time I got there my boot was pretty well filled with blood. That may sound like a lot but it doesn't really take that much blood to fill a well fitting boot.

I checked in and did the paperwork. They weren't particularly busy. A nurse put me into a procedure room where I waited less than ten minutes. When the doctor came in he asked what happened while he looked at my chart. I told him I had chain sawed into my knee cap. He gave a knowing laugh and said that, no, he was sure I hadn't cut that deep. He explained that it would be difficult to move if that were the case and I didn't seem to be faint from loss of blood etc.

I get that a lot. If you don't show up in a state of shock writhing in pain they assume that all you need a band aid and an aspirin.

Anyway he seemed to be competent other wise and commenced to remove my duct tape bandage and start the clean up. It took over half an hour to clean the wood out of the tissue. Eventually he reached a level where upon he exclaimed, "Holy cow, you did gouge out the knee cap". Actually a few of the chain blades had carved across the cap from right to left but there was still more than enough bone left for a stable cap.

Closing took some time also as he had to suture each layer starting with the synovial sack around the cap. As I recall it healed fine and was only stiff for a week or two. But then I tend to forget the negative side of things.

I turned myself in that night when we went to bed. It was hopeless to try and conceal a bandage that big.

Then I caught hell about the chaps.

I still don't always wear them, but I know I should.