

CALVIN COBB

Radio Woodworker!

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A Novel With Measured Drawings

Roy Underhill



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CALVIN COBB: RADIO WOODWORKER!

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For Dad.

OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

- The Woodwright's Shop: A Practical Guide to
Traditional Woodcraft*
- The Woodwright's Companion: Exploring Traditional
Woodcraft*
- The Woodwright's Workbook: Further Explorations in
Traditional Woodcraft*
- The Woodwright's Eclectic Workshop*
- The Woodwright's Apprentice: Twenty Favorite
Projects from the Woodwright's Shop*
- Khrushchev's Shoe and Other Ways to Captivate an
Audience of 1 to 1,000*
- The Woodwright's Guide: Working Wood with
Wedge and Edge*

ABBREVIATIONS

Calvin Cobb: Radio Woodworker! takes place during the spring and summer of 1937. Some help on the alphabet agencies of the New Deal may prove useful.

AAA – Agricultural Adjustment Agency

CCC – Civilian Conservation Corps

FRC – Federal Radio Commission

FSA – Farm Security Administration

GAO – General Accounting Office

WPA – Works Progress Administration



SATURDAY MORNING, JUNE 11, 1937

Fearful of Maryland cops, the cabbie dumped Calvin at the gate of the Beltsville Agricultural Experimental Station and raced back toward the D.C. line. Without the workday ant-parades of lab-coated scientists lacing between the brick buildings, the concrete paths of the station seemed cold as tombstones. Calvin stood listening. Over a background of bleating goats, an engine roar echoed from a far hill and he took off running.

The laboratories gave way to hog pens and turkey houses as he ran. He came to a rough pasture and saw at the far end a gray tractor, headlights flashing, headed straight for a herd of boys, scattering them and sending some leaping over a board fence. The tractor spun around without slowing and chased a small group, corralling them in a corner of the field as they threw up their hands in surrender. The scream of the tractor engine drowned out the cheers and taunts of the other CCC boys closing in behind it.

Seated at a card table at the edge of the field, a woman was watching the business through field glasses. Calvin came up

behind his alleged subordinate and called her name in angry voice. "Linda!"

She spun so quickly that the empty sleeve of her dress made a ghostly grab at him. "Chief!"

"So what's so special about this test that you couldn't tell me about it?" He lifted the field glasses and surveyed the action across the field. The tractor roared and the cornered boys made a sudden dash, sweat cutting pink streaks through the dust on their backs. The tractor bolted in pursuit, looping and jiggling to chase the whole sunburned herd into the field. The tractor swerved to the left to chase three mavericks, running over a dropped fatigue hat and sending it flying in a long arc. A quick reverse drove the running boys back into the pack, forcing them all into the far corner where they threw up their hands in cheering surrender. The driver of the tractor gave a few bounces on the iron seat and waved her hand in victory.

Calvin handed the field glasses back to Linda. "She's gonna kill someone!"

Linda inhaled a draft of summer morning air. "She has to keep 'em busy or they'll wander off."

A green pickup truck turned into the lane and pulled up beside them. Ellen, sitting in the passenger seat beside the pimply CCC boy at the wheel, rolled down the window as Calvin walked over to her.

"Morning Chief!" She glanced quickly at Linda and back at him. "Nice to see you." She winced, struggling against her back brace, unable to turn away from Calvin's lowered eyebrows.

Dozens of bobbing white enameled kitchen scales surrounded Ellen's wheelchair in the back of the truck. Linda pushed past him to lean in the window. "Any word from Anne?"

"She's on her way," said Ellen. "Had to take a taxi from 14th Street."

The distant tractor screamed. "Better take the scales and tally sheets out to the boys before Verdie kills 'em," said Linda.

Ellen nodded to the grinning CCC boy and they drove off toward the roaring tractor at the distant end of the field, leaving Calvin and Linda swathed in oily exhaust. The tractor engine howled and flame shot from its exhaust stack. Calvin pulled Linda's field glasses back to his eyes. "Sounds like it's going to blow." The scream from the tractor echoed off the buildings behind them. "What the hell is that thing?"

Linda waited for the roar to ease. "Some guy at Ford designed it. It's got very good steering." She pointed at the light green leaves of a distant oak grove. "I think the wind is dropping."

Calvin ignored her diversion. "But what's that whine?"

No answer came.

"Linda?"

"It's...the supercharger. It's very special and we only have it for today."

"A supercharger?"

Linda flipped through the pages on her clipboard. "This is the same way we've done our tests for years."

"No, we've never tried to pull a spreader so heavily loaded that it needs a tractor with a supercharger!"

Linda began to speak, but only inhaled and looked up at the trees.

"Oh, no!" He leaned around to face her.

"The front wheels ride way out. It's plenty stable!"

"Oh, hell no!" He slapped the field glasses on the table and started across the field. "What the hell are you thinking!"

She followed him. "It was Verdie's idea! She's had it up to sixty just fine!"

"Sixty! Who the hell needs to spread manure at sixty miles an hour?"

"We're only going up to fifty, tops!" She swung her one arm

wildly to keep her balance as she followed him across the rough ground.

“Absolutely not! We’re not going to get Verdie killed for a stupid spreader test!”

She punched his arm hard enough to make him stop and almost hit back. “We’re not testing manure spreaders! We’re testing Little Shirley! We’re testing her!”

He stood seething, rubbing his arm.

Linda pointed back toward the city. “There were stiffs in the building, Chief! Guys in monkey suits prowling around on Tuesday. Burroughs men. They’re after her!”

“Linda, this is nuts! You want Verdie to die for that stupid machine?”

“She’s not stupid!” She punched him again in the same place.

“Stop that! I can’t hit you back!”

She squared off to him. “Oh, I wish you could! Go ahead! Let’s see just what the hell you can do!”

“Oh, for crying out loud! Stop it! This is no way to run a government office.” He tried to put his hand on her shoulder but she jerked away.

“Probably not!” She fixed him with red eyes and jutting chin. “But look, she’s growing. She can do things now she could never do before! You saw what she’s been doing with your radio scripts! You need her too!”

“Not like you do.”

“Yes, we need her. So what’s wrong with that?”

From across the field, Ellen’s command voice echoed, ordering the CCC boys into line to receive their tally sheets and scales. She was speaking to the boys, but both she and the woman driving the tractor were looking back across the field at Calvin.

He saw them watching him. He shook his head, looked up at the breeze in the trees and blew a jet of air from his puffed cheeks.

“Oh, Chief, thanks!” cried Linda. She wiped at her eyes and looked up at the trees. “You can help, too. Anne’s bringing your lady friend’s little RoBot camera to get sequence shots of the plume.”

“Kathryn Harper’s in on this?”

“No, she’s not *in* on it. Anne just borrowed her camera, just to try the spring motor drive. She’d love it out here, with the grass and the horses. She’s from Kentucky, ya know.”

“Anne?”

“No, Kathryn! Whisky money! Her father moved their business to Europe during prohibition. Don’t you read *Radio Guide*?”

“Guess I’d better start,” he said, as they turned to walk back to the table.

“Well, you know you’re supposed to take an interest in other people. That makes them interested in you.”

Calvin shook his head. “How’s the rest of the manure?”

“Excellent! Mostly pig, but the moisture is dead on. They did a really nice job.”

A taxi turned into the lane and stopped by their table, Anne’s hand waving from the passenger seat. The two women briskly updated each other while Calvin extracted the heavy surveyor’s tripod from the back seat. As he stood with the tripod balanced on his shoulder, watching the women talk, a breeze swept back Anne’s long hair, momentarily revealing the moonscape of scars that passed for the left side of her face. Calvin turned away to look out at the long field, rolling ground randomly dotted with hundreds of bright aluminum cake pans.

“Morning Chief!” said Anne as she joined him to walk to their camera position at the far end of the field. “Thanks for toting the tripod.” She reached down to flip a grasshopper out of a cake pan as they passed.

“Where did you find four hundred cake pans?” he asked.

“They had ’em here,” she answered, as she skipped ahead

of Calvin. For a person just in to middle age, her step was as happy as a calf let free in bright meadow.

They set up their position at a gap in the fence at the far end of the field. Calvin stood up the heavy tripod and Anne adjusted the settings on the tiny camera. "I'm going to kick in the green filter and see if that doesn't punch up the brown."

Calvin stifled the urge to suggest that a number two filter might be more appropriate. Through the field glasses, he sighted Ellen directing the boys as they linked and safety-chained the boxy John Deere Model E Spiral Beater Spreader to the streamlined grey tractor. In the high seat, he watched Verdie pull on a gas cape, goggles, gauntlet gloves and finally a steel doughboy helmet. She dropped into her seat, almost out of view behind the engine, and the tractor's headlights flashed twice. "Verdie's ready. How you doin' there?"

"Just a minute. Give 'em the slow flash," said Anne.

He sighted through a little signal mirror and swept slowly between Verdie's and Linda's positions.

Anne stepped back behind the camera and sighted through the finder. "Okay, I'm ready."

Calvin picked up the red and white semaphore flag. "You sure?"

"Yep. Keep the stopwatch right there." She indicated a spot two feet ahead of the camera lens. "When the flag goes down over there, hit the button. Okay, give 'em the fast flag."

Calvin waved the flag rapidly back and forth overhead and then held it steady. The lights on the distant tractor flashed, a flag went down and he hit the stopwatch. A flock of blackbirds unrolled onto the edge of the field but the roar of the engine sent them flying. Viewed straight on across the field, the only noticeable motion was a slight jiggery about as the tractor and spreader accelerated. In seconds, though, the little train grew a dark peacock's tail as the manure hit the spiral beater.

The supercharger's whine grew constantly louder as the distance between them closed, quickly drowning out the clicks and whirs of the camera as Verdie climbed upward through the gears. The bouncing spreader came into view above the tractor as she reached a slight downhill section. The brown aura now spread in an arc full ten yards wide and equally high.

A sudden spurt sent the brown plume upwards in a starburst-fingered pattern. The front end of the spreader bucked frantically upwards in protest.

"Was that the harmonic?" called Calvin.

"Yes!" shouted Anne. "Yes! Oh God, it has to be! She was right! I can't believe it!"

A new sound—deeper, shaking—reached their ears. The supercharger screamed over the ten raging cylinders. Rooster tails of dirt flew from the tractor tires, cutting through the manure rainbow like brown galaxies in collision. Calvin had a half second to ponder the implications of this intersection before the bucking front end of the tractor caught his eye. He glanced at Anne, still transfixed as the roaring juggernaut bounded straight for them. Now a coarse spray reached them, stinging their faces like tiny bees.

The tractor was upon them in a brain-rattling roar. Anne stood implacable—ill-served at this moment by her proven ability to remain calm, even at the approach of a walking artillery barrage. Calvin, however, stood his ground only through slowness of reflexes, so when the steel wheels of the spreader hit the bump and the machine transformed into an exploded-parts diagram, it was actually his earlier attempt to dodge the tractor that saved them. He threw himself at Anne, carrying her and the camera below the trajectory of flying wheels and gears. A length of drive chain whipped through the air, smacking Calvin's shoulder like cannon shot.

The tractor, now pulling only a towbar, flew past them,

followed by a catalog of cast iron spreader parts plowing waves of dirt from the turf. The tires rocked hard from side to side as Verdie jumped on the brake pedals and the grey monster slowed in backfiring, whining complaint. It turned back toward them, almost tipping over and finally stopped. Verdie jumped from the seat and limped fast toward them. "Oh my God, are you all right?" she shouted. Pulling off her goggles left her eyes in white raccoon bands — the rest of her all brown.

Calvin, heart pounding, staggered to his feet, wincing from the mile-a-minute slap of the flying drive chain. He probed gingerly at his bruised shoulder. "Anne, are you okay?"

"I'm alright. That was amazing! Look at the spreader! Nothing's left!" Anne pointed at one of the spreader wheels still rolling toward a distant fence.

Verdie examined them for bleeding and breathing, shaking her head. "I couldn't brake evenly and if I'd tried to turn I would have flipped. All I could do was keep going."

"It's my fault," said Calvin. "I set us up too close to the path." He spat straw from his mouth and wiped at his face. "I didn't think how fast you'd be going."

Verdie laughed. "You look like you've been dipped in shit!"

He spat again. "You should talk!"

Anne brushed dirt from her stocking. "I've hardly got any on me. Chief, you're a regular Sir Walter." She waved to the approaching pickup truck that was now halfway across the field. A line of CCC boys fanned out on both sides of the truck, recording the weight of manure in each aluminum cake pan, dumping out the contents and tossing the empties into the truck. "I'm going to run and look at the numbers! I'm sure we got it!" she called, already jogging away.

Verdie wiped at the brown ring below her eyes. "Come on Chief. I'll give you a ride back." She rubbed at her right eye and winced.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine! My stump is just a little sore from jumping on the brakes.” She shook off his concern with a laugh. “Hurry up now! You gotta get cleaned up for your big date.” She wiped at the pig manure on her chin. “And we’ve got four hundred cake pans to get back to the home-economics lab.”