

## Mowing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,

We live on a big piece of land, a beautiful big piece of land. Part of its beauty is the grounds that surround our home. There are all manner of perennial and annual, all sorts of shrub and bush, myriad trees and saplings, ground covers and wall climbers. And there is grass, a lawn of sorts, although maintaining a lawn at the edge of a prairie is dicey at best. The prairie has been being a prairie for eons. The lawn is a newcomer by comparison. Left untended the prairie would swallow the lawn in exactly nineteen and a half days. No one would be the wiser. The lawn would simply disappear beneath that gorgeous, formidably waving plain.

It just so happens that the past month or so around here has been hydrologically challenging. It has rained a lot, really a lot. In this part of the Driftless there is a track from Cedar Rapids through Coon Valley that has been an absolute funnel for deep storms, dark, dark skies and torrential rains. It's not easy to get water into basements when those basements are fifteen hundred feet above sea level. At least that's what I thought. Not so. We passed the ground water seepage stage about three weeks ago and have been bailing ever since.

When it rains this much and when the sun shines warmly afterwards things GROW. Everything grows. The flowers grow, the berries grow, the mushrooms grow and the grass grows. The grass grows seven inches a day...well, it seems like it does. By the time I'm finished mowing this half acre the other half acre I just mowed needs mowing again. So what do you think happened last week? What do you imagine would be a nice way to punctuate this rainy passage we're in? Both of the power mowers went down. The tractor is down and the walk behind is down, down past where I can fix them, down to the shop down. But I have to keep up right? A guy's gotta mow or the prairie wins.

So I called my local Menards (I love that store) and asked to talk to someone about a new mower, a push mower, a push reel, old timey, elbow greaser, aerobically challenging push mower. You remember them don't you? Well I had done some homework online and knew that my store had what I wanted. So I got routed to the right department and talked on the phone to Nathan who is charge of mowers. Nathan is twenty-one. He was very efficient and friendly and he calmly told me that they did not have a mower of the brand that I wanted nor the size I required.

I explained to him that the infallible internet had told me quite the opposite and that he did, indeed, have a sixteen inch push reel mower made by Scott. He was about to end the conversation feeling bad about disappointing me when he blurted out, "Ohhh, you mean the kind of mower that doesn't have a motor." I smiled and said, "That's right Nathan, the kind without a motor." "Sure we got those and we got your size too!"

I hurried to the store in a state of great anticipation. I walked in to the lawn and garden section and asked for Nathan. The young man said that he was Nathan. I said I was the guy on the phone who had just talked to him about a push mower. He said he had not just talked to me on the phone. I became momentarily confused and Nathan sensed this, bright young man that he is. He said, "You want the other Nathan, the one in mowers." I offered that it must be confusing to have two Nathans in the same store. He said, "We have four Nathans in this store." Makes you wonder how so many young parents chose their boys' names about twenty years ago.

Anyway, I went back to mowers and there was telephone Nathan waiting for me. Turns out that the only mower they had left fitting my specs was the display model. Nathan climbed up into the rack untied the mower, a green and yellow beauty, and handed it down to a colleague. I did not have the presence of mind to ask the new fellow if he was named Nathan too. I proudly eyed my new accomplice in mowing, a jewel of simplicity, a machine that would never break down on me. We set the settings the way I like them took that baby for a short spin up and down the aisle. Breaking it in, as it were. I'm smiling ear to ear, Nathan is feeling very good about his place in the world and the other guy (who unfortunately remains nameless) is looking at me the way young people look at old cars in the Henry Ford museum in Dearborn, MI. Appreciative but amazed that such a thing actually worked.

I wheeled my new prize over to the check out counter where Nathan #1 was waiting for me. It was clear that he had never seen a device like this out of the box. He could have been looking at the two-headed cow over at the county fair. He looked at the machine and looked at me and I knew (I am nothing if not sensitive) that he wanted a demo. I know that empirical learning is remembered learning so I put the handle bars in his hands and said, "Push it". He had the rollers pointing forward so, of course, the gears were not engaged and the machine rolled along spinning only its wheels. Then I told him to swing the handle bars over so that the blades were pointing forward. He did.

He pushed. The blades whirred into action and the amazed young Nathan exclaimed, "No Way!" I said, "Way!" He said, "Dude that is totally cool!" I said, "Totally cool!."

Then I pushed my push reel mower, the kind without a motor, out of the store and into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.