

THE GUY NEXT DOOR

By
Bob Mulloy

My wife and I started out as the new kids on the block many years ago. We raised our children and watched good friends and neighbors move on or pass away. All of our neighbors were wonderful people who freely offered a helping hand or piece of kind advice to the young greenhorns on the block. One neighbor was the town assistant building inspector. He saw me shingling my roof one day and climbed up the ladder to demonstrate the right way to install a woven valley – a lesson I have never forgotten.

Neighborhood camaraderie was common place. For example, another neighbor built the copper roof for my bay window while another tuned-up my car. Things like tools, rides, kids, baby sitting and emergencies become commonplace as each neighbor aided the other. My neighbors taught me the value of good friends and many of the skills needed to become a successful home inspector. I am reminded of the old saying, “you can choose your friends but you can’t choose your relatives.”

Upon reflection, one wonders where the time went as the circle has turned and we now find ourselves as the “old timers” on the block. A young couple moved in next door and my wife and I have taken them “under our wing” so to speak. We are old enough to be their parents and fully understand that with age comes wisdom, but knowing when to offer advice and when to mind your own business is sometimes difficult.

We try to leave them alone as much as possible, but every now and then there is a knock on the door and a request for some sugar or a couple of eggs and the inevitable sale of girl scout cookies. Whenever I see them, we wave or chat briefly over the fence. When I see maintenance or remodeling projects taking place, I offer my two-cents worth of advice. They listen to an old timer politely, they don’t seem to mind and frequently they follow my advice. I have aided them with a sump pump, replacement windows, tools and countless other projects.

Now this is where this tale takes a different twist. Like me when I was starting out, my neighbor does not have a lot of money and always tries to perform most projects himself instead of hiring a costly professional. The landscaping at my neighbor’s side yard overgrown from years of neglect and the negative grading was contributing to his wet basement problems. The newcomers wanted to clean up the property, improve the grade and plant grass seed, but hiring a landscaper was out of the question.

My advice was to have several truck loads of loam delivered and rent a Bobcat for the weekend – problem solved and money saved. Twenty cubic yards of loam was delivered on a Thursday as scheduled, ready for the weekend warrior. The truck driver made two trips and nicely dumped the loads where requested, spacing them out so as

to simplify the task ahead. Things seemed to be progressing nicely until Murphy's Law made an appearance.

Little did my neighbors know, but the weight of the dump truck crushed the buried sump pump discharge pipe, through no fault of the driver as he was just following directions given by the owner of the property. Repairing the crushed discharge pipe was easy enough, but the discovery of several inches of water in the basement was a different story altogether. My neighbor found the sump pump inoperable and went to the local home center to buy a replacement. A skimmer type pump was purchased but failed to do the job, so it was back to the home center, argue until a refund was granted and then purchase a heavy duty sump pump for the sum of \$125. The pump was installed, the basement was drained and many water damaged goods were disposed of. All in a night's work with the aroma of fresh earth outside, musty odors in the basement and the Bobcat due to arrive the next morning.

The bobcat arrived along with a \$300 rental fee for the weekend and the obligatory security deposit. My neighbor, the weekend warrior, quickly learned a new respect for heavy equipment operators as he fumbled with the controls the entire morning. As I watched from the window, I nicknamed him "Mike Mulligan," for those of you who are my age, or "Bob the Builder," if you are younger. I brought him a cup of coffee, joked about his new name and suggested a little patience and practice. Happily, the guy has a sense of humor and his perseverance began to pay off as most of the dirt was eventually scooped up and spread out in smaller piles. My neighbor had hopes of "mastering the beast" by the afternoon and then perhaps tackling removal of that heavy boulder out near the backyard septic system. Like riding a mechanical bull, he entertained the neighborhood kids. I watched him attempt to drag the scoop in reverse to spread out the dirt, but the front wheels were lifted off the ground as he applied too much downward pressure on the bucket. I went home to mind my own business and watch from my office window. In time, he was successful and a properly graded new yard was emerging.

After lunch, my neighbor's wife drove off to do some errands and "macho-man" was left to play in the dirt with his big new toy and no one to supervise. And so, with confidence and gusto, he drove the bobcat around the backyard, up over the mounded septic system and down the other side to finally conquer that accursed boulder. The sound of the diesel engine struggling brought me back to the window where I saw fumes pouring from the exhaust pipe, and the big knobby tires spinning as he tried to blindly cajole the boulder into the bucket of the bobcat. My neighbor had a brief moment of "Bobcat frenzy" as he struggled with the controls while trying to move a boulder half as big as the scooper. I could tell that his plan of action included a heavy foot, an extra push on the levers and dogged determination.

I seem to remember being taught a principle in school, "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction" – I think the teacher's name was Mr. Murphy! My

neighbor Mike Mulligan did manage to move the boulder a few feet as I watched from the window. I said to myself, the ground is awfully wet in that area. He is going to sink and get stuck, but who am I to go out and give advice.

When the machine finally stalled and smoke cleared, I saw my neighbor climb down from the mechanical bull, kick it in the ribs and paint the air blue with kind words. Behind the Bobcat were two deep furrows across the mounded leaching field, leading to the knobby tires and the rear end of the Bobcat stuck in the mud. I said to myself, yup, he's stuck alright! Looks like a UFO made a crash landing. I was tempted to bring him a plant to place on his new lawn ornament, but thought it best just to continue watching the comedy act.

Fortunately my office window overlooks the newly created farm field with the abandoned and half buried Bobcat, so I was able to keep working while checking my neighbor's progress. After a while, I looked out again and was not the least bit surprised to see the old, "place the plywood under the tires" trick, to try and back out of the dilemma. I felt it best if I just minded my own business and continued working at the computer while listening to the tires spin and the engine rumble. When he shut the Bobcat off, I knew without looking that he was still in trouble.

Perhaps it was about 45-minutes later when act one, scene two began. I heard a rumble as a big ramp type tow truck arrived and drove out back to dig some more furrows in the mounded leaching field. Next, I watched as the tow truck driver hook up his winch to begin a tug-of-war contest with the Bobcat. I felt like a cheerleader as I watched from the window enjoying my popcorn. The winch on the tow truck began reeling in the catch while the rear tires on the Bobcat spun wildly in reverse. The mud was spewing upward from the rear wheels and as both engines struggled. The Bobcat finally came free and life was good again for "Mike Mulligan" or "Bob the Builder." I didn't dare ask what the fee was for the tow truck.

As the truck left, I wandered outside with a couple of beers to share with the guy while admitting that I had witnessed his problems and commiserated with his frustration, wasted time and added expenses. Saturday was nearly over, only about 2/3's of the dirt was spread and the accursed boulder never was moved to the rear of the lot as intended. Now as for me, I said, why not dig a hole beside the boulder and simply bury it? My young neighbor shrugged his shoulders and said, "I never thought of that." His wife was due home soon and he had some explaining to do about the torn up backyard.

Sunday morning arrived and my wife and I had to leave the newcomers to attend our grand daughter's first communion. We noticed our neighbor out in his yard waiting for happy hour, the time he could fire up the Bobcat and get back to work without offending the neighborhood with noise pollution. I wished my neighbor good luck as we drove off. Later that day we returned home and took that curious glance next door.

All appeared to be quiet and the Bobcat was parked at the end of the driveway, ready for a Monday pick-up. While we were unloading the car, my neighbor's wife came coasting by on her roller blades saying, "I just had to get away." Her reaction implied that something was up. And so, we asked what had happened?

Her reply was a sad continuation of Murphy's Law. She said: "remember that old metal pipe in the front yard that we always thought was an old mail box post? Well, he dug it up with the Bobcat and discovered that it was the water main!" Was I said, "Yes, he broke it." No I said; don't tell me he broke the curb stop valve. I walked down to the end of my driveway to look down the street and confirmed my worst fear. Sure enough, water was running from my neighbor's front yard and down the street to the storm drain.

Now being a concerned neighbor, I walked carefully around the soggy mess and knocked on my neighbor's front door to offer a soft shoulder or a bullet for his head, whichever he desired. My neighbor recanted his wife's story but added the description of the geyser named "Old Faithful" and his panicked plight on a Sunday. He said, "All I wanted to do was remove some of the grass and put down some mulch in the garden by the mailbox." I noticed the two yards of mulch still sitting in the driveway and the deep tire marks in the demolished side yard beyond.

Although it was Sunday, he explained that "he had called the Water Department and fortunately they had someone on call." "The man came to the home and made a temporary patch in the water line, enough to squelch the geyser; but the leak must remain until Monday when a crew will arrive to excavate his front yard and perform repairs." The water department worker said, "If the break is found to be before the valve, then the town will pay for it; but if the break is after the valve then you know who will be liable." My neighbor hung his head in sadness and said: "And I have to pay for all that wasted water running down the street plus I called into work and explained that I would not be in on Monday – more money lost." "The guys at work are already calling me names like squirt." "I'm going back to a wheelbarrow and shovel and I don't care how long the job takes!" I responded, "Well buddy, if it makes you feel any better, I don't think you will have to pay for the lost water as it has not passed through your water meter." Mr. Murphy's spirits were briefly lifted.

Thinking the worst, I had to ask if they had any water to the home. My neighbor explained that "the pressure was low but they could manage." I said I was sorry to hear of his problems and being neighborly, I offered to help in any way possible. He thanked me and I left to wait for the Monday morning revolting developments to continue.

The first truck to arrive was the rental company to retrieve the Bobcat. They had no problem loading it on the flatbed truck and off they went to tempt another weekend warrior.

Around 9 a.m., the water department arrived with their dump truck, and jackhammer. They cut a very neat 2' x 8' hole in my neighbor's brand new asphalt driveway and then extended the hole into the lawn to expose the water main. From the window I could see one guy in the hole and three leaning on shovels, you know the routine. Well, I could not stand the suspense any longer, so I walked over to lean on my own shovel so to speak, and see what the verdict was regarding the cost of repairs. For once my neighbor was lucky. The water department announced "that the break in the line was in the portion that belonged to the town and they would repair it for free." The water department workers were great; they even offered to bury Murphy's Law in the hole provided that my neighbor never rent a Bobcat again. As for the guy next door, he made it to work in the afternoon and next weekend he plans to patch his asphalt driveway and fill in the furrows in his mounded septic system. My window seat is ready but I hesitate offering anymore advice.