

## Digging For China

In 1968 my father took up digging. He said that he wanted to see how far he could go with a hole, to see if a person really could dig all the way through to China. If boating, reading, and baseball were called hobbies, my father reasoned, why couldn't digging be a hobby? It's good exercise and, unlike most hobbies, it's practical and productive.

When you're done digging for the day, you're left with something to see, which, for my father, made digging worthwhile. My father believed, above all else, that if your life didn't produce anything at which to look, that if it didn't create something to touch or hold or point to, then it simply was a life of reveling in leisure, and we all know that a life spent in leisure is a life wasted. Efficiency — concrete and measurable — was the all important thing to my father, and thus, now looking back on it, it was to me also. So with digging, my father could look when he was done. He could pose at the end of each dig, as he always did, standing full up and squeezing the muscles in his lower back with his big mottled right hand while holding the shovel vertically, spade partially stuck in the ground and wooden handle wrapped at the top by his big left hand. Holding this pose for a few quiet moments, my father, proud of his work, would look and call it good. Then, as if no other movement were possible, while still admiring his hole, still measuring, still wondering if he had done enough, his pose would break, and his flannel-clad forearm would raise and mop the sweat from his dirty face, and then, with one last motion, the shovel would be lifted up and thrust back into the ground with a quickness that one could easily miss if not watching closely.

As a child, I always knew my father was done for the day, when, after he mopped his forehead, there followed this one last burst of energy — this sudden raising of the wooden handle and tightening of his grip followed by the exploding

downward thrust, like a pile driver, and the ramming of the spade so deep into the earth that it supported itself even without his mottled hand wrapping its top. Nothing made me prouder than to see that shovel left erect in the bottom of his hole and my father climbing out, covered in dirt and filth and sweat and looking like the Paul Bunyan of men; and even then, when I was small, I knew my father was better than any of those other lazy-ass fathers on the street and my friends knew it too, although they wouldn't always admit it. I saw it in their sad eyes, in the way they slouched over, ashamed as they walked past the hole to get to school. I loved it all, the hole, the shovel, my father, and on show-and-tell days I'd bring a spare shovel to school and try to imitate my father. Of course, back then I wasn't much as far as diggers go, but the other boys knew that someday I would be and that they would not.

By the middle of the first summer, my father's hole was deep enough that he had to lean a ladder against one wall to get in and out of it, and as the hole continued deeper and deeper into the earth, more ladders were laid into the side until a person had to look as far as one could see to make out the shape of my father down there digging.

Getting the dirt out of a hole this deep became a problem which set my father back a few days. Those were sad days when I would watch him sitting with his feet dangling over the edge of the hole and holding his head between his two palms as he devised a way to continue. For the first time since he had started digging, I thought maybe my father wasn't going to make it all the way to China — for the first time I doubted my father's dream and he knew it. He saw the doubt in my tear-stained face and threw a handful of dirt at me, "Keep your doubting to yourself." Then he rose and stood tall, and I knew I had been wrong to doubt; I knew I was one of little faith. He walked into the garage and came out with a rope, a bucket, and a pulley. Scaling a telephone pole nearly to the top, he anchored the pulley into the tarred wood and fed the rope through it. He climbed down and, after tying the bucket's handle onto the

line, tied the rope in a loop . He tossed the rope and the bucket into his hole and went back to the garage, all the time avoiding eye contact with me, as I, the foolish doubter, sat in an old lawn chair beside his hole and cried. As I sat there, I heard the ripping of the circular saw and the echoing of a hammer pounding, and after the noises stopped, my father came back out of the garage with a large wooden cross on his shoulder. Laying the cross behind my chair he climbed down into his hole, grabbed his shovel and brought it back up with him. I could not remember the last time the shovel had been used to dig outside of the hole, but my father dug a small hole behind my seat and mounted the cross in it. I offered to hold the cross vertical while he backfilled the hole and tamped the dirt around it. He accepted my help with a nod, but he still would not look at me.

After the cross was raised, I returned to my chair while my father with his shovel climbed back into his hole and began digging. He tossed the dirt into the bucket and when the bucket was full, he pulled the rope which hoisted the bucket up and into the arm of the cross which caught the bucket both going up and coming down and tipped the earth from it. The process was slow but each time the dirt fell from the bucket I felt more shame at how easily I had given in to doubt, at how similar to the other kids I was.

Occasionally that summer, when my father was at work, I'd climb down into his hole and see if I could make him proud again, see if I could redeem myself, see if I could break through to China, but I had soft hands and little muscle as a child and try as I might, blisters and fatigue never allowed me to stay in the hole long enough to make any real progress. When finally giving up, I would pose like my father, but only feel shame as I looked at my work--this was my father's hole, what was I doing down in it? I added nothing to his work, and I was too weak to even get the shovel back standing erect on its own. Frustrated and dejected, I would pull my little body from the hole, only to look down and see that shovel leaning against the side — my black eye

for the rest of the day. My father never said anything to me about being in his hole, but I knew he was disappointed in my weakness, I could see it in his eyes when they looked down in the hole and saw that leaning shovel.

Eventually the hole became so deep that my father's bucket-and-pulley system simply became ineffective. It took a great deal of time to empty one bucket, and a rope that would reach the bottom was so long that it was all my father could do to pull it. He knew another alternative was needed, and again he spent several days sitting at the edge of the hole thinking, only this time I was careful not to let doubt show on my face. My air of confidence must have been inspiring, because after three days of thinking he announced to me that he had developed a new system of digging which he had named "tier digging." I felt redeemed when my father told me about the system as if I were, not merely his son, but his partner.

He worked on "tier digging" in a practice hole for several weeks to perfect it, and when he had it down, his problems were solved. His method simply was to dig steps into the ground and use the space from the last few steps dug as a depository for the earth of the next step. The only problem with the method, and of course he knew it before going in, was that a person willing to engage in this type of digging must be willing to accept the risk of blocking the exit behind you. Thus in this method, one moved forward until breaking through or one didn't get out of the hole. My father was no coward and perfectly understood the risks involved with "tier digging" when he entered his hole for the last time. Creeping in behind him, I did not.

I hid behind my father until the exit was sealed, and then it was too dark for him to notice me, and I stopped worrying about being discovered, and just listened in awe to the rhythmic sounds of his spade ramming into the earth and the gentle cascading denseness of earth being tossed back behind.

The other danger of "tier digging", aside from not being able to break through, is the possibility of losing your sense of direction and thus no longer digging down.

Because of this danger, my father never turned his head from the front of the hole, and thus I had some freedom to move behind him and listen from different angles to the steady beat of one man digging. Although it was black in the hole, I knew what my father looked like as he dug. I could see in my mind his strong back flexing with each thrust and lift, and I marveled at the memory of his tight biceps as they effortlessly displaced the earth standing in the way. I remember never being so proud of my father as I was then, and I remember hoping that one day I too could dig to the admiration of my son.

My father made one mistake in his life and that cost him his life. He miscalculated how far it was to China. Although he dug with a stamina and endurance unknown to other men, he finally, after what must have been several days, stopped digging. The quietness of the hole without the rhythmic sound of digging was eerie. I knew my father was standing tall, rubbing his lower back, and then mopping his brow, and I heard the final thrust of his shovel into the earth and his body crash down beside the spade. I listened to it all, and I knew that the last act of this dirty, sweaty man was that jamming of his shovel, hard enough for it to remain erect after he no longer could hold onto it, into the soil. I pictured in my mind the erect shovel and my father, curled beside it, dead — a monument to the digger of a hole. If only I was an artist, I would have spent my life sculpting that image all over the world until it became to others the ideal that my father was to me.

To die in your own hole, beside an erect shovel, with dirt on your hands and sweat on your brow, is to die in glory. I only hope to be so lucky.

It was really my father who loosened the cap on the jar for me even though he got none of the credit. Because when I did break through, it only took a few shovels full of dirt. My father, with no way of knowing it, was so close that when he could go no farther and stuck his shovel into the ground at the bottom of the hole and died, the spear of his shovel must have looked like a small grave marker to those Chinese who

had to avoid tripping over it for the day that I spent thinking about what to do. They had to have wondered who died for they could think of no one in the small village who had. But someone had died and imagine the surprise on the face of the old Manchus woman, who, sitting with her grandson in her arms, watched in horror as the mysterious grave marker receded into the ground, and I climbed out of the tomb and rose from the dead.