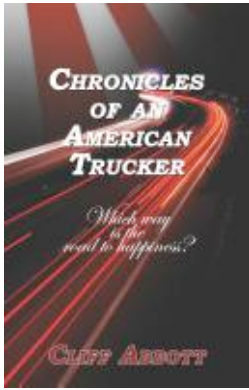


**CHRONICLES
OF AN
AMERICAN
TRUCKER**

*Which way
is the
road to happiness?*

CLIFF ABBOTT



Part memoir, part job description, mostly funny and all true; you'll feel like you're riding along in **CHRONICLES OF AN AMERICAN TRUCKER: Which Way is the Road to Happiness?** From "Barney," the diminutive security guard, to "Buford" the terrible Texas Trooper, you'll meet the characters, see the sights, and share the laughter of life on the road. And when you're finished, you'll know what every trucker knows; the joy is in the journey.

Chronicles of an American Trucker

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The author has made every effort to recreate events, locales and conversations from his memories of them. In order to maintain the anonymity of characters, in some instances the names of individuals and places have been changed.

Any opinions, advice or guidance provided on the subject of professional truck driving is the opinion of the author and is not offered as instruction.

Author acknowledges that his own actions, as depicted, were not always representative of the safest practices of professional driving.

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Chapter 1 - Sandstone

Sometimes, the best thing you can say about your day is, “it’s over.” Mine started in the piercing cold as I walked into the Hurricane, WV truck stop after a sleep that was much too short. I had planned a full night’s rest, but mechanical problems with the trailer and loading delays had eroded my trip time. A short nap was all I time could spare for rest. I splashed a little water on my face, snagged a cup of coffee, and headed for the truck. Breakfast would have to wait. Reasoning that everything was working fine when I had parked the truck, my hasty pre-trip “inspection” was a quick kick of the tires. Then, I was on my way into the West Virginia morning.

The Turnpike was beautiful. Frozen waterfalls cascaded from the sheer rock walls where the mountains had been cut away to make room for the road. Occasional patches of ice dotted the roadway, but they were easy enough to dodge and I kept my speed down. The brakes seemed a little sluggish, but these were mountains I was driving through and the load was heavy.

The sun was well up when I left the Turnpike for I-64 towards Virginia. Signs warned of the steep grade ahead, but I’d been dealing with mountain grades all morning and I was ready. Selecting the right gear, I downshifted and settled in for a long, slow trip down the mountain. Or so I thought.

I was determined to brake as gently as possible to avoid overheating the brakes. When gravity brought my speed to 30 miles-per-hour, I gingerly depressed the brake pedal to slow to

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my “target” speed of 25. I pressed a little harder at 35 mph. And even harder at 40. To my dismay, I continued to pick up speed despite my braking efforts. A quick look in the mirror said it all. Each time I touched the brake pedal, smoke poured from the tractor wheels, but not from the trailer. A pull of the hand-valve confirmed it: the trailer brakes were not working at all. The tractor brakes were overheating in a useless effort to stop both tractor and heavily-loaded trailer. With several miles of Sandstone Mountain left to descend, I knew a crash was inevitable.

I recalled a student in truck driving school asking the instructor what to do in such a situation. We all laughed when he said; “Look for a soft spot to land.” But his explanation made a great deal of sense. “If you can’t avoid a crash,” he said, “you might at least be able to choose what you hit. Rocks are hardest, try not to hit rocks. Big trees are hard, but smaller ones will slow you as they break or bend. Flat, grassy areas are better.” I was looking now, and urgently. I could see yellow signs far in the distance and I sure hoped they said “runaway truck ramp.” My speed was near 80 now, and I might not be able to hold the road in the next curve, or dodge the next car. There WAS a truck ramp, one mile ahead. Could I make it another mile?

It’s kind of funny, how time seems to move in slow motion in an emergency situation. Even at the speeds I was traveling, it still took some time to come down the mountain; time that seemed to crawl. I picked up the microphone and announced to the world that my brakes were gone, suggesting that any advice another driver would care to give would be welcomed. A distant driver advised that I should be sure to steer the truck into the middle of the truck ramp to avoid turning the truck over. I thanked Him. Then I prayed.

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I have a strong faith, and I believed that whatever was about to happen was the will of God, as it should be. My own wishes were secondary. I simply asked that His will be done, and if it could be done without excessive suffering on my part, I would be grateful. I asked Him to care for my family and said I was sorry for the times I had failed Him. Then I was ready.

Well, I would have been ready if not for that unfortunate driver who moved in front of me to pass a slower recreational vehicle. The needle on the Speedometer was beyond the last number of 85; I guessed maybe 90 miles per hour. As politely as I could, I informed said driver that he was about to receive a bulldog suppository if he didn't move back to the right lane, pronto. He did so expeditiously, and his truck became an orange blur as I shot past.

I made another curve and then there was nothing between me and the opening to the escape ramp. I tugged the end of the lap belt down tight and checked my speed one last time. The needle had reached all the way at the bottom of the gauge and started to climb the other side, almost returning to the zero position. I guessed one-fifteen, and then I stood on the brake pedal with everything I had just before entering the ramp. I was attempting to lose as much speed as possible by using up whatever brakes remained. If there was any effect, I couldn't feel it as I entered the pea-gravel truck ramp. The tractor bucked to a stop; the fiberglass hood ripping off and skittering down the mountain like a sled.

The last insult was the book-on-cassette flying out of the tape player and administering a whack to the middle of my forehead. Once stopped, I sat motionless for a moment, mentally surveying my condition and the truck's. I released the

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seat belt and opened the door, which brushed an arc in the pea-gravel as I pushed it open. The tractor was buried so deeply that there were no steps to descend, as the surface of the gravel was even with the floor of the cab.

The force of displacing the gravel had been great enough to rip the front axle from the truck frame. When I saw the steering tires pointed outward in different directions, I remembered my firm grip on the steering wheel and realized I had been steering a truck with no front wheels for the last portion of the ride. Later, I'd find bruises on both hips from the force of the lap belt. But I was alive and the sun was shining when the Highway Department vehicle picked me up.

A kind gentleman in a pickup truck had heard my call for help on the C.B. and I had hardly stepped out of the truck when he arrived. "You all right?" he asked and I told him I thought I was. "You won't get a ticket," he said. "I'll just take you back to the office. After you clean your britches out, we'll have some paperwork to do!" Grateful, I threw my suitcase in back and hopped in the truck.

As we descended the rest of the mountain, he asked a question. "Did it enter your mind to try to ride it out?" he queried. "Of course it did," I told him, "But, I was already going over a hundred and I wasn't sure I could hold it in the road the rest of the way down." The words had hardly left my mouth when we encountered a tight curve to the left, complete with yellow 35 mph warning signs. The mountain dropped away sharply to the right with nothing but air beyond the guard rail. Neither of us spoke; we both knew I never would have made that curve. An hour later, the paperwork was done and I was checked in to a Beckley motel.

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My “once a nurse, always a nurse” wife insisted I go to the hospital for treatment of the “head injury” I had suffered from the cassette tape. “No,” I said. “It’s just a scratch. I’m going to get something to eat, and then I’m going to bed.” She tried, but I was adamant. There were no restaurants close by, but I found a hot dog and some chips at a nearby convenience store.

I returned to find the door to my room standing open and a small man of middle-eastern appearance holding up my bed to peer underneath. He dropped the mattress and jumped 3 feet in the air when I shouted “WHAT are you doing?!” “I look for YOU,” was his reply. Asked why in the world I would be under my bed, he explained in heavily accented English. “Your wife call,” the poor man said. “She say you hurt head and you not answer phone because you die.” I assured him I was very much alive and called the Mrs. to deliver the same news.

Then I went to bed. It had been a long day.

Chapter 2 - The Scale

It wasn't easy to tell my wife I wouldn't be home that weekend, but the opportunity was too good to pass up. The foundry was running 24/7 to meet production, and needed Sunday deliveries of Michigan sand to make molds for the engine blocks they were casting. The plant workers made double-time for working Sundays, and so did we, in a way. The freight rate per ton was double the usual, and the news got better.

The I-94 Michigan scale was still under construction. The Indiana weigh station had not been open on weekends for as long as anyone could remember. The Illinois I-80 scale house was closed for repairs. That only left the Carlock scales in Illinois and, well, there are a lot of roads to Peoria. There was little chance of getting caught if we carried a few extra tons to take advantage of the high rates. I have long since changed my attitude about such things and today would encourage any driver to keep it legal. But that one night, with some careful planning and a little luck, we would earn a week's pay.

In the line to the loading chute, we talked about our big payday while we waited. Eugene was several trucks ahead, and then three of us, Mikey, Tom, and me, were grouped together a little further back. We had already opened the top hatches, so all that was left was to pull under the chute and tell the loader via the CB (Citizens Band) radio how much to load. Once loaded, we'd weigh, print off a scale ticket and pick up our paperwork.

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It wasn't long before Eugene was loaded and the line moved ahead.

I was next under the chute when I saw Eugene pulling out onto the highway. Mikey asked him on the CB if he was going to wait and run with us, but Eugene just said, "No, I gotta go" and went on. "Way to be a team mate!" was Tom's parting shot. I would have commented too, but it was my turn to load and I needed to pull into position. "Twenty-eight tons," I told the loader, three more than my usual maximum cargo. "Are you sure?" came the skeptical response. I confirmed the order, and felt the rig sag as the sand began pouring into the trailer.

Soon we had all retrieved our paperwork and three overweight rigs headed into the Michigan night. We tuned our CBs to an unused channel so we didn't tie up Channel 19 with our discussion of how we might spend our windfall. For those of you who aren't truck drivers, Channel 19 is commonly used as a "community" channel where drivers share information with anyone and everyone listening. It's considered polite to take conversations that only involve a few drivers to a different channel. Had we been on 19, we might have heard someone warning us that the scale house ahead, always closed on weekends, was doing a fine business.

Our first inkling of trouble was when I rounded the curve and saw the "open" sign. My heart sank as I picked up the microphone and informed the boys behind me. As I pulled in, I wondered how much the fine would be, and if my truck would be impounded or I might even be jailed. I slowed to the posted 5 mph and approached the scale itself, knowing that the green light would change to red as I pulled onto the platform. I looked

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into the windows of the scale house, expecting to see a platoon of troopers ready for business. But that's not what I saw.

Through the window, I saw one trooper. Just one. And her back was to the scale readout as she wrote out an overweight ticket for the driver at the counter. Which happened to be Eugene. His eyes were huge as he watched all three of our heavy rigs cross the scale. From his position, he could read the large, red numbers that were behind the officer's back as she dealt with Eugene's citation. But, he said nothing and the light stayed green. I managed to exhale as I rolled off the other side of the scale.

We were nearly to Illinois before Mikey broke the silence. "Do you think he'll be mad?" he asked. Tom said "Tough, he could have waited for us," but I pointed out that we ALL might have been busted if he had. We wanted to feel sorry for Eugene, but we all thought it was just desserts for leaving his team mates back in Michigan. Besides, it was just too dang funny.

As we expected, he was in a bad mood when we again met up in Peoria. I guess a \$1,400 fine will do that to a guy.

Chapter 17 - The Passenger

Many of my memories of the road are pleasant, but one still haunts me. I won't forget one January Illinois night when my pride in my fellow drivers was turned to shame. Weather reports were grim; a shift in the Jet Stream brought cold Arctic air to the Midwest. New records for cold were predicted, perhaps 25-below with a wind-chill of 60-below or worse. Radio stations warned that exposed skin would freeze in seconds. It was best to stay indoors. But I had taken the right precautions and the truck was running well with the cab toasty warm.

As I crossed I-80 the radio announced that a new record had, indeed, been set. I kept an ear to the C.B. too, for the latest weather developments or just in case someone called for help. Some time after midnight I overheard two drivers discussing a pedestrian they had spotted on the shoulder of the Interstate. One mentioned the deadly cold and the folly of being out in it, while the other announced his intention to stop and offer help. Only, he didn't. After a long silence, the first driver asked if he had stopped. "I was gonna," he said. "Until I saw that it's a," well, I'm not going to say it. The person in danger was African-American, and the driver didn't allow that kind in his truck, period. The other driver responded with some gibberish about his company's no-passenger policy and the two went on into the night.

Incensed, I didn't need a heater to stay warm as I picked up the microphone to share my thoughts with the bigoted cowards.

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But, before I could speak, I saw the old Buick on the shoulder, left-front tire folded up underneath as if it was a broken toy. Snow was already beginning to drift around it, propelled by winds howling across the fields that bordered the highway. I saw no one in or around the car, and I somehow knew it was the source of the pedestrian the drivers had been discussing.

I strained to see the driver walking in the night and soon did. No hat. No gloves. No scarf or boots or earmuffs. A thin person wearing a thin jacket against the cold. I threw on the four-ways and came to a stop beside – her. A teenage girl in a High School jacket, nearly frozen and scared to death. Somebody’s daughter, sister. She remained silent when I spoke to her from the opened passenger door, weighing the risk of climbing into a stranger’s truck against certain death from the cold. As gently as I could, I convinced her climb up into the truck.

She sat with her back to the door, curled up and still scared, never taking her eyes off of me. After a while, I got her to speak, but only a few words. I said I planned to get off at the first exit with a business where she might find a pay phone and keep warm until her folks arrived. She shook her head, slightly, in agreement. But the restaurant we found was closed and there was no pay phone outside. So was the gas station at the next exit. We found an open convenience store one exit further, but the rough-looking group hanging around the parking lot frightened her worse than I did. So I made a decision. Likely illegal, maybe unsafe, undoubtedly stupid. I took her home.

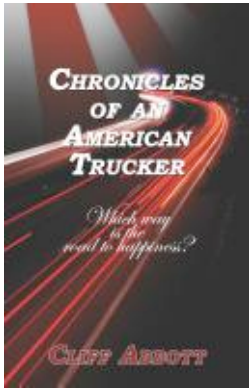
With few soft words and hand gestures, she directed me to an older residential neighborhood in Joliet with narrow streets and old houses and cars parked on both sides of the street. At

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each intersection I'd stop and wait for her to point the direction. A couple of turns were too tight and I'm sure more than one resident woke up to find truck tracks in the snow across a corner of their yard. But she finally said, "Here," and I stopped the truck. I offered coat, gloves, blanket, money, but she only shook her head and slowly backed down the steps to the ground. And then, without a word, she disappeared.

I never saw which house she went to, or if she went off somewhere between the houses to somewhere else. I wanted to believe that worried parents greeted her with hugs and tears of joy and relief. But I'll never know. She could have been a runaway, a criminal, a – well, it doesn't matter. She wasn't a frozen corpse on the side of I-80, and that will have to be enough.

When I finally shut down, I lay awake for a long time, pondering those frightened, brown eyes, and two men with hearts colder than the Arctic air.



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