



12-15-1995

## Round Trip

Michelle L. Hutchens

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

---

### Recommended Citation

Hutchens, Michelle L. (1995) "Round Trip," *Westview*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol15/iss2/3>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).



# ROUND TRIP

*Michelle L. Hutchens*

It seemed to Daniel that he had been waiting as long as he could remember for this day to come. For the past three summers he had tried to convince his father to let him go earlier, but Frank had been adamant that he wait at least until he was sixteen.

Daniel was dressing in the muted light from the clothes closet when Frank walked into the bedroom to wake him. Despite his father's insistence that he get a good night's sleep, he had slept fitfully, excited and nervous about the week ahead. He had been awake for a couple of hours before he finally dared to get up and dress. It was still dark out; a light, cool breeze stirred the curtains.

Frank walked over to Chester's bed. Chester was curled into the fetal position, his pillow clutched to his chest. Frank gently pulled Chester's thumb from his mouth, retrieved the sheet from the tangle of bedclothes at the foot of the bed, and covered his legs. Frank nodded at Daniel, tapped the watch on his wrist, and went downstairs.

Daniel smelled the bacon and coffee before he stepped into the kitchen. He set his bundle of clothes, which were wrapped in plain brown paper—Maude wouldn't let them use the suitcase, it would get too dirty—next to his father's bundle and poured himself a cup of coffee.

They ate in silence. After they finished, Daniel stacked their dishes and the empty apple butter jar in the sink. Frank poured the remaining coffee into a thermos.

Daniel picked up their two bundles of clothes and the hefty grocery sack that held their lunch. "Ready?"

"Go on out to the truck while I do a double-check,"

Frank said. He gave Daniel the thermos and went upstairs.

Daniel went out and set their clothes in the bed of the pickup. Their two dogs clambered out from under the porch when the screen door slammed. The dogs sniffed at the lunch sack; Daniel pushed them away with his knee. He rolled the windows down, placed the thermos in the cab, and settled into the passenger seat. He knew Frank was making the rounds through the bedrooms, checking on each of his sleeping children and his wife so he could kiss them good bye. Sometimes Daniel pretended he was asleep when his father crept into their room to give him good-byes; it embarrassed him that Frank would still kiss him even though he was a grown man, practically.

Frank stepped out onto the front porch. The dogs rubbed their heads under Frank's hands, their tails whipping madly. He squatted down to stroke their large heads; they licked his face and knocked off his hat, quietly yelping with pleasure at his touch. Maude liked the dogs to be in the house with her whenever Frank was gone; they made her feel safer.

The sun was just coming up when they started out. They had about an hour's drive and they didn't talk on the way, except when Frank asked Daniel to pour him some coffee. The truck's speed forced a cool breeze through the cab and filled their noses with the scent of summer wheat and manure.

By the time they reached the field, the sun had risen high enough to sting Daniel's eyes. Frank glanced at his watch. "We'll go on ahead," Frank said. "I like to get there a bit early, and knowing my crew, they'll not show

up 'til just a couple minutes before the shift change." They drove along a rut to the well site; Daniel sloshed coffee onto the stained seat when they rolled to a stop. Several men were standing around the rig. One man was seated, leaning back on his elbows, smoking a cigarette. An untanned strip across his forehead showed where his hat had been.

"What's this, Harwood? Break time?" Frank grinned and stepped down from the truck. One of the men wiped his greasy hand on the leg of his grimy dungarees and held it out to Frank.

"We just wore down another bit."

Daniel pulled his hat down further over his eyes and stepped down from the truck.

Frank walked to the derrick. "Still no oil, huh?"

Harwood picked up a rock fragment, bit it, then handed it to Frank, who did the same. Frank shook his head. "Well, my boys'll be here any minute. We'll make the trip. You all go on; you look beat."

Harwood slapped Frank on the shoulder. "You're a prince, Cooper." He turned to Daniel. "Who's this? Breakin in a new one?"

Frank put his arm around Daniel's shoulders. "This here's my oldest, Daniel."

Daniel held out his hand. "Nice to meet you, sir."

Harwood laughed and shook Daniel's hand. "Only 'sir' out here is the owner of the company, and he don't come out here too much; he might get his hands dirty." He turned to Frank. "No wonder you're so willin to make the trip yourself. You got to show the boy how it's done!"

Another pickup rolled to a stop at the rig. Two men climbed down from the cab and another two jumped out of the bed.

Harwood turned to his crew. "And another end to another shift. Let's go, boys." His men wearily followed

Harwood to the pickup; the ones riding in the bed lay down. "Have fun," Harwood called from the cab of the truck. "Give young Cooper there an education!"

Frank's crew stood with their hands in their pockets. Frank waved his arm in Daniel's direction. "This here's my oldest boy, Daniel."

The men nodded at Daniel and muttered hello. Daniel returned the nod. Eight eyes squinting against the already bright sun stared at Daniel. His arms felt very long and his face reddened. He started to stuff his hands into his front pockets, but that felt wrong, so he crossed his arms, which felt worse. Finally, he looped his thumbs into his belt loops and returned the gazes from the red-tanned faces.

"He's just here to see how things get done. He thinks he wants to work out in the fields in the summers, and I want him to see what he'd be gettin into." Frank shot Daniel a warning look. "If he gets in anybody's way, you let me know. Got it?"

Daniel and the oil crew nodded.

"Good. Alright, everybody. It's time to make a trip."

The men groaned and moved toward the rig. Daniel tapped one of the men on the arm. "What's a trip?"

"Just stay out of the way and watch," he said.

Frank took his place on the rig deck and reviewed the instruments on his control panel. One of the rough-necks helped the derrick man hook a cable onto his wide leather belt. They both checked the connection; then the derrick man tugged on worn leather gloves and began to climb up the derrick. Frank shoved two of his fingers in his mouth and whistled. "Hold it, Tyler. Let me double-check your geronimo line."

"Sure, sure." Tyler jumped down. "I checked it, though, and so did Martin."

Frank jerked the cable. He squinted up at the clear,

bright blue sky. "I know. But if that wind kicks up I don't want to take no chances. I ain't lost a derrick man yet. Now go on." Frank returned to his instruments. Tyler made his long climb up to his perch near the top of the derrick. "Okay," Tyler yelled, "here comes the kelly!"

Two of the roughnecks tugged on blackened, heavy leather gloves and got on the derrick floor. The derrick man and one of the roughnecks guided a long, six-sided tube with a hook and block assembly to the top of the bore hole, which the other roughneck latched to the pipe. One man reeled in the cable on the assembly while the other guided the pipe up from the bore hole. Once the pipe was pulled out three-joints high, the derrick man and the roughneck guided the pipe out of the hole and rested it on the derrick floor, out of the way. Before the first thribble had been pulled, the roughnecks were spattered with grease and mud.

Frank kept a close watch on all the instruments. Every few minutes he called out the drilling fluid pressure, often instructing the third roughneck to add more water or bentonite clay to keep the pressure at a safe level.

Finally, they pulled up the drill bit. The roughneck tending the drilling mud brought over the new bit and replaced the old one. They performed the entire process in reverse to put the pipe back in.



Once drilling resumed, the derrick man climbed down, removed the cable from his belt, and sat in the shade of the pickup. He pulled a pack of unfiltered

Camels and a silver lighter out from under his shirt sleeve, cupped his hand against the breeze, and lit a cigarette. He inhaled deeply and let the smoke out slow. Two of the roughnecks squatted next to Tyler and used his lighter for their cigarettes.

"So, Danny boy, was this your first *trip*?" Tyler asked.

Daniel nodded. "But why is it called a *trip*?"

One of the roughnecks offered Daniel a cigarette, which he refused. "Cause you're pulling out the pipe. What we just did was a *round trip*; we pulled out all the pipe and then turned right around and put it all back."

The other roughneck fanned his sweaty, grimy face with his hat. "Like father, like son, Daniel? You want to go into the oil business, too?"

Daniel shrugged. "You can make a good livin at it. And Daddy said he'd teach me if I really wanted to learn."

Tyler nodded. "Your old man's about the best I've ever seen. Worked his way up from roughneck, never let nobody do him no favors, even though he's buddy-buddy with John, the owner's kid. He's read up all about drilling, and he's got common sense, too."

One of the roughnecks snickered. "He ain't got too much common sense if you ask me, still working as a driller. Hell, he could be at least a tool pusher by now, maybe even a drilling superintendent, if he wanted." He scratched at the peeling, sunburned skin on the back of his neck. "But no, he keeps workin these tours out here with us, gettin dirty and sunburnt." He made *tours* sound like *towers*.

Tyler kicked the roughneck's boot. "Just shut your face, Dannon." He looked up at Daniel. "Your old man just knows what it is he likes to do and he just keeps on doin it. Hell, ol John liked to never even got your daddy to give up being a derrick man."

Daniel squatted next to the men. "What convinced him?"

Dannon snickered again. "*Who*, you mean. It was when ol Johnny-boy's nephew Carl took a dive."

"Shut up," the other roughneck said. "A man's dead."

"Pardon me, Father Martin." Dannon stood up and stretched. "I seem to be gettin on you all's sensitive nerves, so I'll just go give Booth a break." He jerked his hat onto his head and sauntered back to the derrick.

"Carl was John's nephew, his oldest sister's boy," Martin said. "His sister's a lot older than him, and Carl was just a couple years younger than he was. They was more like brothers than uncle and nephew."

"Carl was a lot like your dad; even though his family owned the company, he wanted to learn it from the ground up. And a lot of the crews made it extra hard for him to learn, too, cause he was in the family, but he had guts. He didn't complain to nobody and just worked his ass off."

"So what happened to him?" Daniel chewed on a blade of grass.

Tyler stared out to the horizon. "He was a derrick man, like me. He shouldn't a been a derrick man; he was just learnin, really, he hadn't been on the job long enough to be able to handle it. It was May, and thunderstorms were just blowin up out from nowhere."

"It was a really big rig; they were trippin out line in fourbles instead of thribbles. A thunderstorm started moving in, but the driller, who was some jackass tryin to buck his way into management, wanted to get the job done before the storm came in."

Tyler leaned his head against the pickup. "The wind all of a sudden picked up and caught Carl off guard. He fell."

Daniel tugged at the grass. "But didn't that cable

save him? I mean, isn't that what it's for?"

"Yeah, that's what it's for," Tyler said. "But it wasn't secured. Carl had a faulty hook and he hadn't been able to tell when he checked it, and cause everybody in the crew gave him such a hard time, he didn't trust nobody else to check his geronimo line, either."

"He didn't die right away," Martin said. "He was all crumpled and couldn't move his arms or legs or even talk, but he lived like that for a couple of days."

"Ol John come out to the field and beat the tar outta that driller," Tyler said. "And then he told your daddy that he didn't want anybody else to have to die like that, out of carelessness. He convinced your daddy that he needed to work as a driller, be in charge in the field."

Booth took a cigarette from Martin and settled in next to Tyler. "Talking about Carl?" He lit his cigarette with Tyler's lighter.

"How'd you know?" Martin asked.

Booth slowly exhaled. The smoke drifted in the light breeze. "Dannon was laughin when he relieved me." He stretched. "Well, did the story change your mind about going into oil?"

Daniel shrugged.

"Ah, what am I thinkin," Booth said. "Cooper's your daddy; it's in your blood. You don't have any choice."

Tyler and Martin stood up slowly and returned to the rig. Booth finished his cigarette and rubbed out the butt on the ground. "Watch and learn, Danny-boy." He walked back to the derrick and helped Martin wash down pipe and tools. Tyler and Dannon maintained the mud mixture for the drilling fluid.

They broke for lunch in shifts. Daniel watched them work the rest of the afternoon. Around three-twenty, Tyler called out, "They're comin!" and climbed down from his perch. Daniel turned and saw the dust trail in the wake of the pickup rattling to the rig site.

The other men removed their gloves and hats and Frank scribbled a few notes in a log at his control panel.

Three men stepped lazily from the bed of the pickup. A fourth man jumped down from the cab. The driver, a big-bellied man with a sunburnt face and a bushy, graying handle-bar mustache, stepped down last.

"Lookee here, boys," he said, extending a meaty hand with heavy fingers, "I told you we was the hardest workin crew in the company. This here boy hadn't even got dirty and he's been out here all day!" He crushed Daniel's fingers together.

"This here's my oldest boy, Daniel," Frank said. "Son, this is Don Foley."

"Pleasure to meet you, sir," Daniel said.

Foley laughed. "I see your daddy's taught you manners, son."

"We took a round trip this morning," Frank said. "But you'll have to change out bits again before your shift's over."

Foley nodded. "I hoped we woulda hit oil by now."

Tyler settled into the driver's seat of the pickup and honked the horn. "C'mon, let's go!" Martin took the passenger seat; Booth and Dannon climbed into the bed of the pickup. Dannon lay down in the bed, using his greasy shirt as a pillow. The tires spun when Tyler sped out.

Foley slapped Frank on the back. "Til tomorrow, Coop."

Frank nodded. Daniel followed his father to their pickup. Frank watched the derrick man make his long, careful climb to his perch. "Still want to work in oil?"

Daniel studied his father's tanned, lined, sweaty face. "Yeah, Daddy."

Frank shook his head and started the engine.