



## Humor in Surveying: The Conversation

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*A Work of Fiction (... but based on a true story)*

I arrived at the site a few minutes late. I was kicking myself because it was such an important meeting and there were a lot of dollars at stake for someone. After all, the second story of the building was partially framed and I had been informed just yesterday that it was across the boundary line onto the neighboring property. You probably already know this, but that is not where most developers want their building to be, on someone else's property.

The whole group had already assembled and had begun discussing the issues and I was late. That's not the best first impression, especially since I was the one they were relying on to sort out what had happened and who was at fault. Everyone was visibly nervous. No one wanted to be the scapegoat and they were all obviously maneuvering and posturing so as to avoid having to pay for such a blunder. It isn't cheap to move a building, basement level and all. I could hear from a distance the anger and tension in their voices.

As I walked up to that group I was struck by the fact that I was the only one wearing blue jeans and work boots. My boots were muddy too. It had rained and the site hadn't dried out yet.

As I approached I heard the end of Melissa's tirade, "I want to know what the !@#%\$ happened to my building!" It's not hard to figure out that Melissa is the developer. She's also my client. My crew had staked the location of this building.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Melissa. It literally took me until now to figure out exactly how this happened."

"Well thank God someone knows what's goin' on here!" she said. "Clue us in!"

So here it is. The moment of truth. All eyes are on me.

As I opened my mouth to speak, I heard, "All I know is that we built it where it was staked! I don't even know why I've got to be here! I've got work to do!"

"Shut up and let the man speak, Frank!" came shouting from Melissa. If you haven't already guessed, Frank is the contractor. That's what contractors say, "We built it where it was staked." It's sort of like a mantra.

"And besides, you're here because I TOLD you to be here! I'm paying you, right?" she added, "Get on with it!"

"Actually Frank, you didn't build it where it was staked," I said. "This has been a rat's nest to untangle but I think I've finally figured it out. See these nails I've got here? They're maybe six to eight inches long. We use them because they're so big and usually won't move once they are set in the ground. Besides, the ground has been frozen so we couldn't get anything else in. Well Frank, we can go on over there to where the stakes are, the ones that are left that is, and I'll show you three things about how you built this building from the stakes. One, in building this thing, you knocked out over half the nails. You may think the physical evidence is gone but we electronically save the location of all the points we stake for just such an occasion as this. So we know where all the nails were even though they've been knocked out. Two, between the freeze, thaw, and equipment, some of these nails have been disturbed. In particular, on the west side of the building, the nails are all laying on their sides. It just so happens that the distance from the head of the nails laying on their side to the building corner coincides with the offset distance we discussed. But the nails weren't set laying on their sides. And third, when we were discussing this issue prior to stakeout, you requested a 15' offset, after much deliberation that is. You almost settled on a 10' offset instead, remember? Well the stakes say 15' but the distance from the head of the nail to the building corner is exactly 10'. That pulls the building 5' to the west of where it's supposed to be."

"So that's that? Problem solved? What the hell are the rest of us doing here?"

"Not so fast Mr. Anderson," I said. Mr. Anderson, as he preferred to be addressed, was the engineer, and keenly interested in ending this discussion and getting back to his business unscathed.

"What do you mean by that?" he said.

"Well, I've got to tell you that Frank's was not the only indiscretion in this situation. The civil design for the site doesn't show the correct building location."

"What are you trying to say?" he shot back.

"I'll tell you. It appears to me that the original site design showed a building that was 38' wide. Later, since there was room between the side setbacks, the building design was changed to make it 40' wide. On the civil drawings, the building was changed, as can be seen on Sheet C7 in the clouded area, but the side setback was left the same, at 10'. Consequently, the building is another 2' off."

"This is getting worse by the minute. Who has the Tylenol?" quoth Melissa.

"There's more," I said. "Charles' part has yet to be described."

"When will it end?" said Melissa.

Charles was the quiet, confident type. An architect. He had been patiently but attentively listening to the conversation so far.

"The building has an underground garage that actually extends out from the face of the exposed main level by two feet on the side. The building footprint that was provided to the engineer's office by Charles was for the foundation, which is the underground portion and not the main level, as is usual for a set of civil drawings. The civil drawings usually show what will be exposed at ground level. So the building has

been shifted an additional two feet."

"They asked for the foundation drawings from us!" said Charles.

"Is that finally all?" asked Melissa.

"Unfortunately, no. There's one more culprit."

"There isn't anybody left!"

"Yes there is. There's me," I offered.

All eyes perked. It isn't often that anyone in a conversation like this points the finger at themselves. I've learned over the years though that more business can be retained and will even be developed than will ever be lost if you admit to your mistakes, take your medicine, pay your dues, and move on. In the end, business people do value integrity and I've made much more money over the years by maintaining my integrity and paying for my mistakes because those same developers have hired me over and over again. Melissa is a terrific example of that. She's been my client for many years because she knows that when I make a mistake I'll admit to it. She also knows she can count on me to tell her the truth about a situation, which is why I was in this conversation.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Well, let me show you the subdivision plat. See this side property line that looks darker than the other lines? The city wanted to maintain control of the potential development of the adjoining tract so they kept an outparcel 1' wide along the length of the side of the property. It isn't dimensioned though except all the way at the back of the property and it doesn't show up well on the plat. It shows only as a darker single line. I missed it. And my party chief missed it, too."

"Is that finally all of it?" pleaded Melissa.

"Yes," I said.

"So, in the end, all of you are to blame?" she asked.

"Yes," I said again.

"So, we have a 5' error by the contractor, a 2' error by the engineer, a 2' error by the architect, and a 1' error by the surveyor adding up to a 10' error and my building is on the wrong property? What do we do about this now?"

"Not exactly," I said.

It was at that point that I noticed a glimmer of enlightenment in the eyes of the other "culprits."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"It's like this. Charles made his 2' error when he gave the wrong building footprint to Mr. Anderson. Mr.

Anderson compounded that error by 2' when he adjusted the building layout without adjusting the setback distance. I then compounded that error 1' further by laying out the building without noticing the 1' outparcel to the city. Then Frank comes along and blows the layout off the stakes by 5' and nullifies all of our errors!"

"Are you telling me that my building is in the right place after all?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you."

"Well why didn't you say that in the first place?"

"We'll let this be a lesson to us all."

The collective sigh of relief was audible, and I was part of it.

## About the Author



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