The Tractors

When my dad bought a farm near Columbia, Illinois he soon realized we needed a tractor for plowing and general farm work. However, I think he must have invested most of his extra cash on buying the farm because the first tractor he bought was a small International Cub. It only pulled a single-bottom 14" plow and was normally used in a garden, not on a full-sized farm. But, the first major task he assigned me was to plow the north 10-acre field to plant alfalfa. I began the project in September of 1956 and didn't finish until October.

Ten acres isn't a large field, but with the Cub and single plow it took me about 30 minutes to make a complete circuit from one end of the field to the other and back. So, most evenings that Fall when I returned home from school at about 3:30 p.m., I would jump on the tractor and drive up to the field to plow until dark. That left me about two hours each day to make four passes back and forth before I couldn't see any longer in the dark. Considering that the plow was only turning the sod over at a rate of 14" per pass that meant I was making progress across the field at a rate of about nine feet per evening. Since the field was about 300 feet wide and 1500 feet long it took me four Saturdays and most evenings for six weeks to get the job done.

After my complaints that the tractor wasn't big enough and I was freezing to death riding that tractor for hours on end, my dad finally broke down and bought an old 1939 John Deere Model A tractor that could pull a two-bottom plow with more power to move down the field at a faster speed. I used this tractor for two years before it died a sad death.

The tractor already belonged in a museum when my dad bought it. The old "Johnny Popper" had two large horizontal cylinders, a fly wheel, and a petcock for each cylinder which were opened to start it. It started on gasoline and ran on diesel fuel. The procedure to get the engine running was to open the petcocks on each cylinder to reduce the pressure for starting, turn the fuel control to gasoline for easier ignition, and turn the fly wheel by hand. It normally took several attempts to get the engine to ignite and begin chugging away.

The fly wheel was about 18 inches in diameter and heavy. That meant you had to coordinate your rotation of the fly wheel, so it would turn at sufficient speed to start the engine. If you didn't begin the process at the right position or give it enough momentum either nothing would happen or, when it fired, the flywheel might turn backwards. You didn't want to be holding onto the flywheel if it reversed direction—you could pull a muscle or be tossed into the tractor's axel nearby.

Once the engine started you needed to close the petcocks to keep the engine running. It would frequently start roughly with one-cylinder firing, particularly in cold weather. But, after a few moments when both cylinders were firing, it would begin to warm up and run smoothly. After a few minutes when the engine was warm enough you could turn the fuel valve from gasoline to diesel and the tractor was ready for use.

Old John Deere tractors had hand clutches which were controlled by a vertical metal stick which was positioned to the right of the steering wheel. By pushing forward on the stick, the clutch would engage, and the tractor would move forward or back. By pulling back on the stick the clutch would disengage and the tractor would stop. If you were used to a foot clutch it was sometimes difficult to remember how to control the tractor, what with a foot brake on each side of the tractor, a hand clutch, a steering wheel, a gear shift, and a hand throttle on the steering column.

Our tractor was awkward to drive around the farm yard or when maneuvering with equipment, but when you got it into the field for plowing, it was wonderful to listen to it chugging away. Old John Deere tractors had only two cylinders, but the large flywheel smoothed out the action. The ignition of fuel in each cylinder occurred slowly compared to 4 or 6-cylinder tractors. The momentum of the flywheel allowed the engine to pull heavy loads with the cylinders sometimes firing as slow as once per second.

It's easy to recognize a "Johnny Popper" out in the field plowing because of the slow, regular rhythm of the sound. When plowing in second or third gear in soft soil, the engine runs along with a steady pop, pop, pop sound at moderate speed but, when the tractor moves up a hill or plows into hard soil, the engine

begins to slow down. What is astounding is that the engine will continue to slow down until it sounds like the Little Toot trying to get over the mountain—I think I can, I think I can, I think I can. And, when the tractor gets over the hill or passes out of the hard ground, the engine speeds up again, with the exultant sound of a job well done. Hearing an old John Deere out in a field plowing is one of my favorite memories from the farm.

But, my dad's old John Deere was burning oil and losing compression. It just didn't have the power it needed to do the job. So, the winter after my dad bought it I was given permission to overhaul it in the ag shop at school. I was taking an agriculture class in high school and my teacher was willing to advise me on how to bore out the cylinders and replace the rings and other parts in the engine.

It turned out to be a fairly easy job to remove the heads and cylinders and prepare them for a machine shop. The cylinders were ground out to a larger diameter, new pistons and rings purchased, and the engine reassembled. Amazingly, it started right up after the overhaul and worked fine all the following Summer and Fall.

Unfortunately, the following winter my father used the tractor one Saturday and forgot to put a can atop the exhaust pipe when he was done. Without a cover for the exhaust pipe rain will trickle into the engine and mix with the oil. When he started the tractor up again on a cold day a few weeks later, water in the oil had turned to ice and prevented lubrication of the engine. After a few minutes without oil, the engine overheated and ruined the new pistons, cylinders, and rings I had installed. So, my dad decided to buy a different tractor.

This time he bought a newer tractor—a 1950 Farmall Model H. It was a fantastic tractor! It had more power, was agile, and was fun to drive. Compared to the Old John Deere it was like living in the modern age. The John Deere was like driving a lumber wagon—the "H" was like driving a Cadillac. It still only pulled a two-bottom plow, but it could do it even faster than the John Deere and could do it more elegantly. In fact, I liked it mainly because it looked like a slightly smaller version of our neighbor, Eddie Stumpf's, Model "M". His tractor could pull a three-bottom plow, but at least, we were in the same league.

We sold the old John Deere but kept the little Cub. It was great for working around the farmyard and in the garden. But, it was sometimes dangerous. I remember before getting the “H” that the Cub just didn’t have the weight or horsepower to do some of the jobs. We would try to haul hay up the hill behind our barn to load into the loft. The Cub was so small that it just couldn’t make the hill pulling a hay wagon without the front end coming off the ground and the tractor almost turning upside down. And, even if you let the clutch out too quickly the front end would lift up. This happened one time when my Grandmother Vardiman was visiting and was standing near the tractor when it did this. She screamed and nearly had a heart attack. The “H” solved that problem. It was sufficiently heavy and powerful enough to pull most any load we had up the hill and plow some of the hillsides we hadn’t been able to work previously.

Tractors have always fascinated me. I now have a tractor over 50 years later, but it doesn't pull a plow--it’s a John Deere riding mower. But, I can dream. And of course, I always wear my John Deer hat when I mow the yard.