



Two days in March

By Ian M. Johnston

Researching material for my books and magazine articles often takes me to some out of the way places, occasionally involving unexpected consequences.

The following is an account of two days of an eight week trip to the USA, which I undertook a few years ago with (of course) Margery, my aid-de-camp.

DAY ONE

It had been a big day. We had driven from the John Deere Corporate Headquarters in Moline, across the Mississippi into Iowa, then north through Cedar Rapids to Waterloo. From there it was only a short distance to the farming community of Dunkerton – our first objective of the day.

Kenny Kass is a corn grower in summer. But throughout the long bitter Iowan winters he hibernates into the intestinal centre of his vintage tractor restoration treasure barn, in which a large fearsome rumbling furnace maintains a climate akin to the inside of a brick kiln, as we were about to experience.

We had come to the Kass farm at Dunkerton to study and photograph the world's only remaining Galloway Farmobile. I felt it would be something of a journalistic scoop to include a chapter on this ultra rare tractor in my next book.

Following handshakes all round, Kenny ushered us into his inner sanctum and quickly slammed the door, presumably to keep the minus one temperature on the outside. We were instantly consumed by a blast of hot air that had us furiously tearing off scarves, gloves and jackets.

It took a while to regain our breath and recover a semblance of composure. Then we gazed around.

There was the Galloway. But it was surrounded by an absolutely amazing collection of antique tractors of such singularity and exquisiteness that I could only stand and gaze wide eyed, open mouthed, like a simpleton.

Kenny Kass has created an industry for himself, specialising in the re-manufacturing of Waterloo Boy tractors. This then is how he spends his winters, ensconced within his near meltdown sanctuary, fabricating and assembling components for customers as far away as Australia, who are prepared to hand over megabucks in exchange for a better-than-new Waterloo Boy.

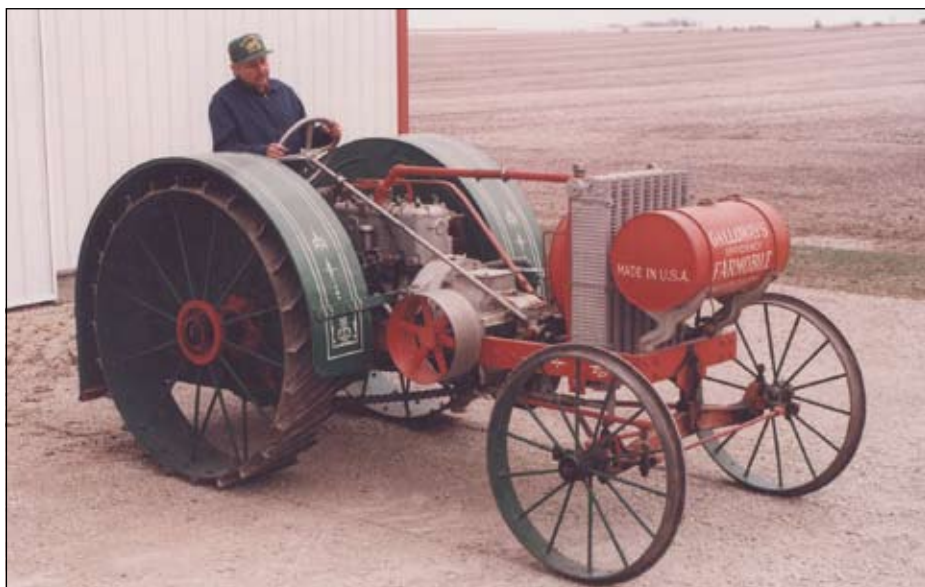
It should be pointed out, that Waterloo Boy tractors were originally manufactured in 1913 by the Waterloo Gasoline Engine Co. (It is not widely known that they were actually a copy of an earlier tractor

known as The Big Chief). Deere and Co. bought the rights to the name and design in 1918 and continued their production until 1923.

In addition to his Waterloo Boy activities, over a period of many years Kenny Kass has diligently sought out and acquired the magnificent tractor specimens, over which I was now drooling. I have been privileged to have had the opportunity of inspecting many of the great vintage tractor collections in different parts of the world, but few can compare with the quality of the Kass display.

Part of the uniqueness of the collection at Dunkerton is the number of early giant tractors dating back to the turn of the 20th century. Usually, even in the best of the North American heritage museums, only three or four of such icons will be in evidence. Frankly, I have no idea how many I saw in Kenny Kass's barn.

After some hours of blissfully clambering over the big tractors, it was time to focus on the main purpose of our visit. Accordingly, we moved the Galloway out



Kenny Kass sits shivering in zero degrees temperature at the controls of his super rare 1916 Galloway Farmobile. Note the extensive winter fallow cornfield in the background. In the summer months this would be a sea of waving golden corn "as high as an elephant's eye". (Photo IMJ)



The engine of the Galloway is a 4 cyl side valve Dart with a 4.5 x 5 inch bore and stroke, developing 20 bhp. The gearbox is located between the engine and radiator and provides one forward and one reverse gear. The engine is cranked from the rear. (Photo IMJ)



In a corner of Kenny Kass's barn of treasures, was this nearly completed re-fabricated Waterloo Boy. Originally it was a rusty old hulk that had been presented to him for restoration by a collector. (Photo IMJ)



The reputation of Kenny Kass, as possibly the greatest authority and restorer of Waterloo Boy tractors, extends around the world. Even in Australia his craftsmanship is much sought after. Pictured are two of the Kass recreations imported into Australia and photographed at Plough and be Counted, near Cootamundra, NSW. The unit on the left is owned by Ian Toop and on the right is an example owned by David Mansur. (Photo IMJ)

of its heated refuge, to the cold world outside the barn, where I shot off a number of photos.

It was now late afternoon and we were ready to once again hit the trail. Reluctantly we bade farewell to Kenny and his tractors, and resumed our drive west.

The last vestiges of gold then pink were disappearing from the vastness of the wintry prairie sky, as we approached Fort Dodge, our scheduled overnight stop. In a matter of minutes it was dark with only

the gaudy neons of the motels and diners punctuating the exit off the Interstate 20.

We checked in to the most wholesome looking of the motels, then walked across the road to Alf's Joint for a steak, washed down with a Budweiser.

DAY TWO

The sky was sullen and grey. An ominous stillness in the atmosphere threatened heavy snow, as I swung the Hertz Thunderbird back on to Interstate 20 and

pointed its long sleek nose west. It was Sunday morning.

The landscape was totally flat. Winter's mantle still enveloped the endless prairie corn fields, now stripped and colourless as they vanished into the horizon. Occasionally the drabness was brightened by the emergence of a homestead with its mandatory red painted barn.

Despite the melancholy scenery all around us, Margery and I were cheerful
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and full of expectations. Research I had pursued back in Australia had tracked down an example of what reportedly was the world's fastest production tractor ever offered to farmers.

For decades I have had a thing about determining which tractor would qualify for this distinction. I know that a psychoanalyst would have a field day if given the opportunity of probing the origins of such a pointless cerebral exercise. I offer no excuses. Maybe I am just a hoon at heart. Anyway, featuring the world's fastest production tractor would be another scoop for my book.

And here I was, about to feast my eyes upon this elusive very special tractor.

Pomeroy is nothing more than a whistle stop, about an hour's drive from Fort Dodge. It is located a few miles north of the Interstate 20 and consists of a cluster of grain silos, a rail siding, an office of The German Mutual Insurance Company, several used tractor lots and a handful of weary looking houses.

Octogenarian rocker

An enquiry addressed to an archetypical Steinbeckian octogenarian, wrapped in layers of coats sitting on a rocking chair watching the traffic roar past (our Thunderbird was possibly the only traffic through Pomeroy that morning) directed us the final miles to the Rosenboom farm.

We were expected. Steve and Rachel Rosenboom and their two teenage sons proved to be a delightful family and welcomed us warmly into the homestead. Soon we were all seated around the scrubbed kitchen table grasping steaming mugs of very welcome coffee.

The tractor we had come so far to see had the unlikely name of Friday. It had been manufactured in 1958 by The Friday Tractor Co of Hartford, Michigan. Rachel produced original Friday sales pamphlets, which she laid out on the table for our perusal.

Almost imperceptibly, but quite definitely, the room darkened. Huge snow flakes were slanting down and had silently obliterated the scene through the window. In a matter of minutes the entire countryside was mantled in white. Within half an hour, the Thunderbird was but a rounded shape, difficult to differentiate from the mounds of snow enveloping the garden shrubs.

There was no point in venturing out into the driving snow and across the yard to the barn in which the Friday was housed, as visibility had been reduced to only a few feet. So we had an early lunch, in the hope that the snow would ease soon.

Friday flying on my mind

Around 2 pm the snow abruptly ceased to fall. This was the moment.

There was no drum roll, but there should have been, as Steve slid open the barn door to reveal – it. There was the Friday, resembling a cross between a combine harvester and a Porsche Speedster. Gosh!

But the deep snow had disappointingly put a halt to our planned speed trials. Never-the-less Steve was able to convince me that the previous week, in anticipation of our visit, he had speed tested the Friday with the help of a Ford F150 pick-up and had effortlessly overtaken the F150 whilst it was clocking 60 mph. Wow!

These were the sort of speeds attained by Barney Oldfield, when he raced works-prepared Allis Chalmers Model U tractors at the Milwaukee Speedway in the 1930s. Tail End Charlie, the specially geared Chamberlain, also could just manage this speed in the Round Australia Redex Trials. But these were specially tuned tractors and the Friday was a stock standard production model.

The reason why the Friday was such a low flier is that, during their first year of production in 1958, the tractors were powered by a petrol fuelled Chrysler six cylinder 218 cubic inch side valve engine, which (unlike all other tractor engines) was not fitted with a governor! When the two

stage 10 speed gearbox was in 10th gear the ground speed per 1000 engine rpm was 32 mph and the engine could spin out to 3000 revs.

The following year, some spoil sport in the Friday organisation decreed that the tractors would henceforth be fitted with a governor. Probably an accountant or nervous lawyer!

Steve fired up the engine. Despite being a relatively bland side-valve affair, the noise was shattering as the crescendo bounced off the walls of the barn. A short unrestricted stubby exhaust pipe blasted fire and brimstone directly from the manifold. I was reminded of Blair Shepherd's Offenhauser screaming around the Brisbane Exhibition Ground in the 1960s.

It took a while to register that seemingly I had finally come face to face with my illusive world's fastest production tractor.

I spent a delicious couple of hours inspecting and photographing the sleek red machine. Another coffee, then it was time to go.

Time to slip away

It was 4.30 pm when we were finally farewelled by our new friends. They had urged us to stay the night but we hoped to reach Omaha that evening, as we were due at the Nebraska Tractor Test Facility the following morning.

The boys had swept the snow from our car, but the landscape was carpeted with a foot of the now glistening whiteness. We were assured that by the time we reached the Interstate 80 the snow ploughs would have been doing their thing. Trouble was – the Interstate 80, which would lead us eventually into Omaha, was some 90 miles to the south.

Truth is, we only covered fifty yards when the car embarrassingly, unceremoniously, nose dived into a drainage ditch near the gate to the Rosenboom's property.

The snow had completely filled in the four foot deep ditch and rendered it invis-



A group photo of the Rosenboom family, posing alongside the Friday. (Photo IMJ)



A springtime photo of the Friday, clearly showing the big six cyl Chrysler engine which, without a governor, is capable of propelling the sleek tractor at speeds restricted only by the nerves of the operator. (Photo R. Rosenboom)

ible. Well at least it was something I suppose to have one's Thunderbird dragged out of a ditch by a Friday. I was glad Mr Hertz wasn't around to witness the proceedings.

The following two hours proved hair raising. Darkness had again descended and

I was obliged to navigate our way through the deep snow covered minor roads, slithering and sliding, with headlights dimmed by the snow building up on the lenses. Stopping to clear them proved pointless, as within minutes they were again opaque with snow. Eventually we reached the In-

terstate 80. An hour further on the lights of Omaha, Nebraska, greeted us.

We were not fussy. The first motel on the strip looked pretty good to us. Wearily and gratefully we booked in and headed for our room.

Tomorrow would be another day! ■

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Reproduced is a 1958 price list of the Friday. Note that a governor could be purchased as an optional extra for \$55. (Photo R. Rosenboom)

IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR QUIZ

QUESTION: Can you identify this tractor from its rear end view ?
CLUE: Note the offset engine and transmission.

DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY: The temptation will be to rush in with what seems like an obvious answer. But take care, it is not that easy!

ANSWER: See page 48.



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