

100-Year-Old Riding Reel Mower

Massachusetts lawn mower collector James Ricci recently acquired one of the oldest, heaviest and most expensive reel lawn mowers ever made. His Milbradt riding mower has a 38-in. cut, weighs about 1,280 lbs. and has a single cylinder, 5 hp motor. It was built sometime between 1915 and 1922 and sold new for a whopping \$600. In 2014 dollars, that would be about \$14,000.

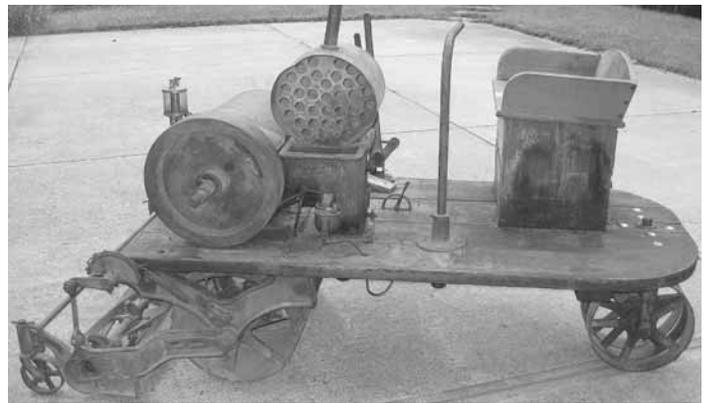
Ricci acquired the mower from the family of the owner, who had recently passed away. "A friend sent me pictures of this machine that he'd taken at an engine show. I made it known that I was definitely interested in owning it. I promised the family when I bought it that I'd get it running again and get it back on the old engine show circuit, which I've done."

Ricci learned that the man who owned the mower for several years had purchased it in rural western Massachusetts. The Milbradt Company that made it was also known

for manufacturing rolling step ladders, the kind found in old-time high ceiling stores. Company founder Gustave Milbradt immigrated to the U.S. in the 1860's and he started making the rolling ladders in St. Paul, Minn. during the 1880's. Ricci thinks the mower was built in St. Louis after the company moved there.

Ricci says that like most equipment pushing 100 years of age his Milbradt is pretty much worn out. "It's a giant piece of rusted metal with a dilapidated seat. The engine is a 5 hp model with a Schebler Model E brass carburetor. The engine was built in St. Louis by the Lippert Engine Company, which became the Missouri Engine Company in 1913. I've talked to several collectors and the consensus is that it should be preserved and not restored."

Ricci started repairing a few of the missing and broken parts in the fall of 2013. He wants to bring the engine back to working condition



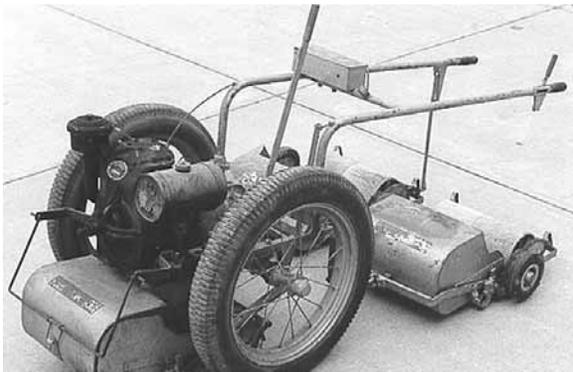
James Ricci says his Milbradt riding mower is one of the oldest, heaviest and most expensive reel mowers ever built. It was built between 1915 and 1922.

with help from other collectors. Ricci says completing the preservation project has no timetable, though he thinks it might be close to a year before all areas of concern are dealt with and the massive rider takes its spot in

the reel mower museum on his farm.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, James Ricci, 30 North Farms Road, Haydenville, Mass. 01039 (ph 413 268-7863; www.reellawnmower.com).

This "Scout" Overgreen built by the Worthington Mower Co. is just one of the many vintage reel mowers in Ricci's North Farms museum.



Museum Holds Hundreds Of Vintage Reel Mowers

In 2008 James Ricci had amassed such a large collection of reel lawn mowers that he launched a business and website called The Reel Lawn Mower History and Preservation Project. His idea was to preserve and expand knowledge of vintage mowers of the 19th and early 20th century.

Since he started collecting reel mowers in the late 80's, Ricci has acquired hundreds of different models representing 25 different manufacturers. "Some of them I've bought or traded for at swap meets," says Ricci. "I've also had about 250 old mowers given to me over the years."

Ricci says reel mowers came to the U.S. in the mid 1800's when a few different models were imported from England. That coincided with people learning that an attractive mowed lawn enhanced the landscape around a home. By the end of the 1800's, well over 150 companies were making reel mowers in the U.S.

At Ricci's North Farms museum he has push-type hand reel mowers from 5 different companies, pull-type gang mowers from 2 companies, and power reel mowers from 18 different companies.

Ricci says the reel-type mower was invented by Englishman Edwin Beard Budding in 1830, who at the time was working in a textile mill in Gloucester. His machine was originally designed to trim the knap off cloth uniforms. Soon he realized it would also cut grass. Friends and co-workers thought he was a madman for needing two people to mow a lawn, one pushing and one pulling, so he tested his invention on lawns during nighttime hours to avoid being called a lunatic. Beard, however, had the last laugh



Ricci also owns this 1935 Sturdex 24-in. reel mower built by Jacobsen Mfg.

as his invention became a huge success. His cylinder cutting principal hasn't changed in more than 180 years and the manicured look it produces is preferred by golf courses, Royal palaces, bowling greens and athletic fields.

"England has a much larger base of mower collections than the U.S.," Ricci says. "They have many manufacturers and collectors there value the different styles, sizes and power options."

Ricci says that early mowers, including large riders, were built with big and heavy cast iron pieces. "Cast iron was easy to work with and many towns had foundries, so parts and mowers were easy to make. They weren't concerned about soil compaction, so weight wasn't a problem either. That's not the case today where users want lightweight equipment that mows, collects, mulches and still produces a manicured look."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, James Ricci, 30 North Farms Road, Haydenville, Mass. 01039 (ph 413 268-7863; www.reellawnmower.com).



Arnie Fowler acquired this Case 150 garden tractor in a trade back in the early 1970's. He restored it with the help of his great granddaughter Dannel (driving).

40-Year Collection Of Garden Tractors Fills 3 Sheds

Arlen Fowler's collection of yard and garden tractors nearly fills 3 good-sized farm buildings.

"I started collecting when my kids were small back in the 1970's," says Fowler. "I was a mechanic and my first tractor was a Hiller that my daughters used to drive around the yard. My dad built a replica wagon to trail behind the Hiller and later I made some garden tilling equipment for it." Fowler began acquiring more garden tractors when he was a dealer for Deere garden equipment. He says customers would trade in Case, Bohlens, Massey Ferguson and Panzers on the new Deere machines. Sometimes he'd sell the trade-ins, but mostly he'd keep them.

Nearly 40 years after he started collecting, some of Fowler's tractors are still regulars in nearby parades and special farm events. He started 'parading' when his own kids were young, and the tradition continued as his grandkids became old enough to drive and handle equipment safely. "It's a great family event," says Arlen. "At one parade we had nearly a dozen tractors lined up, all driven by our family."

Fowler's collection now includes several Lawn Boy, Case, Deere, International, Panzer and Bohlens models. He has Deere models from 1964, one with an 8 hp engine and a 3-speed transmission. One of his Bohlens is on steel wheels and some of his machines have Maytag engines. Fowler ended up with a large group of Bohlens walk-behind tractors after an unusual occurrence at a show. "I was displaying a couple walk-behind Bohlens garden tractors and a fellow stopped by and said he wanted to sell his," Fowler says. "I asked him how many he had, and he said 4 of them. I told him I only had \$11 in my pocket, but he took the money and I got the tractors."



The Kliver garden tractor (above) was a predecessor to the zero-turn riding mower and is part of Fowler's collection, as is the 1960's Panzer garden tractor shown below.



Fowler also has a rare Gravely machine that was built in Europe, one of only 12 that are known to be around. One is in France, 2 are in Canada and 9 are in the U.S. He also owns a Kliver, made in Rockford, Ill., which was a fore runner of the zero turn mower.

Fowler brings his full collection outside for an annual show at his 3½-acre farm attended by nearly 100 people, including neighbors, a small antique tractor club and senior members of their church. They serve a big potluck dinner and people enjoy a full afternoon and evening of 'tractoring'. "I've collected and restored these tractors for years and really enjoy it," Fowler says. "I'll keep going as long as I can and then let the next generation take over."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Arlen Fowler, 5007 East Route 14, Crystal Lake, Ill. 60014 (ph 815 459-3320; arlenfowler@earthlink.net).