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FARM SHOW (ISSN #01634518) is published bi-monthly (6 times/year) for \$27.95 per year (\$31.95 in Canada) by Farm Show Publishing, Inc., 8500 210th St. W, Lakeville, Minn. 55044. Periodicals postage paid at Lakeville, Minn., and additional post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to FARM SHOW, P.O. Box 1029, Lakeville, Minn. 55044 (ph 952-469-5572; fax 952-469-5575; email: circulation@farmshow.com; website: www.farmshow.com). Single copy price is \$6.95 (\$8.95 in Canada). Publication No. 469490.

In Canada: Publications Mail Agreement No. 40032660, Return Undeliverable Canadian Addresses To: Dycorn Mail Svcs, 495 Berry St., Winnipeg, MB R3J 1N6; Email: circulation@farmshow.com

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March-April, 2024

Deere sold just 28 of the Wagner-built WA-14 models, which produced 225 hp.



Deere 4-WD Tractors Trace Back To Oregon Inventor

Turn the calendar back to 1969, and that's when you'll find that the bloodline of Deere 4-WD tractors was injected with 51 gold FWD Wagner 4-WD tractors painted Deere green and yellow. Oregon inventor Elmer Wagner, inspired by powerful equipment he'd seen working in Germany during his time in the service, built a prototype 4-WD tractor in 1949 and, along with his six brothers and another company, formed the Wagner Tractor Company in 1955. News travels fast in the equipment business, and when Deere heard of the tractors, they bought one and pitted it against a modified J.I. Case 4-WD in a field test. The Wagner outdueled the Case in an uphill tillage test and thoroughly impressed the Deere brass in attendance, including the Chairman. For several years, Deere tried rather unsuccessfully to build its own 4-WD loosely based on the Wagner concept.

The Deere model 8010 4-WD debuted in 1960 with a marketing splash. Farmers clamored around the 20,000-lb., 225-hp. rig and soon backed away when they saw a \$30,000 price tag, more than \$20,000 higher than a 4010. In the field, the 8010

had mechanical problems and also lacked Wagner's patented Pow-R-Flex coupling. That feature allowed Wagner's articulated design to perform flawlessly, even when the tractor was turning, under full power and its wheels were oscillating up to 20 inches on uneven ground. Deere struggled to sell 100 of their 8010s in 5 years, while Wagner was selling 100 or more 4-WD tractors a year.

Eventually, the problematic 8010s were recalled, rebuilt in the factory, and reintroduced as 8020 models. In the late 60's, as Deere worked on a different 4-WD design, Steiger, Versatile, J.I. Case, and Oliver were selling successful models. To gain a stronger presence in the marketplace, Deere approached Wagner in 1969 to deliver 100 Wagner tractors that Deere would repaint, rename, and renumber.

Deere dealers were wary of promoting the models because they were built with outsourced truck and industrial parts, which they didn't want to stock. The company sold just 23 WA-14 models and 28 WA-17 models of the 100 they'd contracted for. The WA-14 was priced at \$35,900, and the WA-17 sold

for \$41,750. The tractors were heavy and expensive, and only large farmers could afford them.

Both WA models used an 855-cu. in. 6-cylinder Cummins diesel. The WA-14 output was 225 hp., and the turbocharged WA-17 produced 280 hp. Both models had a Fuller Roadranger RTO 910 10-speed transmission. Axles were supplied by FWD and Wagner made the drop boxes and hinges. An open station was standard, and cabs with heaters and air conditioners were optional. Either 15 or 35-gpm hydraulic pumps with single, dual, or triple outlets were available. The tractors were bareback and had no pto.

While Deere was selling Wagner models, it was also developing its own 7020, which debuted in 1971. The 7520 appeared in 1972. They weren't produced in large numbers, but they did help the company gain a small foothold in the already crowded 4-WD market.

Meanwhile, the contract Deere signed with FWD Wagner was voided. It had a stipulation that allowed Deere to cancel at any time, and if they did, a no-compete clause prevented Wagner from producing 4-WD tractors for 5 years. Deere canceled in 1970, and Wagner was soon out of business. Fifty-some years later, many gold Wagner tractors built in the 50's and 60's are still being used in the U.S., Canada, and other countries.

The 51 Deere badged WA-14 and WA-17 are now collector tractors, though they're seldom seen at tractor shows. Collectors surmise that many, like the Wagners they're modeled after, are still being used. Darrell Ebbersten of Elkhart, Ill., owned two that sold at his 2020 auction. His completely restored WA-17 brought \$148,000, and the unrestored WA-14 sold for \$78,000.

Deere has undeniably done extremely well with 4-WD tractors, manufacturing well over 60 4-WD and tracked tractor models through 2023.

Mail-Order Tractors Were Sold By Department Stores

Made by Custom Manufacturing Company, Montgomery Ward sold tractors in the early 1950's, and Raymond Brenneman has one. He shared its story with the readers of Vintage Tractor Digest.

"A fellow at the auction where I bought it told me they made good pulling tractors, which is one reason I bought it," says Brenneman. "I started to convert it, but I realized it would be a shame to turn it into a puller. It's unique, and the company no longer exists."

Brenneman has the Wards Model C. Built in 1952, it originally had a dual exhaust, 6-cylinder industrial engine with fluid drive Chrysler coupling and a New Process 5-speed transmission. It was equipped with a belt pulley, Ross steering, tilt-up hood, wet line hydraulics, and 540 pto. A toolbox under the seat, hydraulic brakes, and a Timken truck rear end rounded out the tractor's features.

"It's a beautiful driving tractor," says Brenneman. "It really moves in road gear. It's pretty fast compared to other tractors of its day."

The Wards tractors weighed about 3,200 lbs. and claimed 25 (toolbox) hp. and it was somehow able to pull a 3-bottom plow. Brenneman has used it mostly pulling wagons loaded with hay bales.

"It seems to have plenty of power," he says.

The Vintage Tractor Digest story follows the history of Custom Manufacturing Company, which privately labeled its tractors for several companies in the U.S. and Canada. While the names on the tractors changed, the serial numbers didn't. Sequential numbers may have had different names and colors.



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Wards went with a shade of red. "There are so many red tractor brands; it's hard to compare with more well-known ones like Farmalls," says Brenneman. "In the right light, it's sort of a candy apple shade of red."

The company changed hands a number of times, moving from Indiana to Illinois and then Wisconsin. Eventually it was sold to a Mexican company before ending production.

Brenneman has kept his tractor the way it was when he bought it. Previously restored, it has a single exhaust, though it's still equipped with the original manifold for duals. He did remove the rear hydraulic valve before deciding against converting it for tractor pulling.

Brenneman appreciates it mostly for its rarity, the name Wards and the company logo front and center on the hood. An interesting addition to his collection, it's now up for sale. "It'll be bittersweet selling it," says

Brenneman. "It's what's called a style tractor, and I always liked them. I've never seen another one like it."

He was told of one other. He took the Wards to display at a tractor pull, and a man started laughing when he saw it.

"I asked him why he was laughing, and he said he'd recently seen one just like it displayed in a museum in Baltimore," recalls Brenneman. "He told me the tour guide described it as rare, adding, 'He said it was unlikely we'd ever see another. Then I come here and see yours.'"

Brenneman hesitated to put a price on the tractor. "I'll consider offers," he says. "My goal is to find someone who'll appreciate it, rather than just have it sold at auction someday."

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