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He Has A Long History Of 'Painting Tractors Perfect'

Dave Thoennes says, "If you don't want a tractor to look and run a little better than perfect, then you probably don't want me to do the work. I've learned that to do an exceptional job, a person has to go way beyond just 'spray standing up.'"

Collectors who've purchased tractors Thoennes has restored and painted say his work is "particular plus," museum-quality from front to back, top to bottom. One customer, especially impressed with his quality

work, bought a completely restored Super M-TA from him for \$8,500.

"He thought long and hard about the price, but after he parked it next to others at a show, he realized he looked a lot better," says Thoennes. "I'd cleaned and painted inside the frame rails, underneath the body, under the hood and under the gas tank. I put on a new seat, a new steering wheel, a wiring harness, lights and new tires. The radiator and front end were super clean. He became a repeat

customer who later bought a Super H and Cub from me."

Thoennes grew up on a farm north of Alexandria, Minn., driving a Farmall H that his dad bought new in 1951. He hadn't thought much about painting tractors until he and a neighbor restored and painted a 1950 Farmall A.

"He was a very particular guy," Thoennes says, "so I learned the basics well. We took apart everything we could, sandblasted away the grit, grime and grease, then primed and painted it."

That experience inspired Thoennes to get serious about restorations. One of his next projects was restoring his dad's H.

"After I was done, he looked it over carefully and gave me a really nice compliment, telling me, 'It didn't look that nice when I bought it new.'"

Thoennes still has the H, along with a treasured picture of him and his parents beside it.

Thoennes has studied, practiced and improved his techniques on more than 50 red tractors. He's worked on A, B, C, H, M, Super H, and Super M models. A Super M-TA, along with 300, 656 and 560 red ones, have also gone through his shop. He's rebuilt engines on several of these, installed sleeves and pistons, ground valves, honed and polished crankshafts, and rebuilt rear ends. He removes frame rails on the smaller tractors to sandblast away grease and grit that's inside—an important step that he says a casual observer probably wouldn't notice if it weren't done.

Most of his projects have involved operation tractors, although he worked on a cab-model International 886 for nearly a year.

"The engine was in good shape, but everything else needed work," Thoennes says. "I rebuilt the inside of the cab and operator station, installed a new seat, gauges and flooring. Rebuilding the air conditioning, radiator, brakes and electrical system were also part of the project. I removed the wheels and tires, sandblasted the rims inside and out, and sandblasted the whole tractor body before repainting it. Like others I've done, the tractor probably looks better now than when it came from the factory."

Thoennes uses Case IH and Farmall factory paint, adding hardener before priming and topcoat applications. He clear coats some projects but says that step isn't really needed if cleaning and prep work are done properly.

"The key is having everything clean, dry and free from any oil or fluids," Thoennes says. "I never paint over existing paint because there's always a possibility of blistering and cracking, which only gets worse over time."

Thoennes says he wants all his projects to look really nice. His daughter, Jen, says he actually wants them to look better than perfect. He tells people who want museum-quality to keep their tractors out of a cold building. Over time, the freeze-thaw cycles and moisture will damage the paint.

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Fully restored Big 4 Thirty tractor at Little Log House farm near Hastings, Minn.



Bauer and Romnes found a heap of rusted parts that once was a 1911 Flour City 40-70 tractor.

Flour City and Big Four Tractors Reclaimed From Rust

"My friend Chris Romnes could sniff out an old tractor two or three states away," says Steve Bauer of Hastings, Minn. "So when he told me about a pile of parts from a 1911 Flour City tractor more than 300 miles away in Nebraska, we had to check it out."

Bauer says he and Romnes could hardly believe their eyes when they saw the stripped frame of the Flour City, with its rusty parts scattered all around beneath it.

"The frame and its parts had been lying in that pasture since 1945," Bauer says. "The owner had parked it there several years before, and during WWII, government officials were traveling the countryside looking for scrap metal to convert into ammunition. The farmer agreed to dismantle the tractor, and officials said that, in a few weeks, they'd bring torches to cut apart anything that couldn't be unbolted. That was in early August, but the torches didn't arrive because the war had ended. The frame and parts lay there for 47 years, even as other family members took over the farm."

The rusted heap didn't stop Bauer and Romnes because they'd already begun restoring a kerosene-powered Big Four tractor.

"We figured we might as well work on both at the same time, so we bought the parts from the family of the farmer who'd bought

the tractor new," Bauer says.

Over the next five years, Bauer, along with Chris, his father Maynard, and Ray Nicolai Jr., brought both tractors back to life.

"We sandblasted parts, made parts and located a piston in Iowa for the Flour City that Chris and Maynard used to forge a new manifold. The engines were completely frozen, so the blocks were honed and the crankshafts were ground. Chris and Maynard restored both engines. They've been running strong for 25 years at our Little Log House Power Show in late July and a few weeks later during the 12-day Minnesota State Fair," Bauer says. "They're important to Minnesota agricultural heritage because they were both built in Minneapolis during the early 1900s."

The 40-70 tractor was the first of four Flour City models built in 1911. This 21,000 lb. behemoth features enormous 8-ft. dia. traction wheels with a 24-in. face. Large steel-spoked front wheels support the rugged I-beam main frame. It houses the Kinnard-Haines 4-cyl. engine along with numerous shafts and gears. The 7 1/2 by 9-in. bore-and-stroke engine runs on kerosene fuel and produces 53 drawbar horsepower.

The Gas Traction Company in Minneapolis built the Big 4 Thirty tractor. Its design is similar to the Flour City. In 1912, the company was sold to a Rockford, Ill., company

that was eventually purchased by J.I. Case in 1928.

Bauer says, "These giant tractors from Minneapolis companies were used to break the virgin grasslands of the central United States and parts of Canada. Both tractors could pull 7 or 8-bottom plows and turn over 40 acres or more in a day."

The 40-70 they found in Nebraska had been shipped there by rail in 1911 and remained on the same farm until Bauer and Romnes purchased the parts.

Both tractors are now prominent fixtures at the Little Log House farm near Hastings, Minn. They join several other vintage tractors, including a 1908 Hart Parr 30-60 Old Reliable and a single-cylinder 1911 Fairbanks Morse 15-30 that, for many years, operated a sawmill in the Canadian northwoods. Bauer has two buildings full of gas engines on permanent display, all of them running during the annual Log House Antique Power Show in late July.

"We started out nearly 40 years ago with a two-room log house in the oak trees, and today the grounds have more than 50 permanent vintage buildings, gas stations, railroad equipment, a 50s drive-in restaurant, and hundreds of tractors, implements, fire engines and military equipment on display during the show."

Throughout the year, the show site hosts weddings and special events at a restored church and event center.

Bauer has always enjoyed finding, renovating and restoring old engines and tractors.

"It's been a lifelong passion that we're able to share with visitors to our Log House show site and also at the Minnesota State Fair. Those big tractors always draw a lot of attention."

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Restored tractors have been displayed at the Minnesota State Fair for 25 years.