

## **The “Miracle” of the Steam Engine Tractor**

Something new and even revolutionary was introduced in the mainly agricultural United States in 1876 – the year that our country was celebrating its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence.

That year at the Centennial celebration in Philadelphia, Americans saw prototypes of the most advanced farm machinery - inventions that promised to make harvesting faster and far more efficient. Today we can only imagine the interest and delight of those persons at the Centennial who saw demonstrations of marvels such as portable steam engines that could be used to mechanize the process of threshing field crops.

In fact this machinery would not become common on American farms for another 15 or 20 years, but the “miracle” of a steam engine-powered tractor foretold great changes that would ultimately allow the United States to become not only the most agriculturally productive nation in the world, but also to earn the reputation of being the “bread basket” that supplied grains to help feed people in other nations around the globe.

The Frick Eclipse was a stunning highlight at the Philadelphia Centennial and today that steam engine is revered as a pioneer in American agriculture. Visitors to the Kutztown Festival will have the opportunity to learn more about this remarkable machine, to see threshing demonstrations, and to enjoy rides on a version of this early steam powered tractor.

David Kroa got involved in steam engines and antique tractors at a very young age. His grandfather, William Kroa, a fireman for the B & O railroad, purchased a Keck Gonnerman steam engine after his retirement. The machine was David’s delight. William Kroa would take young David to steam shows and the lad became fascinated with what he saw. “I grew up at the National Threshers Convention held in Wauseon, Ohio,” David relates.

When he was 12 years old his grandfather passed on. Unfortunately David's father and uncle did not keep the engine and it was sold at a farm auction. Still, the aura and fascination of steam engine powered tractors remained for David. His hope was to rediscover the wonder of this remarkable old machine.

"Ever since the sale of the engine I dreamed of buying my own or owning grandpa's engine. Each year I would attend the show to smell the smoke, see the steam and watch these great pieces of iron in action. It was not until four years ago that I located the engine in Mason, Michigan," David relates.

His dream came true at the age of 38. "I purchased a Frick Eclipse 8 x 10, made in Waynesboro, PA. A gentleman had traded a car for the engine which had sat nearly 80 years beside a sawmill. He tore the engine down, installed new flues, and gave it a paint job. This was nearly two years of work. But family medical bills created a problem and he needed to sell the engine. The man never fired the engine and drove it. I was the first to do this since the engine was removed from the brush at the sawmill," David said.

The Rough and Tumble Historical Association, of which he is a member, is dedicated to the recognition and preservation of innovative farm steam engine equipment. Their members' massive, sturdy engines attest to countless contributions and loving labor. David took the engine to the group to learn from others as much as he could about his newly acquired Frick steam engine.

"With a lot of help it was fired and I began my relationship with the engine. Over the past years I have done a lot of mechanical work to get the engine to sound as quiet as it does," he explained.

His Frick Eclipse engine weighs 14,800 pounds and carries 140 gallons of water in the boiler and 100 gallons in the axle tank. Each year the boiler is inspected by the PA Department of Labor Industry boiler division and must pass stringent tests.

Yesterday's marvel is today's antique treasure. Learn more about it by visiting with David at the Festival.

David will gladly discuss all aspects of his remarkable steam engine to Festival visitors, so be sure to stop by to witness this wonderful page of American agricultural history.