

## FEATURED TRACTOR

Following is a story about my Perrin garden tractor. This was published in the Vintage Garden Tractor Club of America's June/July, 2004, Newsletter. If anyone has a story to include in a future newsletter, please let me know. I would still like to include biographies in future issues of the newsletter.

### **THE PERRIN STORY**

by Larry Morrison

Collecting and restoring riding garden tractors would not have occurred to me earlier in life, but after I retired in 1995, I attended a few tractor shows and began to search for a tractor to restore and display. When I saw interesting garden tractors, the garden tractor "bug" infected me. My first purchases were a 1953 Garden-All Gard'nMast'r and a 1950 Mayrath Standard. After a great deal of fun restoring and showing these tractors, I didn't hesitate when I got the opportunity to purchase a Perrin from Cliff Park, an Anderson, Missouri, friend in the Northwest Arkansas based Tired Iron of the Ozarks (Branch 37, EDGE&TA) tractor and engine club.

Cliff had purchased the tractor at an auction in Southeast Kansas. It had been advertised as a Gibson tractor, but as an owner of a couple of Gibsons, when he saw it he knew it was another brand. He didn't know what it was, but it had a replacement 12 HP engine on it that he could use, so he purchased it. The only way he later identified the tractor as a Perrin was by its resemblance to a Perrin pictured in the December/January 1998 issue of Farm & Ranch magazine. William "Bill" Strom of Ravensdale, Washington, owned that Perrin, and he was seeking further information about the brand. He knew his tractor was a Perrin since it sported the Perrin name embossed on the front wheels, which Cliff's tractor did not have.

Since the tractor as I purchased it didn't have an engine, I relied on Charles Wise of Sedalia, Missouri, to find an appropriate engine. He found a Wisconsin engine that would be correct, so my wife and I drove round-trip about 550 miles to get the engine. We were able to pick up a Sears Handyman tractor Charles had purchased in Carl Junction, Missouri, and deliver it to him. He considered the delivery of his tractor as payment for the Wisconsin and would not take my money. When I got the engine home, and after some minor attention and paint, the engine started and continues to run well (see photo below).

I wanted to know all I could about my "new" Perrin, so I contacted Bill Strom, and he proved to be a valuable resource. Bill's research had produced an undated Portland, Oregon, newspaper article entitled, "Tractor Firm Moves Here, Product Unique," and an advertisement for the Perrin Tractor & Implement Company, Inc., at 9210 N. E. Halsey, Portland, Oregon, and a spec sheet on the Model D Perrin. Bill graciously shared his material with me.

The newspaper article began by announcing "that one hundred tractors will come off the assembly line this month," which must have been February 1948 since that production schedule was to be doubled in March and quadrupled in April and May of 1948. It quoted Mr. Perrin as saying the firm was moved here "lock, stock, and barrel" from Kansas City, Missouri, in December 1947. It stated, "Designed and engineered by Perrin, the tractor is a unique small four-wheeled machine with an eight-horsepower, air-cooled engine. It differs from the conventional type in that the differential has been eliminated, including even pull on the two rear wheels. In the low-price bracket, it will sell at \$599.50, f.o.b., Portland."

An interesting bit of information about the tractor being produced was that “This tractor has no steering wheel. It is manipulated through power steering of the rear wheels.” A photograph accompanied the article and showed a tractor without a steering wheel.

The article provided valuable information on the manufacture of the Perrin tractor, but much more was to be learned of its history.

The great breakthrough in learning the history of the Perrin came when I was contacted by none other than Jennifer Perrin Stock, the granddaughter of Ray M. Perrin, the manufacturer of the tractor that bears his name. Jennifer, of Kent, Washington, had located my name and email address on one of the Yahoo garden tractor chat sites and emailed me. We have corresponded back and forth by email and letter to exchange information. The information from Bill Strom, which I shared with her, afforded her new insight about her grandfather’s business, but she provided me with her own father’s account of the Perrin tractor company. Her father was eight years old when most of the story began. The following is the letter Jennifer wrote and sent to me to recount the events of the Perrin saga as told to her by her father, Neil Perrin:

During World War II his [Neil’s] father, Raymond M. Perrin, needed a tractor to work the ground on his 5-acre farm in the American Lake area of Pierce County [Washington]. Of course there was NO new material available to build anything as all steel, etc., was going to the war effort. So, Grandpa basically utilized an old Ford Model A truck for parts (with some probable timely help from the mechanics at Ft. Lewis, where he worked at the time) and proceeded to fabricate the first hybrid PERRIN tractor. There was an almost immediate problem; the guy with a small farm down the road also needed a small tractor, liked what he saw, and wanted one built for him! Word got around, orders started to be placed and soon Grandpa knew he had a winner – not bad for a farm hand transplant from North Dakota. The first attempt at production was in Tacoma and was reasonably successful. There was even an entry in the 1946 Daffodil Parade, but getting the parts, engines, and steel was proving to be a bigger problem than selling the finished product.

About this time the Mexican government advertised via open bid for a working demonstration of small tractors. Seems as how they were giving every peasant a tractor and 5 acres of ground. Grandpa loaded his tractor on the railroad, left for Mexico (couldn’t speak or understand a word of Spanish) and entered the competition. As luck and perseverance would have it, he won and came back with an initial order for 500 units with more to follow. Apparently the reason they chose his tractor was not only because it performed very well but that replacement parts from Model “A” truck parts were readily available there. He had built 100 – 150 tractors in Tacoma and knew there was no way he could ramp up any sizable production to cover the heavy increase in orders. Dad says that a distant family member heard about Grandpa’s search for manufacturing space and told him where there was a large foundry immediately available (made tanks during WWII), so he packed up the family and headed to Arcade, New York, approximately 40 miles south of Buffalo in the early summer of 1946. He flew ahead and leased the building AND employees at a fixed rate based on X units of production. In the six days it took for the family to drive there, problems started that would eventually kill the whole operation. Seems as how the employees at the foundry demanded an immediate raise and refused to work without one. The lease had no provisions about striking workers and Grandpa was legally forced to pay the “rent” even though nothing was being produced. No PERRIN tractor was ever produced in New York.

About 4 months after they moved to NY, Grandpa went to Kansas City [Missouri] to try to generate interest, get some financial backing (funds were getting short what with the Arcade problem) and make tractors there. After all this was where Wisconsin engines were made at that time. Dad thinks maybe he may have built a couple of demos in KC, which may or may not have had the logo [PERRIN] on the front rims. The PERRIN name on the front rims and the locking cam clutch plate

arrangement were two distinct identifying characteristics of the tractor.

The Kansas City venture didn't work and in the summer of 1947 he and his family moved to Portland [Oregon] to set up operation as he had obtained some limited financial backing there. There were two sites in Portland, the last one being on Halsey Boulevard, close to the Gateway area. My dad remembers being at this place and relates how he would sweep the floor on Saturday mornings for the chance to drive the tractors in the afternoon. The crawler was designed and built only in Portland (about 100 in one and a half years) and some wheeled units were also built (Dad remembers driving both around the sales field). Then, something happened, which probably had to do with the lack of funds and/or sales. The financial backers had words with Grandpa and physically threw him out the door. He left everything there and never looked back. Dad thinks one of the guys that were putting up some of the front money may have been Windolf, who continued to make the crawlers for a few years afterward. Grandpa told my dad many times that it was a good try but doomed to failure, as he felt in order to be successful, it was absolutely necessary to have a strong distribution and sales organization. Grandpa would reference the fact that Farm-All Cub by Massey-Ferguson was introduced at this time and was an instant success due in large part to its worldwide support system.

I would say the 100 to 150 tractors built in Tacoma, and maybe the few built in Kansas City were the only Model D tractors [wheeled version] made. And, the 100 or so crawlers built in Portland were all the tractors Grandpa built. This business just wasn't in the cards for him. Grandpa moved back to the Seattle area, did carpenter finish work and ultimately started his own construction business, which, when he passed away in 1965, was a very successful business he had created with his then young adult sons.

Along with her letter, Jennifer sent me copies of a letter Ray Perrin received from the Graham-Hoeme Manufacturing Co. in 1945 in reply to his query about a plow from that company. The letter stated that their smallest plow was an 8-foot tractor plow. This was certainly too large for the Perrin garden tractor. I know Mr. Perrin located or built proper implements because his later sales literature advertised several implements, and too, my Perrin has a well-built front blade on it. It is operated by a very useful implement lift.

Jennifer also included two sales brochures and another undated newspaper clipping which announced a "Tacoma-Made Tractor Soon to Be Available." It mentioned the attributes of the Model D tractor and the engineering skills of Mr. Perrin. The sales brochure pictures a Model D Perrin and a very similar looking "Ground Hog Tractor." Since it is mentioned that a 6 H.P. and a 9 H.P. engine are available, perhaps the horsepower distinguishes the two models. Jennifer also emailed me a picture that her grandmother, Louise (Perrin) Decker of the Puget Sound area, gave her of a Perrin tractor being driven in the Puyallup, Washington, Daffodil Parade (see photo below). Mrs. Decker is the widow of Raymond Perrin. She does not know the identity of the lady driving the decorated Perrin.

The sales information I received from Bill Strom gives details of the garden crawler version produced by Perrin. It shows the Terra-Trac-Tor and its attachments. Pencil notes on the items indicate that the crawler sold for \$890, the Terra Bulldozer Attachment (front blade) for \$47, the Terra Harrow for \$45, the Terra Disc for \$150, and a Terra Plow for \$47.50. The Terra-Trac-Tor's specifications included that the engine was a Novo, Model DA33 (8 h.p. at 2200 RPM), the speed range was ½ to 4 miles per hour, and the unit weight was 1200 pounds. Much other information is included on the sheet identifying bearings, clearances, brake type, materials, etc.

Corky Cook of Seattle, Washington, is another Perrin owner. He has a 1947 wheeled version. In email correspondence, Corky verified much of the information concerning crawlers and gave additional information concerning names of the wheeled tractors. He said that as well as the Perrin and the Ground Hog there was one named the Pacific. He also mentioned the sale in 1949 of Perrin rights to

the Windolph Brothers who owned a Kaiser Frazer dealership in Portland, Oregon. Corky said the B & C models of Windolph continued to use casting marked "P.T." with a number to coincide with the Perrin's tractor name.

There are several other places to see pictures of and to find information about Perrins. The Yahoo Track-laying Garden Tractor Club has pictures of a few crawler versions of the Perrin and/or the Terra-Trac-Tor, as well as several pictures of the similar Windolf crawler. Jim Cunzenheim sent me a copy of an article entitled "The Perrin?" by Harry Cruchelow in the January 1990 Gas Engine Magazine. He recounted his search for information about the tractor and told that he was able to discover an address for the Perrin Company in Oregon. He included pictures of a Perrin crawler and of the brass nameplate with serial number 122. An interesting comment by Mr. Cruchelow was that he saw a four-wheel Perrin without a steering wheel. He said it was steered by steering clutches and brake and caster wheels in front. This is the type mentioned in the newspaper article quoted above.

I am certain from my research and observation that my tractor is a Model D Perrin manufactured during the brief operation of the company in Kansas City, Missouri. The fact that Cliff Park located it so close to there strengthens my belief. And too, the only departure I can determine from other known four-wheel Perrins is that my tractor does not have the PERRIN name embossed on the front wheels. Jennifer's dad mentioned that it was quite possible that the Kansas City tractors did not have the logo. My Perrin now proudly joins my other tractors which include the Gard'n Mast'r and Mayrath I mentioned above and a 1946 Gibson, a 1957/58 Wheelhorse, a 1966 Wheelhorse Lawn Ranger, and a 1948 Ford 8N. All of these are displayed at the Tired Iron of the Ozarks Spring Crank-Ups in April and the Fall Shows in September. Our club is associated with the Early Days Gas Engine and Tractor Association as Branch 37. We invite all garden tractor enthusiasts to attend any and all of our shows.

As a footnote to this story, Jennifer Perrin Stock and her husband have purchased Bill Strom's nicely restored Perrin tractor (see photo below) and plan to use it in lawn work at their new home. They are also in the process of restoring her father's original Perrin. Jennifer's renewed interest in her grandfather's tractor company has led them into a search for other Perrins in the Oregon/Washington area.



Perrin in the Puyallup, Washington, Daffodil Parade



Bill Strom and Jennifer Perrin Stock



Larry Morrison's Restored Perrin