

Sawyer Massey 25-45 Kerosene Tractor Threshing Circa 1919

Among the photos donated to the Manitoba Agricultural Museum is a series of photos taken in the Elton district, northeast of Brandon on the Archie McPhail farm. The date is suspected to be 1919. The photo here shows a Sawyer Massey 25-45 gas tractor powering a threshing machine. The identities of the men in the photo are not known at this time. Alex McPhail, Archie's son, may be the man in the Stetson hat by the front wheel of the 25-45. Alex McPhail had trained as a pilot in World War One and therefore it is thought his presence in the photos would indicate he had been mustered out of service, which then indicates the photos were taken after 1918. As well, his sister, Lena McPhail, is present in some of the photos. She was married in late 1919 to a farmer from the Chater district. It would be unlikely she was present in the photos if she was married as she then had her own household to operate. So it is logical to assume the photos were taken in the fall of 1919.

Archie McPhail had come west from Ontario in 1880 working for the CPR on construction of the mainline to the Pacific. He acquired a homestead in the North Brandon area in 1881 and managed to "prove up" on the homestead while working part time for the CPR on construction. This was a common practice by homesteaders who found it necessary to have another source of income while they were breaking their homesteads and slowly bringing the farm into production. This money was needed to purchase supplies and basic machinery. By 1892, Archie was successful enough as a farmer that he married and built a new house. Archie purchased another 1/4 of land and became a purebred livestock breeder specializing in Clydesdale horses and Yorkshire pigs. At one time this herd of hogs was regarded as one of the premier herds in North America. Archie became involved with the Brandon Exhibition in 1882, remained involved for over 40 years and helped organize the first Brandon Winter Fair in 1908. He also did some work for the Immigration Department of the Government of Canada and was sent to Britain to recruit immigrants to Canada. Unfortunately, Archie's wife, Mary, passed away in 1910; however Archie remarried in 1914. In 1916 Archie was appointed as the Farm Manager for the Provincial Mental Hospital at Brandon. He reportedly planted the rows of spruce trees that line 1st Street between the door of the hill and bridge. Archie retired in 1933, and passed away in 1940.

Throughout the 1890s to 1910, Sawyer Massey was a major Canadian builder of steam engines, however the emergence of gas tractors saw Sawyer Massey begin production of gas tractors. Many gas tractors at this time actually used kerosene as a fuel, as it was cheaper than gas at the time. The company produced a number of sizes of tractors. The first model produced was a 20-40 which was then followed by a 30-60 tractor. The 20-40 seems to have been more powerful than thought as this design was later re-rated as a 25-45. The tractor seen here is a 25-45 tractor equipped with a Sawyer Massey designed and built engine. Sawyer Massey in other tractor models turned to purchasing engines from outside suppliers as this was cheaper than developing its own engines. 25-45s seem to have been somewhat common judging by the number of photos of these tractors. Today, they are a fairly rare tractor. The McPhail 25-45 has long since disappeared, probably to the scrap heap.

The photo illustrates the problem that threshing machines posed, the need for large numbers of men. There are seven men in the photo and probably there are more men elsewhere. There was usually an engine man tending the tractor, a separator man tending the threshing machine, two sheaf pitchers per sheaf wagon and for efficient operation, a crew would need at least three or four sheaf wagons. And then several grain wagons would be needed to haul grain away into an elevator or grain bin. If you were running a steam engine you would also need a water wagon and a man to constantly haul water. A crew then may consist of over 10 men and probably closer to 14, all of whom usually needed to fed and housed on the farm. Some custom threshing operations featured "caboozes" or shacks on wheels in which the men slept however it is more likely the usual accommodation was the barn loft or a straw stack with the horse trough serving as washing up facility. Many accounts of early steam engine men mention sleeping on the engine's deck using grain bags as a blanket and the heat from the boiler keeping them warm.



The McPhail outfit of the Elton district threshing in the fall of 1919. While the men have taken a short break in order to have the photo taken, from the sheaf wagons pulled up alongside the threshing machine, the crew have been giving the outfit "snooze" in order to bring in the harvest on the McPhail farm.

Manpower in the threshing days was such an issue that the railways operated "harvest special" trains in which they offered cheap fares to the prairies from the Maritimes and Eastern Canada where manpower was more plentiful. As wages at harvest were relatively decent, large numbers of men came to the prairies for harvest. To a fisherman from the Maritimes, used to life on a fishing boat where work was hard, wet and cold and the accommodations equally as wet and cold, with the prospect of a drowning thrown in, a prairie harvest could be seen as an excursion particularly if you found work on a farm with a wife and daughters who were skilled cooks.

In celebration of Canada's 150th birthday this year, the Manitoba Agricultural Museum has identified the top 150 artifacts in the collection. You can find this list in the Museum website, visit the Museum to examine these artifacts and others in the collection and then give us your opinion as the top 150 artifacts! The staff and volunteers would love to see you in 2017!

The Manitoba Agricultural Museum is open year round and operates a website at <http://ag-museum.mb.ca/> which can provide visitors with information on Museum and the Reunion including location and hours of operation.