Old Iron
A Restoration

Ken Quade (author’s father) with Cockshutt tractor. Photo by Mary Quade.
Antique engine shows aren’t exactly secret, but if you didn’t know about them, you’d probably never stumble onto one. On some rural road, there’s a hand-painted sign at the entrance of a gravel drive that leads to the grounds—a large field and some weathered buildings. Pull in, and an equally weathered older man in feed cap and money apron will take a few dollars from you, offer you a program describing the exhibits and advertising local businesses, direct you to another older man who flags you into a patch of grass partitioned for parking. No ticket or hand stamp or wristband. I’ve attended these shows all my life, and even my earliest memories are vivid, but maybe that’s because nothing has truly changed over the years.

In one memory, I’m four or five, with Dad and my big sister, standing on beaten-down grass in front of a roped-off display, watching an engine about the size of a Labrador retriever rhythmically sputter and hiss as the pair of heavy flywheels flanking it spin and spin, amber liquid splashing in the glass oiler. It’s on a little wheeled cart, which shakes back and forth as though it might take off, worrying me. Steam pours out of the water hopper. Occasionally, the engine pops, and though this firing is predictable, I’m always startled, blinking when the loud clap interrupts the smooth clatter of the wheel. Dad calls these the “putt-putt engines,” but their real name is “hit-and-miss engines.” I’m entranced by the repetitive motion and a bit lightheaded from the exhaust and the summer heat. All around us, similar engines whirl and blat. Most just spin their flywheels, but some have belts that run water pumps or butter churns or washing machines, jobs they would have performed on the farm. An old man in overalls sits in a lawn chair behind the engine; occasionally he gets up to adjust something on
the machine. He looks past us as though we’re invisible. Dad asks him a question, so now Dad’s not invisible. I wish I knew something to say.

I’ve always liked the putt-putts, the smooth mechanical noise of their toylike work, but now, sometimes seeing them all lined up for display, flywheels turning against no resistance, they seem purposeless, cheerful anachronisms innocent of their uselessness.

When I was a kid, we’d visit the show put on by the Sussex Antique Power Association in Sussex, Wisconsin. In addition to the hit-and-miss engines, there were antique tractors, collectible cars, a sawmill, a thresher, and crowds of what my dad called “old-timers,” which is to say, elderly men, more than a few of them missing parts of fingers. I was fascinated with these amputations, how the stubs cooperated with their other fingers to hold tools or adjust things on the engines. The grounds had a dirt track where the daily parade of tractors and collectible cars took place. Pictures from the show forty-five years ago look pretty much like pictures from recent shows—men standing around tractors with their hands in their pockets, or driving tractors, or holding small children while driving tractors. Though in the old photos, the men wear brimmed hats, not feed caps. In the old photos, visitors’ cars parked along the edge of the grounds look just like the antique autos of the collectible car displays in newer photos. In the old photos, most of the tractors are steam traction engines.

Though they’re often informally called steam shows, today gatherings feature mostly gas engines, from the big stationaries to the putt-puts to the farm tractors. At even a large show, there aren’t dozens of steam traction engines—or steam tractors, as they’re often called. For one thing, they’re huge and heavy, with five-foot-tall iron wheels that make it impossible to drive on asphalt without gouging the surface. You can’t tow one with your F-250 pickup truck. And there just aren’t that many of them around anymore. Most of the old steam tractors were scrapped during World War II, more valuable as metal than tractor, and transformed into the war machine.

As a kid, I was drawn to the steam tractors like I was drawn to the missing fingers. They smelled of calamity and danger. It didn’t take an expert to comprehend that they held inside the power of obliteration, that their
giant iron wheels were indifferent to obstacle. Though it slightly resembled one, the spinning flywheel was nothing like my box fan, into which I once, out of curiosity, stuck a pencil and pulled out a piece of splintered wood. No, it wouldn’t just break your arm off; you’d never be that lucky. A steam traction engine has a shape similar to a steam train engine—a firebox and boiler, a puffing stack—and they range in size from several tons to quite a few tons more than several. They’re Old Testament machines—soot, fire, water, and wrath.

When I study today historical accounts of steam tractor explosions, they often note how high the tractor, its parts, or its operators shot—a horrible flight of a hulking, flightless monster. Enormous flywheels thrown over houses; engines catapulted into the air; workers tossed fifty feet; boilers buried partway in the ground from the force of their falling from the sky; bodies disemboweled, unlimbed, decapitated; flesh burned or boiled away. Even restored, the engines need diligent attention to control catastrophic forces. Steam tractor operators rely on a mess of release valves and flues and water tanks and pressure gauges to keep their tractors whole and grounded. In 2001, a 1918 J. I. Case steam tractor exploded at the Medina County Fair in Ohio. It killed five people, including the engineer, injured forty-seven others, and lifted the eighteen-ton tractor fifteen feet into the air.

Besides the occasional boiler explosion, other accidents punctuated the era of the big steam tractors. They had, for instance, a tendency to succumb to gravity on bridges not meant for such heavy travelers. It was difficult to determine how heavy was too heavy until it was too late. Also, the tractors and threshers had many exposed wheels, belts, gears—things ready to grab and grind.

In his book *The Harvest Story: Recollections of Old-Time Threshermen*, Robert T. Rhode argues that the stories of horrible accidents clearly didn’t represent the typical experience of engineers, or else no one would have used the steam tractors on farms or celebrated them today at steam shows.¹ He’s obviously right, I know. Steam tractors were commonplace. Still, I find myself reading and rereading the chapter in his book full of firsthand accounts of disasters, because stories of suffering and devastation sometimes
seem to be more meaningful—a deception—than stories of plain old work. One story that sticks with me is about a man whose legs were blown off in an explosion. One leg was found seventy-five yards away. Needless to say, he died. The undertaker accidentally swapped left leg with right, and he was buried that way, parts reassembled, disorganized. Surely, I think, in this deconstruction lies a lesson to be learned, about fragility or hubris or absurdity.

Even small gas engines have the potential to self-destruct. The part of a hit-and-miss engine that regulates speed is called the governor, a set of hinged, weighted wings spun by gears connected to the drive shaft, wings that cause the engine to stop firing and coast or to begin cycling again. Cycle, coast, cycle, coast. It’s a hit-and-miss, not a hit-or-miss; it needs to do both things. If it fails to hit, at least once in a while, it stops. If it fails to miss, the engine will go faster and faster, speed unregulated, until it flies apart. The engine needs that rest to keep itself together. Even with a great deal of effort, I only grasp the mechanics when I’m watching it work. If I step away, I can’t quite remember the way it all fits together, and it returns to a state of semi-mystery, to that simple message of cycle, coast, cycle, coast, which I can comprehend. I muddle through the elements that resonate with me, half-informed, missing the specifics.

In the same way, it’s not my understanding of the technology or even usefulness of the steam tractors, exactly, that draws me to them, but something they evoke. Maybe it’s the palpable, present metaphor of the balance between power and doom that attracts me. Maybe this is why I can’t look at steam tractors without thinking The End. But maybe it’s more about what’s hiding within all that iron.

Tractors of all sorts made this country what it is, good and bad. When a tractor plows a new plot, each blade slices through the roots that were holding the turf to the earth underneath, and then rolls the sod over, exposing its underbelly. It’s a kind of surgery, opening up a fertile strip of soil, then another, and another, until a uniform pattern covers the landscape, leaving nowhere for the eye to settle.
I'm a descendant of Kansas farmers on both sides of my family. My paternal grandparents grew up on farms, as did my maternal grandfather. My dad was raised farming, but not on one particular farm; his family moved from place to place, renting land, and my dad lived in over a dozen different homes before he went off to college. By the time I was born, however, his parents had moved to a small town. My maternal grandmother was from a small town, and my mom was raised in town, though her father had inherited family land and grew wheat on it until he died at the age of ninety-one; he was buried with a bundle of stalks from his last harvest. I had maternal and paternal great aunts and uncles who farmed, but my own aunts and uncles don't.

Some of the farms my family has owned still function as farms but belong to someone else. One of the last things I did with my grandpa before he died was drive him out to check on his wheat and to see his family's and his brother's former farms. At the farm where my grandpa grew up, a muscly black dog blocked the driveway, barking aggressively. I remembered visiting my great-grandma at the farm, but, watching the dog, I couldn't recognize the place, the buildings in disrepair and trees cut down. At my great uncle's old farm, a recent storm had shattered the tops of the huge shade trees surrounding the house, the thick trunks ending in lopped-off branches.

I didn't grow up on a farm. I grew up in rural Wisconsin, in a tiny subdivision near a lake, surrounded by farmland. Today any farmland in the area where I lived is surrounded by subdivisions. A few years ago, I visited the area for the first time in almost two decades, searching for familiar landmarks. One field I used to ride past on my bike now sprouts an 18,000-square-foot, twenty-four-bedroom villa that squats over the acres, an enormous trinket. Some people are from places they can return to. The place I'm from has been replaced. I can't quite get there, except through memory and stories. The land has become something else.

In 2002, my husband and I moved from a house in Portland, Oregon, to a former dairy farm in rural northeast Ohio. We wanted a little piece of land. Our place used to have at least a hundred acres, but now we own
just over four. We’ve got a vegetable garden the size of our entire lot in Portland, where we grow more tomatoes than we can possibly eat; one summer we planted 120 and canned hundreds of quarts in the fall. We have some apple, cherry, and peach trees, and have raised chickens, ducks, and quail. But it’s not really a farm in any real sense of the word. It’s a pastime, not a living. There’s nothing crucial about the work we do with the land. I call it the Farmette.

Two tractors live in an old pole barn on our property—a Farmall Super-md and a McCormick wd 9, both manufactured by International Harvester—but neither is mine. They belong to our neighbor, who grew up in our house when it was a farm. Like many tractor people, he’s accumulated some equipment over the years. Tractors are happier out of the rain and snow, so we give his a little shelter with roof and walls (though not doors; those fell off years ago). They share company with a pile of wood needing to be split, an old goat stall pieced together from pallets, various cages we built for raising birds, and groundhog holes now occupied by skunks. The Super-md sinks into the sandy floor of the barn, three tires flat and cracked and one missing altogether. The seat is gone, as are more critical parts like the clutch. It’s rusty, but you can still read the make and model painted on its side. The wd 9 is in much better shape—looks to me like it’s ready to go, with maybe just a little air in the tires. They’re from the late ’40s or early ’50s, I think, though I’m not sure.

Every year or so my neighbor says, “I’ve got to get those tractors out of your barn,” and I always protest. I’d never want my own tractor, which would require those limited resources of time, money, and knowledge that I’ve dedicated to other passions. I also simply don’t need one; I have no work for a tractor, no wheat, no hay. But I appreciate the presence of these tractors. They tie my barn to its past, and in some ways they tie me to this land that I share with the past, to the tractors my family used to shape their farms—land now lost.
I want to get the story right, so I call Dad, as I have many times before, to check the Cockshutt model.

“Forty?” I ask. I always think it should be a forty.

“No, thirty.” He’s patient.

Then I ask him when my grandpa got rid of it.

“Nineteen-sixty, I think. You should call Leroy. He’s got the whole story written up.” Dad can’t remember all the details either.

“It was a good tractor,” Dad tells me. “We’d use it twenty-four hours a day, taking turns.”

I try to imagine this—the red tractor, headlights beaming, in the middle of a Kansas night. I’ve seen the places Dad lived; there’s not much out there but land. When you have one tractor and it’s time to plow, you get as much done as you can. You couldn’t work a horse that way.

“A good tractor,” Dad says. “It still is.”

In the end, Dad writes Uncle Leroy an e-mail asking him if he can send me a copy of the story. I don’t hear anything back, so Dad gives him a call. Turns out Uncle Leroy only has a hard copy of it. And the hard copy is in the tractor toolbox. And the tractor is out at the old farm property he owns but doesn’t live on. So he’ll get it next time he’s out there. I think of it in the toolbox, with the crescent wrench and pliers.

A few weeks later, I get a copy in the mail. The story begins, “It was on December 6, 1995, that my older son, James, and I were up early to go deer hunting, but first I had promised him that we would deliver some auto parts to a fix-it shop in Burr Oak, Kansas.” While driving around Burr Oak, a town of only a few streets, Uncle Leroy spotted a couple of Cockshutts. He and my cousin stopped to look at them for a few minutes, then left.

After Uncle Leroy visited Burr Oak, the tractors nagged at his mind, and he asked my cousin to call the auto-parts guy to get the name of the owner. Then he drove back to Burr Oak, but the owner was taking a load of scrap iron to Nebraska. Uncle Leroy writes, “I took a closer look at the two tractors and found identifying marks on one of them that had been done by my dad while he owned it.” My uncle recognized its unique alterations
and scars. There were bolt holes in the right fender where a sprayer control valve had been fastened. It had a broken hitch, which Grandpa had repaired with pieces of scrap metal because he couldn’t afford a new part. And the clincher was the stop that kept the oil can from falling off; it was carved from a wooden broom handle and still stuck in a hole in the chassis after all those years. The tractor was about to be sold for scrap.

My uncle had found the family tractor, a machine he hadn’t seen in over thirty-five years. My grandpa had bought it new in 1947 and sold it in 1959 when he quit farming. Uncle Leroy had the owner’s number, so he reached him and got a price, then called my dad in Wisconsin. They’d buy the second tractor, too, for parts.

“You’re going to get them, aren’t you?” Dad asked, offering to split the cost.

Uncle Leroy writes, “We bought the tractors for too much money, but we had our old tractor to fix up the way we last remembered it.”

I hear this kind of story again and again on tractor websites and at tractor shows: someone out searching for the family tractor. The Holy Grail of tractor people. Travel down almost any country road and you’ll see old tractors, rusty and waiting to be found.

In my search for more stories of Cockshutt tractors, I stumble on an article about a young woman named Molly Bradley who’s been restoring Cockshutts since she was seven. She got hooked on them by a close family friend, now passed away. There’s a photo of the nineteen-year-old leaning on a bright red Cockshutt 20. She looks strong and sweetly sassy, her hip cocked to one side, her blond hair catching a breeze. I find her name on the website for the Minnesotans Go-Pher Cockshutt Club, so I contact her. She tells me tractor shows have taken her all over, which I find interesting because tractors themselves aren’t distance vehicles; they’re meant for acres, not hundreds of miles. She says the difference between a new tractor and an old one is the stories. An old tractor “has dings and dents but they all
have a story behind them. The stories are worth sharing.” As for Cockshutt people, she says they’re special because it’s a rare brand. You can’t just go anywhere and buy parts for them, like you might a John Deere, so Cockshutt owners rely on one another to find or make parts to fix up the machines.

Because I’m a writer and not an engineer, the history of the Cockshutt company is easier for me to absorb than the way the tractor itself functions. Cockshutt was a Canadian manufacturer that sold tractors built by the American Oliver Corporation under the Cockshutt name in the 1930s and ’40s; the Olivers and Cockshutts were essentially the same tractors with different paint jobs. In 1946, Cockshutt started building its own design and came out with the 30, the first tractor ever to have an independent live power take-off, which meant that a farmer could send power to attached equipment—baler, mower, etc.—while the tractor was parked. In 1962 the company was sold to White Motor Company of Cleveland. My husband teaches high school on what was once the White estate. He eats lunch in the school’s dining hall, which occupies the ground floor of the White house. In the days when it was the White estate, it was also a working farm, with even its own dairy herd. Apparently, rich industrialists in the 1920s liked to play farmer.

A Cockshutt person can collect a lot more than tractors, I discover. Hats, lawn chairs, checkbook covers, coffee mugs, T-shirts for people and for dogs, key chains, belt buckles, teddy bears, aprons, bumper stickers, mouse pads, pet bowls, calendars, wall clocks, Christmas ornaments, book bags—all adorned with the Cockshutt logo: a black, yellow, and red bull’s-eye target with a black and yellow arrow. There’s even a one-sixteenth model of a Gambles Farmcrest 30, my family’s tractor. Toy tractors make me a little sad. I had a nice die-cast International when I was a kid that I liked to play with in the dirt. You could steer it! I can still feel the weight of it under my hand as the wheels turned, see the little dusty tracks left by the tires. It disappeared; I think a neighbor boy took it and then moved away. No chance of ever getting it back.
My dad’s grandpa, my great-grandpa Ehlers, farmed in north central Kansas. The ground was hardpan or gumbo, poor soil that water wouldn’t permeate, forming gullies. In the 1940s, he had a Caterpillar D2, a bulldozer tractor with crawling tracks instead of wheels—a tidy, stout machine, smiley-face yellow. He’d break up the ground with a subsoiler or “rooter” so the water would soak in and stay in the soil. He used the blade to create terraces and small ponds. In the winter, he’d haul silage, corn, and sorghum out to the livestock using a wagon on the Caterpillar. The D2 is steered by adjusting the speed of its two tracks with two separate clutches. If the left track stops but the right keeps moving, the tractor spins to the left. As long as both tracks move at the same speed, the tractor travels in a straight line, even if no one is controlling it. My great-grandpa would put it in gear and, as the tractor rolled across the field, hop on and off, unloading feed from the wagon, working alone.

In the 1930s, they nearly lost the place several times, but somehow managed to keep on going. Dad tells me of a time a prairie fire came through. The horses, tied up, were caught in the flames and their hoofs fell off. They had to put the horses down. I’ve visited this farm a number of times, though it’s now another family’s land. As the years go by, the abandoned stucco house falls apart. My grandparents spent their wedding night in that house. Someone has used its walls for target practice. Last time I was there, the living room had dropped into the basement. No other houses within sight; just grassy pasture hugging the hills. No plowed fields, no crops, no tractors.

It’s hard to know what went wrong, exactly. One winter day in 1948, my great-grandpa was out alone, using the Caterpillar to feed the cattle. The D2 had a bulldozer blade and a fender attachment over the track, and Dad says they think that when my great-grandpa was hopping on and off to get the feed from the wagon, he stepped on the track instead of the fender. The tractor pulled his left foot between the toothy grousers of the track and the frame for the hydraulic cylinders connected to the bulldozer blade. Somehow, he managed to get to the throttle to shut off the tractor. But he was stuck and mangled, and no one came looking for him for several hours. His leg was too bad for the local hospital, so they went to Great
Bend, which even today is almost a two-hour drive. He'd been working in pasture, and because of the unsanitary conditions, gangrene set in. They had to amputate his leg to save his life.

After the accident, my great-grandpa kept farming, using the same D2; he had a machine shop and was inventive, so he manufactured a handle in order to operate the left brake by hand. Eventually, though, they sold the place and “moved to town,” as Dad puts it. The town—Downs, Kansas—today has a population hovering around nine hundred people, one of those plains towns that popped up when the railroad was built. My great-grandpa bought a few empty lots and sunk wells on them. He built up a business truck farming—raising tomatoes and other vegetables—and growing irrigated alfalfa. Dad says he had a wooden leg but usually wouldn't wear it. He recalls his grandpa in a hurry, throwing off his crutches and hopping across the field on one leg. I remember a photograph of him somewhere out west, sitting on a ski lift, lone right leg dangling.

With just a lot of hard work, tractors can be resurrected from all kinds of damage. The pictures Dad took of rebuilding the Cockshutt engine reveal polished metal parts I can’t name, cylindrical and smooth. The engine case has been repainted bright red. The tools spread out amidst the scene suggest coercion against time—mallets, wrenches, a product called Gunk Engine Brite, bottle brush, oily rags and wads of paper towel, Lucas High Performance Assembly Lube, cans and cans and cans of wd-40, a case of Busch beer.

All this hard work to keep the memories of other hard work—hard work long past—from fading. In the 1940s, men who years before had threshed using steam tractors began to form organizations and hold reunions to celebrate the machines. Equipment that was once simply a means to get hard work done became relics to restore for the re-creation of hard work, if only for a few days each year. Compelling, this urge to hang on to usefulness. Eventually the then-new tractors with internal combustion engines, like the Cockshutt, aged into antiques as well, acquiring—with their dings and dents—stories.
My family cultivates a plot of stories. Grandma teaching in a one-room school. The pet raccoon Dad kept for a while as a boy. The crazy local bachelors and their antics. How Grandpa, as a toddler, accidentally shot off his brother’s thumb. The time Dad killed the pig with an angry kick. Dad’s stints on the combine circuit. The family tractor, found and fixed. These stories surface when the occasion calls for them, and each, in its own way, is a story of survival in hard times. Others, like the story of my young Uncle Johnny freezing to death in a field after his car broke down, stay mostly buried, needing a blade to turn them over.

I was once told that a story must contain loss to be meaningful. Loss defines value. A thing has no value unless it can disappear. And we don’t always know what that value is until the thing is gone, if we know it then. So what does it mean when a story itself is lost? I have to pay attention.

I call Dad. He sighs. He knows what story I need to hear. The one I’ve never really heard—only traces on the periphery of other stories, a hint of a part missing from the whole. But I’ve been digging around its edges with the D2.

In the end, it was a surprise, Dad says. My great-grandpa had suffered from phantom pains since he lost the leg. A missing foot he couldn’t scratch, a feeling of something persisting beyond the body he possessed, a thing lost but still connected to him. Maybe this absence was the reason, or maybe, Dad suggests, he just felt he couldn’t do all the things he’d done before. In 1960, when my dad was in his first year of college, Great-grandpa rigged up a shotgun clamped to a vise and killed himself. This tractor story isn’t one my family tells.

I’ve driven the Cockshutt with Dad’s coaching: a jolting, growly ride. The body itself isn’t repainted, so it’s the dull dark red of dried blood. Dad and Uncle Leroy take it to shows and to tractor parades, events where folks on tractors meander their way along a rural route, passing through
little towns, moving at the pace of patient progress. It’s a straightforward narrative, this adventure. The tractors either travel along or fail to travel along, depending on their condition, which can be unpredictable. It’s OK, though, if things go wrong. They’ve been restored once, and chances are, they’ll be restored again.

I don’t know if restoration is an act of preserving history or of erasing time. I’m not sure why I need the stories of both the Cockshutt and the D2, except that I worry what would happen if I didn’t harvest them. The engine, I know, needs both hit and miss.

On a tractor parade in Kansas, Dad sends me pictures via his cell phone. To be honest, it’s hard to tell if the tractors are parked or rolling; it’s not the stuff of action photography. More and more, Uncle Leroy resembles the old-timers—gray hair, feed cap, overalls—and though Dad isn’t in any of the pictures, he does too. The tractor doesn’t really change. If anything, it’s getting younger as they tinker and toil over it, returning it to smooth usefulness. If it had to, it could perform the job it did when it was new—dig into the turf and turn over the land, transform the view into fertile emptiness, each groove deep and fleeting, demanding perpetual work.

NOTES


2. I’ve heard the history of Cockshuttts from my dad and tractor friends. Particulars about the origin and development of the Cockshutt brand can be found at the website for the International Cockshutt Club, www.cockshutt.com.