

A VENT WINDOW VIEW
My Merry Minneapolis-Moline
May 2015 B. K. Showalter

Names and faces have faded from my memory to the extent that I need a program containing the cast of players so that I can figure out who's who at family reunions; therefore, you can understand the difficulties I've encountered while trying to get the facts right in order to describe correctly my earliest venture into the world of high-speed road racing. The thing is, the vehicle that I utilized for this grand contest was a farm tractor with the usual (common in the area where I lived in the late Forties and early Fifties) tricycle-styled running gear designed for use when cultivating row crops such as corn and soybeans. To explain how such a race could come about one must remember that in those years, combines were just beginning to take over grain harvesting from the threshing machines that in 1949 were still being used around Northwest Missouri. Generally, in those days farmers worked smaller acreages and some (like my Dad) were still utilizing horses to power their farm equipment.

Crops on our 160 acres were diversified; we planted corn on roughly a quarter of the farm while another quarter held wheat. One quarter served as grazing land for our livestock while the final quarter held either alfalfa or clover. (Draft horses need fuel not only when crops are being cultivated, but also when the animals are idle in winter.)

During the grain harvest the owner of a threshing machine pulled his unit from farm to farm behind a large tractor. Some of those were steam-powered monsters, but by the Fifties most threshing machines were towed behind a gasoline-powered, steel-wheeled tractor heavy enough to pull a battleship. These beasts also served to power the threshing machine once it was parked on the next farm scheduled for the harvest.

Five or six neighbors whose grain had already been threshed assisted the upcoming four or five farmers whose crop was soon to be harvested. Their wives would cook a mid-day meal that would serve to power the men who collected bundled grain from the fields and fed the bundles into the threshing machine. Generally there were two men forking grain bundles onto a wagon pulled by a regular farm tractor that was usually driven by a high school or even younger kid. And, that's where I received my very first lessons in tractor driving.

"Pops" Hooper's former tractor driver had, with his parents, moved away from the area and "Pops" suddenly found himself in need of a driver. As luck would have it, I was standing in the right place when he learned of his need.

"Kid, can you handle a tractor?"

"Sure." My reply carried a positive note that I didn't exactly feel, but the job was now mine--for better or worse. And, during the following week, I learned quite a lot without running over any of the workers. Some 8 or 10 days later the threshing machine was set up in a field several miles from home; it was so far from my usual haunts that the roads we headed for home on at days end were not at all familiar to me. Still, at "Pop's" urgings from his position where he stood on the tow bar, I shifted into high gear and learned for the first time just how fast his Minneapolis-Moline tractor could travel. The rest of the pack was far behind until we reached the first hill. That's when I learned that my yellow monster's high gear lacked the power needed to reach the top of the grade. By the time we topped the hill and I shifted back into high gear, the rest of the pack was right on my heels.

"C'mon, son! Put the spurs to her; let them boys eat our dust!" "Pop's" trust in my steering skills far exceeded my own, but I obeyed his instructions and soon my yellow steed was again well ahead of the pack. Some years later I realized that what I had done showed that I was "young and dumb." On the other hand, I'm pretty sure his encouragement indicated that he was "old and dumb." In the end, though, what stuck with me was that no matter the age, racing on public roads is far from smart; in truth, young or old, in a car or on a tractor, racing on public roads is a downright dumb thing to do.

This photo lifted from the Internet may not be the exact year and model of the unit mentioned in the article above. Some details about my world 65 years ago have faded a bit!

