

THE AGE OF STEAM

The frost was on the pumpkin, the days were rapidly becoming shorter, the weather reporter in the "NorWest Farmer" forecast rain, later turning to snow, and there was a month of threshing still to be done.

The crew handling the old portable steamer coupled to an aging separator, struggled to keep operating in conditions that were far from favorable. The engine, brought from Ontario many years ago, was done. Flues were leaking beyond repair and steam escaped from fittings and valves. It was impossible to keep operating continually.

The separator, built in the days before the straw blower was invented, was worn out as well. There were many stops when impatient pitchers plugged the cylinder with damp sheaves. This angered the operator and farmer alike, but was a delight to the fireman who used these intervals to attempt to keep the pressure in operating range.

Later, when winter set in, the old outfit was hauled to the bush still emitting steam and with icicles hanging from its frame and a new outfit, belonging to a neighbor, puffed proudly into the field to finish the season. This was a common situation in many districts of the West in the early part of the century and one which helped to usher in the age of the big steam outfit.

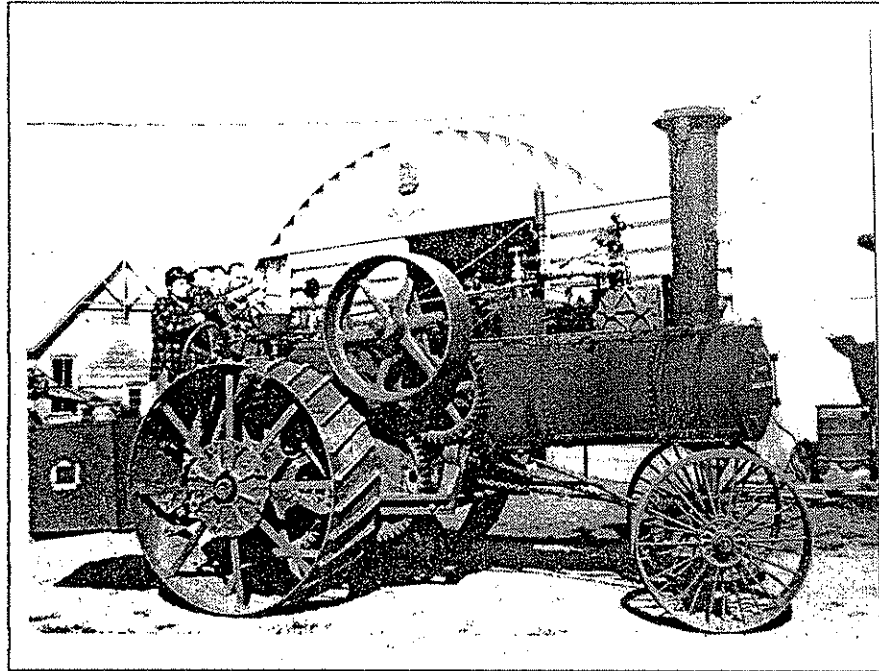
There was, and possibly still is, a certain mystery and romance associated with steam. Young men at the time when steam was so vital to all activities, hurried to the city in the off season to take short courses in operating these machines, while others worked with neighbors to learn the business of firing with hopes of acquiring engineer's papers later.

Boys, whose idols had been cowboys, policemen or carpenters, lost interest in these trades when they saw the big steamer pull into the yard at night belching sparks and steam and with a separator and water tank in tow and guided by the beam of a powerful headlight.

It was a time when steam was king; men who loved these big machines were said to have

steam in their veins. They provided the only source of power available to drive the separators of the day, to power the grain crushers and wood saws or anything that needed great strength to be moved. Manufacturers competed keenly for a place in the market; each vying to top the other. It was a race to provide the most suitable engine with the capacity to pull the 10 or 12 bottom breaking plows of the day.

But their days were numbered. Soon the



The Sawyer-Massey 25-75

sound of the whistle early in the morning or at night to signal the end of a good day's work (and suitably responded to by neighboring outfits) would be heard no more.

Although the first huge gas tractors of the time were far from successful, smaller units such as the Rumely, the Waterloo-Boy, the Titan, John Deere and the first International 15-30 were rapidly gaining in approval. In addition, with the prosperity of the war years, many farmers became able to afford their own outfits. The day of the big machine was over as each farmer became independent.

It was a happy day for farm wives when the last of the big gangs disappeared; instead of having to prepare and feed a gang of 25 men in good weather or bad, she had only to contend

with 7 or 8. By the mid-20's the steamer began to disappear, most were gone by the depression of the 30's.

The Rocanville and District Museum have four of these steam traction engines still serviceable and one larger model which will be restored when time and permits are available.

In addition, there are four mill type engines, three of which are in operating condition, the fourth and largest is still to be assembled. The recently acquired steam operated generator which was used in a Regina hospital as a standby unit, is now set up and operable in the main building.

To complete the display of steam equipment to be seen on the grounds, there are privately owned units consisting of one traction model, a small vertical boiler connected to a water pump, and an engine of great historical interest now mounted with a boiler on a car frame. More about this artifact at a later date.

But the one we wish to deal with at this time is the old "Sawyer-Massey" 25-75. This engine is a tandem compound design, the only one of its kind on the grounds.

From Mr. Len Polvi of Moosomin, we learn that this engine came to the New Finland District right from the factory in the year 1908. It was the custom at the time for several farmers to go together to purchase equipment of this magnitude. This "Syndicate", as these companies were called, was known as the "Rompon Co." Partners were Isaac Polvi Sr., Mikki Luoma and Henry Peterson. John Bushman was known to be the first engineer in charge, followed by Ed. Polvi.

In those days it was common practice for threshing Co's to complete their own harvest of stooks first, then to carry on, sometimes to the New Year or later, threshing out neighbors who in the meantime had stacked their crop to keep it dry. Also, it is known that this old faithful had done a great deal of breaking in its time.

By the mid-twenties Polvi and Peterson had bought out the Luoma share, continued to operate till the small machines began to take over, then abandoned the engine in the bush. Later, when it was purchased by the Lake family, it had to be literally cut out of the bush. No date is available to indicate when the old machine was finally pensioned off, but it is assumed to be in the early thirties. Eventually, it became the property of Mr. E. Symons and from there it found its way to the Museum.

Restoration work began on the old

Massey about ten years ago. First the rusted out portion of the smoke box was replaced with new metal, the bottom of the front flue sheet was reinforced and a new set of flues was installed. New pipe, valves and nipples were added to connect all components and finally a new water tank and fuel box were built.

A thorough cleaning and paint job in the original colors finished the job. It was a happy day -- and a thrilling experience -- to see the old machine operating again after so many inactive years.

So when you hear the sound of the whistle next September, you will find people of all ages gathered by the threshing outfit. There will be a few, though aged, who still come to the steamer and talk of how they enjoy the old familiar odor always present about the engine. They will be heard to speak knowingly about injectors, blowers, and the valve setting and some will possibly voice a bit of criticism about how things are being done. You may hear stories too, much improved with age, as men reminisce about incidents involving engines, which took place years ago.

There will be some too, who will speak and marvel at the tremendous power displayed before them, of the ease with which the engine handles the load and of how the governor responds so promptly to changes. Others will remark of the quietness of the steamer compared to the usual noise about the internal combustion engines.

But all will feel that they are witnessing one of the last tangible links with the past still available and in serviceable conditional condition. Those with an agricultural background, and this includes most of us, will be reminded once again of the role of pioneers played in building our country to be what was once known as the bread basket of the world; and will become aware of the tremendous value in the effort of museum workers for restoring and maintaining these artifacts for the benefits of generations to come. ● ● ● ●

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