

A Steam Powered Tractor In Hutto?

by Harvey Olander

Yes, Gus McCormick owned it. He lived at the north end of College St. where that huffing, puffing, jumping, smoking hunk of machinery came to life every fall during harvest time. Every school student had his chance to see that dinosaur in action if he only took the time to look. It was across the street from school. Gus operated a thrashing harvester, which separated the grain from the chaff.

I was fascinated by the machinery and all the activity that went on. Gus McCormick continually checked the steam engine's water level. It was critical that the boiler never run out of water. Without water the heat-weakened boiler tubes would explode. Gus complained bitterly about water consumption for making steam. He used over five hundred gallons of water in a ten-hour day. The spacing between the tractor and the

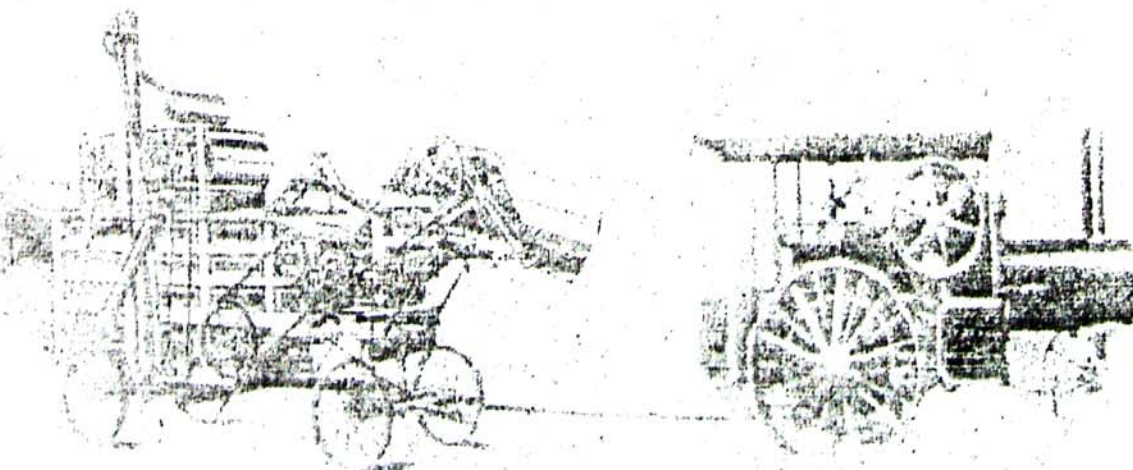
thrasher was very important. Sparks from the smoke stack could easily ignite the straw, which accumulated around the thrasher, so the tractor with its steam engine was spaced about fifty feet from the thrasher. That required an extra long flat pulley belt (about one hundred feet) to power the thrasher. Strong wind gusts often pushed the long belt off the pulley. He found that twisting the belt added traction and offset the wind currents.

Running the thrasher required two men to put in the grain, and another to sack the grain and count the sacks filled. Another cleared the chaff and stacked or loaded grain bags on the wagon. When business slowed, McCormick hooked up the thrasher to the tractor, as illustrated, and pulled the rig north on what is now FM1660, possibly to Jonah. That was the slowest moving piece of farm equipment I have ever seen. It took over an hour to

travel from town and pass our farm, which was about one mile from town.

My dad, a farmer, grew row cane for cattle feed and harvested the seed. We cut the cane, tied it into bundles, and stacked it in shocks. After the seed dried it was cut from the bundles and hauled by wagon to that thrasher powered by the only known steam tractor ever to have been in Hutto.

Everything has a useful life. I do not know when the steam engine came to Hutto or what happened to it, but its usefulness ended for sure after World War II. An industrial revolution in the design of new farm equipment began at that time. Now one man can do all of the above in several minutes in the field, if he can afford the \$100,000 dollars to buy the self-propelled combine. All the old machinery mentioned above is now in one piece and includes air conditioning and a stereo.



The Avery Tractor & Case Thrasher pictured are closest to what I remember! Harvey Olander