

THE BIG RACE IN BIRD CITY

By Jack Lacy

When three thousand people stand up and cheer for a man who is the slowest in a steam engine race you know he's the winner, and engineers of old-time tractors in three midwestern states are practicing the "skill of slow" in preparation for their annual contest.

For thirteen years members of the Antique Engine and Threshers Association have gathered at the Roy Kite farm at Bird City, Kansas. The annual reunion will be held this year September 29-30 and October 1 with steam engines competing from Kansas, Colorado and Nebraska.

According to Chester Sawyer, association president, there will be 20 giant steam engines of the 1910 vintage and at least an equal number of 1920 model gasoline and oil fired tractors. All must be in good operating condition and entered in one or more events.

The annual reunion of the Antique Engine and Threshers Association is an animated museum. Fifty-year-old steam engines are painted and polished for three days of pulling and puffing reminiscent of the days when the sod was first broken in what is today recognized as the world's largest wheat producing region.

The idea for the show and contests originated in the minds of Chester Sawyer and Roy Kite back in 1953. They knew there were numerous old steam engine tractors hidden away in sheds and barns and the generation trained to operate them was rapidly passing. As youngsters Chester and Roy were raised around coal-fired huffing and puffing steam engines. They loved the thrill of seeing these giants snake a 12-bottom plow through unbroken sod; they knew the skill required to handle the snorting locomotive. Chester and Roy had worked as "water boys" handling teams of horses hauling wagons of water from stock ponds to fill the engine boilers.

Roy Kite set aside 60 acres on his farm two and one-half miles east of Bird City to be used for the antique engine grounds. "The boys can use it as long as they want to," Roy said prior to his death in 1959. Mrs. Kite is carrying on the tradition and the Methodist ladies come "with lunch for everybody on the grounds" each noon.

It's a family affair with free admission for all ladies and children. Men who aren't members of the association pay a dollar to watch the day's events.

The fancy old steamers are hauled in on modern-day semi-trailer trucks and the program starts each morning at 10:00 a.m. with a parade of equipment. Skilled operators, many of them old hands at the game, then set about the task of competing in threshing wheat, testing for steam horsepower and the big race.

The race can't compete with the Indianapolis 500 for thrills, but the skill of making a 10-ton tractor crawl while keeping the engine running will test the ability of race drivers and jet pilots. If the engine loses steam and quits, the driver is disqualified. "Any kid can run a steam engine wide open," says Sawyer, "but it takes a real man to make her crawl!"

There aren't any steam engine tractors being built these days, so the men who have painted and polished the antique models have found "gold in them thar frills." One rare old engine recently sold for \$6,000; there were only 50 of this model constructed.

"It's just like selling a thorobred calf," President Sawyer explains, "it all depends upon how much the buyer is willing to pay."

But members of the Antique Engine and Threshers Association don't fix up their steamers to sell. They're kept in operating condition and ready to run.

"These old steam engines will out-pull any modern gasoline or diesel tractor with the same rated horsepower," according to Sawyer. He's prepared to prove his point in horsepower contests at the reunion. The steam engine starts more slowly than the tractor-type and can move more weight as a result.

At the turn of the century there were numerous contractors in Western Kansas operating large trains of plowing and threshing equipment powered by steam. They carried bunk cars, kitchens,

machine shops and all the necessary plows and threshers to get the job done. Roy Kite's father was one of these contractors and the steam engine shed, where the original equipment is kept in storage, is site of the daily noon "dinner" served by the Bird City Methodist ladies during the three-day reunion.

Even though the old steam engines are more powerful they're "too big, too slow and require too much labor" to compete in today's highly mechanized farming operations. Chester Sawyer has three big diesel jobs that he runs today, and he can handle them by himself. "The old steamers can only roll about two and one half miles an hour at top speed and you have to have a man hauling water to keep them running," he explains. The modern motorized models will operate at twice the speed.

Chester Sawyer who has operated threshing machines for 46 years, and is still at it, has earned the title of president of the tri-state area's Antique Engine and Threshers Association. He won't claim that his association's show and reunion is the biggest of its type in the United States, "but we'll claim second-best until we hear of a bigger one."

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Steam-powered tractors line up for the big race at Bird City, Kansas. Each year the Antique Engine and Threshers Association holds an annual reunion with parades and horse power competition. The one who can drive the engine the slowest is the winner in this unusual race.