

Local tractor company never gained traction

“More from the soil, with less toil” was the promise of the Illinois Tractor Co., which for a few short years sold its Bloomington-made tractors across the nation and even overseas.

This was in the late 1910s and early 1920s, when the promise of “power farming”—that is, replacing horses with machines—captivated much of rural America. As such, the Illinois Tractor Co. competed against a seemingly innumerable number of manufacturers—Aultman & Taylor, Avery, Bull, Case, Hart-Parr, Holt Caterpillar, International Harvester, Parrett and many other smaller concerns, the names of which today are known only to those who collect and restore antique tractors.

The Illinois Tractor Co. originally manufactured farm silos, incorporating in 1912 as the Illinois Silo Co. From its plant on the south side of Bloomington between Lincoln and Lafayette streets (roughly where Behr Iron and Metal is located today), it also sold farm machinery and building tile.

By 1916, the renamed Illinois Silo and Tractor Co. (the “silo” in the name would be dropped in a year or two) began touting its new tractor, said to be the first “motor-driven machine” made in Bloomington. “Does any work on the farm that a four-horse team will do,” it was said. Unlike the company’s next generation, more modern-looking tractors, these early ones were ungainly looking contraptions with exposed gears and belts.

By 1919, the company was selling the first model in its “Illinois Super-Drive” line of tractors (see accompanying images.) John B. Foote—“the country’s leading tractor transmission expert,” according to the company’s promotional material—is said to have devoted “three years of continuous work” developing the Super-Drive. Whether that’s true or not we cannot say, but in point of fact, Foote-designed transmissions were well known back then.

The Super-Drive’s “live-axle, spring cushion drive,” claimed the company, “delivers more engine power at the drawbar than any other driving principle now in tractor use.” The rear axle “applies power direct to the rims of the drive wheels—not to the hubs or spokes—through cushion springs which relieve the entire mechanism from all jars or shocks.”

These tractors were assembled in Bloomington, with most of the components and parts coming from elsewhere. Its kerosene motors were manufactured by the Climax Engineering Co. of Clinton, Ia., for instance, while the carburetors came from the Stromberg Motor Devices Co. of

Chicago; Spirex radiators from Modine Mfg. Co. of Racine, Wisc.; Sylphon thermostats from the Fulton Company of Knoxville, Tenn.; etc.

Even so, the tractor's under frame and other parts were likely designed and manufactured in Bloomington. The company employed pattern makers here, and maintained a large inventory of sheet metal, floor plating and steel.

In the first months of 1919, the company's some 60 factory hands were assembling nine to twelve tractors a week.

It was around this time that the Illinois Super-Drive appeared in tractor trade shows and field exhibitions across the Midwest, Great Plains and beyond. The tractor, proclaimed the company, "has gone into the field under practically every soil and weather condition, in high and low altitudes, and has demonstrated its ability to successfully handle four 14-inch plows in sod or stubble at a depth of from six to eight inches and at a speed of from two and a half to three and a half miles per hour."

At one time, it appears direct factory branches opened in Fargo, N.D., Kansas City, Mo., and elsewhere. And at some point, the company licensed a Canadian manufacturer to make Super-Drives under the Imperial name.

By the fall of 1919, The Pantagraph reported that an Illinois Tractor Co. overseas representative in Paris had closed a contract for 200 Super-Drive tractors. At the same time, Nat B. Lay, engineer and head of the service department, was heading to Europe to help establish a permanent presence on the continent. The ambitious company had already opened an export office in New York City.

"More than a year ago we recognized the opportunity for marketing our product in foreign fields, particularly in Europe," B.F. Sprankle, general manager of the company, remarked at the time. "Our first move was a carefully planned advertising campaign, conducted through widely circulated export journals. Before we had received an export order for a single tractor, the names 'Illinois Super-Drive' and 'Bloomington, U.S.A.,' were known in every foreign agricultural country."

Despite such supposed name recognition, the company sank under the weight of mismanagement, undercapitalization, stiff competition and likely other insurmountable problems. In early 1921, there were hopeful whispers that the floundering company would be absorbed by "one of the largest automotive concerns" in the nation.

Alas, it was not to be. One year later, in Jan. 1922, stockholders filed bills of relief against the Illinois Tractor Co. and its officers. According to a series of complaints, the company cooked the books to create a fictitious surplus, inflate year-to-year profits and underreport mounting losses. The aggrieved stockholders also claimed that one company official sold stock on 25 to 50 commission, and that its “officers and directors declared annual dividends of 8 percent to holders of stock to instill confidence and induce others to buy.”

All Ponzi-like schemes rest on a house of cards, and this one came tumbling down soon enough, On May 2, 1923, bankruptcy trustee W.B. Leach held a sale of more than 54 tons of company steel. On Dec. 4 of that year, a public sale of Illinois Tractor Co. assets netted between \$11,000 and \$12,000, with tractors selling from \$300 to \$690 each (or \$4,400 to \$10,200 in today’s dollars, adjusted for inflation.)

The following year, 1924, International Harvester began selling its McCormick-Deering Farmall, the first commercially successful, all-purpose tractor featuring the classic “tricycle” design, though it would be another eight years before pneumatic tires replaced steel wheels.

The archives of the McLean County Museum of History include a collection of material on the Illinois Tractor Co. In this collection are several dozen photographs—both of finished tractors and component parts—as well as a published instruction book and parts list for the Model C tractor.

Today, it’s believed that there are but a handful of surviving tractors built by the short-lived Illinois Tractor Co.

In the summer of 1988, Jim Adams of rural Bloomington had his two 1919 Illinois Super-Drives restored by a farm equipment repair business near Effingham, Ill. Adams, a steam engine collector, debuted one or both of the tractors that fall during the 50th anniversary of the Central States Threshermen’s Reunion in Pontiac.

These two Super-Drives were originally purchased by a North Dakota farmer, who then hid them from scrappers during World War II. After Adams’ passing, the tractors were sold by Aumann Auctions, Inc. of Nokomis, Ill. One tractor went to a buyer in North Carolina and the other one to a buyer in Missouri.