

By Mary Hooper

Alan Converse gets a lot of visitors to his large metal shed on Highway 56 in Garfield, Pawnee County, Kansas.

Most are complete strangers, folks just passing through.

The attraction certainly isn't his large metal shed. There are untold numbers of large metal sheds in rural America.

It's what's outside the shed, in the big dusty lot on the highway across from the grain elevators.

Old tractors.

Lots of old tractors, in rows of John Deere green and yellow.

Converse, 78, has lived in Pawnee County his entire life. He grew up on the family farm in Sanford. Following his dad's lead, he became a farmer in his early twenties and grew alfalfa and wheat until he decided to retire at the age of 65.

With retirement came a problem - what to do with all the time he suddenly had on his hands?

"When I farmed, I worked hard. It took all my time and energy. I never had time for a hobby, so I never had any hobbies," he said.

But it turned out that Converse was only "retired."

"I actually didn't quit farming. I bought some more land and started farming again, and by this time, I had caught the tractor bug and started to tinker with tractors.

"I always did like tractors, so I started buying a few and fixing them

Restoring History

One of Alan Converse's favorites is this unstyled John Deere A, so-called because the radiator is exposed.





Passers-by are often intrigued by the row of antique tractors outside Alan Converse's shed/workshop.



Alan Converse with a 1929 John Deere D.

up. Some had motors that were stuck. That's the first thing I had to fix; get them running again."

Today, Converse has restored between 40 and 45 tractors, most dating from the 1930s and '40s. Of these, about 25 are arrayed outside his metal shed-body shop on 56 Highway; the rest are out on his farm.

Converse eased into his new-found passion. He would hear about a farm sale coming up. Or a friend would stop by and tell him that a farmer somewhere had a tractor for sale, or was getting ready to retire and was selling his machinery. More recently, he's gone online to buy tractors.

It always pained Converse to see the noble old machines torn up for scrap.

Years ago, he went to a salvage yard looking for a piece of iron and saw a John Deere 60, a 1950's model, about ready to be broken into pieces.

"I couldn't stand it, so I bought it," he said. "I got a soft heart for old tractors. I hate to see them go by the wayside. I have a couple I'm only the second owner of."

One of his restorations came by way of a telephone conversation with an elderly aunt, who said she had his uncle's old John Deere "Johnny Popper" sitting out

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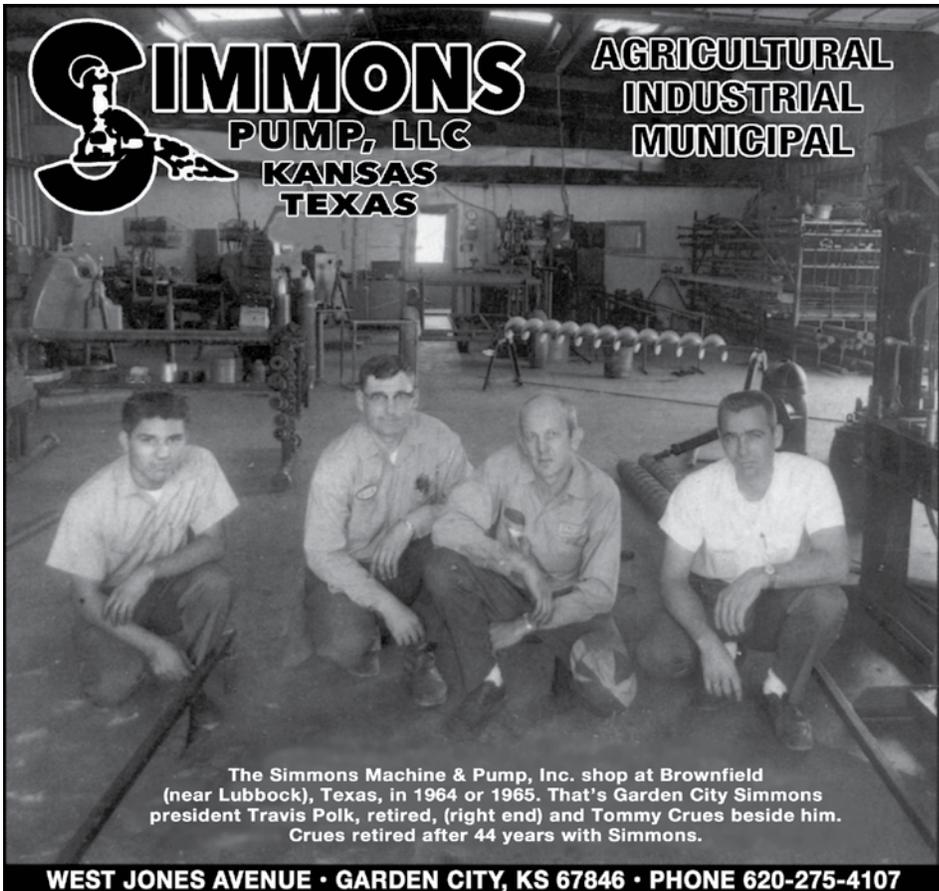
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The Simmons Machine & Pump, Inc. shop at Brownfield (near Lubbock), Texas, in 1964 or 1965. That's Garden City Simmons president Travis Polk, retired, (right end) and Tommy Crues beside him. Crues retired after 44 years with Simmons.

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Converse plans to use this monster International crawler for terracing on his farm.



A Minneapolis-Moline KTA.

in the trees. Did he want it?

He did. He bought it and restored it, taking two years.

“So I called her one day as it was running and popping in the background and asked if it sounded familiar. Unfortunately, she was getting deaf and didn’t recognize it,” he said with a smile.

Converse has enjoyed foiling the scavengers.

“You’d go to a farm sale and there’d be a lot of junk guys there buying tractors just for the weight, when iron was worth \$150 a ton. Now it’s down to \$30 a ton so the competition isn’t so great.

“One thing is for sure: if you don’t fix them, they’re going to wind up in a salvage yard, they’ll be torn apart for iron and recycled and you’ll never see them again. They’re gone.”

Among Converse’s favorite tractors are what he calls “unstyled John Deeres”. These are tractors so old that their radiators are exposed, not enclosed behind grilles.

He appreciates the quirky and unusual, like the steel-wheeled John Deere B, the previous owner of which replaced the motor with a Corvette V-8 engine.

“Why he did this I have no idea. But when I saw it on eBay, I had to have it.”

He’s also fond of crawlers: tractors that have continuous, tank-like tracks rather than wheels. He recently bought a little 1930’s-vintage Cletrac crawler from the estate of a farmer near Garfield who preferred farming with crawlers. Converse put in a new radiator, fixed the leaky valves and got the motor running. The machine is painted green, but he intends to restore the original orange.

“A crawler will go to a lot of places that a wheeled tractor can’t, like soft ground or rocky ground,” he said. “Of course, you can’t take them out on the road with those steel tracks.”

Converse has another crawler, but in contrast to the petite Cletrac, this one is huge. It’s a 1962 International TD20 with a dozer blade.

Originally owned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, it passed into the hands of a farmer whose land abutted Lake Wilson in the Russell area and who used it to level ground near the lake. He eventually sold it to Converse.

Like the old warrior it is, the International crawler

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A recent addition to Alan Converse's collection of antique tractors is this 1930's -vintage Cletrac crawler.

has plenty of dings and dents, but after the motor work Converse did on it, it's ready to go to work. He'll use it to rebuild terraces and fix washed-out ditches on his farm. Converse has another crawler, a John Deere 9400 T for work on his land, along with six Versatile tractors.

How long does it take to bring an antique tractor to life?

"Hard to say. It really depends on the condition of each individual tractor."

He says it can be cheaper to buy a new tractor than to buy a used one and restore it, considering labor and cost of parts. He recently bought a sorry-looking Massey Harris 101, which needs a lot of work.

"Lots of its pieces are gone, including part of the chassis. I felt sorry for it."

He has the help of Cesar Garcia, an employee, when tackling a restoration job. The work takes place in the large, oblong metal building that Converse bought from the Garfield Co-op. He buys the distinctive green and yellow John Deere paint from . . . where else? John Deere. As for parts, Converse scours the ads in antiques magazines, finds parts on the internet, or learns about them by word of mouth.

"People know you collect and will let you know when parts are available locally," he said.

Of all the tractors he's fixed up, Converse has sold only one.

"I may just let 'em sit out here and rust up 'til somebody else buys them to fix," he said with a chuckle.

He adds that he doesn't really mean that. He would not want to see them rust up after he put so much effort into restoring them.

Now Converse is thinking of retiring again, and there may be no quotation marks around the word this time. He doesn't know what will become of the tractor collection he has so painstakingly amassed. His children live far from Pawnee County and aren't



A John Deere B with a Corvette V-8 engine and an automobile seat.

much interested in old tractors. He hopes that the new owners, whoever they may be, care about these machines as much as he. His greatest fear is that they'll wind up as scrap.

"I hate to see this old stuff go to the junk pile. I hope somebody will keep it (the collection) going so that 50 years from now, people will appreciate these old machines.

"It's interesting when you look at what they had to farm with back in those days – a tractor with no power steering, no hydraulics and steel wheels, how crude some of them were compared with what we have today, but they got the job done. They're part of our heritage."

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