A Smaller Gibson D
by Dave Brown

Like most collectors, I enjoy seeing a nicely done restoration, whether it's an antique tractor, a steam-traction engine, or a hit-and-miss engine. I will even admit a meticulously restored item sometimes gives me pangs of envy, and I admire the person who did the work.

Occasionally, restorers not only do the complete job themselves, but also take extra steps to ensure the end result is something special, something a little out of the ordinary. In my opinion, this additional effort and attention to detail borders on art.

Jim Stengel of Boulder, Colorado, who collects and restores antique tractors and engines, is one of these artists. Recently, he became a Gibson tractor enthusiast and is now a source of knowledge and assistance for other Gibson tractor collectors.

Jim has a nice collection of smaller-sized Gibsons and other "garden" tractors. He recently finished building a two-thirds scale model Gibson D, and if you have never thought that restorations are artwork, consider this one.

Jim grew up on a farm and his interest in old iron is understandable. One of his first exposures to farm tractors was in 1941, when his dad bought a brand new Case model SC. Jim was on hand the day the dealer delivered the Case, and he remembers that while he watched the men unload it, he hoped it wouldn't slip off the side of the truck. It didn't, and Jim "spent many hours on that tractor," he said.

The Case stayed in the family many years, but when the family farm was sold, so was the tractor. In later years, when he became interested in restoring machinery, Jim successfully tracked it down and was able to acquire it again.

Jim was also familiar with a 1946 Gibson model D while he was growing up. It actually belonged to his neighbors, an elderly couple who used it to mow weeds around their farm. They found it too hard to operate, Jim said, so "my brothers and I would use it to mow the neighbors' fencerows, and we would then use it to mow ours, too." This continued for some time, and the Stengel family found the Gibson so useful that they bought it from the neighbors. The Gibson stayed in the family until it became so worn out from use (and probably a little misuse, too) that it was sold as "junk."

Jim retired in 1989 from an automotive accessory manufacturing facility that he owned and to keep occupied, he began restoring antique machinery. His first restoration project was a 1925 Witte 25hp stationary engine, which had been used to operate an ore crusher at a mine in the Colorado mountains.

He next restored the family's Case SC tractor and began displaying it at local shows along with the Witte engine. Like many other collectors, he decided that one tractor probably wasn't enough, so he restored a 1927 Fordson that had been given to him by a friend. Each of these restorations, as is often the case, involved not only finding replacement parts, but also rebuilding or fabricating from scratch those parts that couldn't be obtained.

Jim always does all of the work himself, from scraping off the ugly old grease to applying the finishing paint, but most of all, he said, he enjoys "making..."
replacement parts and designing something that looks right and works right" when the original part is missing.

At the ripe young age of 60 or so, he decided smaller and lighter was better and started acquiring garden-type tractors—Mighty Mite, Laurel, and Harvey Power Flex (which is related to Gibson) to name a few. The 1946 Gibson model D that the Stengel family had owned remained in the back of Jim's mind, and it fit the definition of "smaller and lighter."

He was unsuccessful in his search to locate the Gibson and bought another model D instead. This Gibson really fueled Jim's interest in the Gibson line, especially when he learned that Gibson tractors were manufactured not only in Seattle, Washington, but also in Longmont, Colorado, just a scant 12 miles from where he lives.

Jim now owns and has restored at least one each of all the smaller Gibson tractor models, including a model A, an SD, two different variations of the model D, a Super D2, and a row crop-style model E. He also has a one-of-a-kind Gibson prototype tractor, which is similar in size to the Super D, but in design is quite different from all other Gibson models. The original engine used in this prototype is unknown, and the tractor has a bellhousing, transmission, and differential unlike those in other models.

This tractor was acquired from a former Gibson employee, who says the company used the prototype in the Longmont factory as a shop mule to shuttle parts around. The Gibson employee thinks the company had been developing the tractor under contract for another party—Montgomery-Ward or Sears and Roebuck, perhaps—but it evidently never advanced beyond the prototype stage.

You might think owning and restoring this assortment of Gibsons would be enough of a challenge for even the most energetic collector, but Jim took Gibson collecting one step further in 2000 and 2001 by building a complete two-thirds scale Gibson D tractor from the ground up.

This remarkable little tractor could be mistaken for a normal model D when viewed from a short distance. Parked next to a full-sized model D, it looks exactly the same—only smaller.

Only those parts that could not be reasonably fabricated are not exact in scale—the transmission, for example. Otherwise, all parts are amazingly authentic.
in appearance and accurately built to scale. The front axle is fabricated from multiple sections of steel plate, each accurately profiled and welded together. The inner edges are all filleted, and only a close examination will show the axle is not a one-piece forging. The rear wheels, with dished, pressed-steel flanges, were cut and formed in Jim’s shop and look exactly like the real thing. The frame, all the steering parts, the clutch parts, and all the levers and controls were shop-made, as is the gas tank.

Some parts were modified from existing parts. The seat, for example, was a standard-size seat from an old unknown implement, cut down in size, with the proper amount of holes added to replicate a standard Gibson seat. Jim’s expertise as a designer, welder, and machinist are apparent in the tractor’s design.

The engine is a 4-hp model ABN Wisconsin, and its size is nearly perfect to maintain proper scale. It has a 1930s vintage Chevrolet three-speed transmission. The axles and housing from a Nissan pickup were cut down in length and covered with sheet metal “cowls,” cleverly shaped to resemble the original Gibson differential and axles.

The wheels are 3.50 by 8-inch in front with 16-inch implement wheels at the rear. A few custom-made decals (Jim didn’t make these) make the tractor complete. It can be ridden, but Jim prefers to steer it using lever extensions attached to the clutch and steering, while walking behind it. He is working on a radio-controlled remote system for driving it.

This scale model Gibson is a noteworthy accomplishment and during its first showing, in August 2001 at the Yesteryear Farm and Home Show at the Boulder County Fair in Longmont, Colorado, it received a lot of attention, not only from Gibson fans, but from all who appreciate the amount of effort, dedication, and skill required to accomplish a project of this scope.

The lure of doing something different and the challenge of creating something new has stayed with Jim (or maybe he has just been sniffing too many paint fumes) and he’s now talking of another scale-model Gibson—perhaps one-half scale. Stay tuned.

Jim Stengel can be reached at 303-494-7231 or at stengel@juno.com.

The Laurel tractor was built by the Laurel Manufacturing Company of Denver, Colorado. Little is known of this company or its line.

It is obvious by looking at the bellhousing on the Gibson prototype tractor that the engine now in use is not the original.

The transmission and differential on this prototype Gibson tractor are noticeably different from standard Gibson tractors.