The One and the Only
GIBSON
SUPER G
By Ed S. Intervie
Ray Hoffman

I got into the business of building shipping pallets when I started Dexton Enterprises 19 years ago. It never made me rich, but it kept the wolf away from the door.

I have always liked tractors. In fact, I graduated from Iowa State with a degree in Agricultural Engineering. The main reason I took that route was so I could go to school to study tractors at the same time. I thought that was a win-win situation. After graduation, I went to work as an engineer for International Harvester Farmall Works. A classmate and I would get together on weekends and go visiting outlying tractor dealers. We were always prowling their back lots. One day we got a surprise. There in the weeds was a Silver King. At Iowa State, we had discussed the major manufacturers and some short-line manufacturers, but we had never mentioned Silver King. We had very little knowledge of the total picture of the history of tractors. We did some research and discovered that there were hundreds of tractor manufacturers in the United States.

There was a big influx of manufacturers after WW II, brought on by people who saw an opportunity and capitalized on the high demand for tractors after the war. However, they knew they could not compete with the major manufacturers for long. Most were entrepreneurs who used this as a way to expand their current businesses.

I started collecting tractors with a John Deere A and a G, a Blackhawk 35, a Silver King, and a Co-Op. But then I found a new interest—flying. I sold the tractors and bought a home-built aluminum airplane that I flew from my own runway on the farm for several years. I bent it up more than once, and some of the bends were
Above: Mr. Gibson himself is sitting on the tractor

getting serious. I decided to keep my feet on solid ground and start collecting tractors again. This time I decided I would only collect low-production tractors from nearly forgotten production lines. I only collect what most people call the "classic" tractors—those that came on rubber tires and had starters and generators. Most were built just before, or not long after, the second world war. When I first started I didn’t say a whole lot about what I was doing. I just kept watching sale bills and chasing leads on tractors I’d heard of. I knew if a lot of collectors got interested in these short-production tractors, the prices would skyrocket because they are so scarce.

My second hobby is collecting any shred of information I can about some obscure tractor. I have file drawers full of write ups, ads and brochures for tractors I never expect to find, but that is what puts the spark in the chase.

When a new tractor comes in, I do the tearing down. As an engineer, I find it fascinating to see what makes it tick. I enjoy studying the designs to see what some long-forgotten engineer may have thought would make his tractor better than
The Gibson model Super G is identical to the company's production model I. Both models have a Hercules cylinder flat-head engine of 230 ci displacement. The Raska tractor test of the Model I revealed a maximum horsepower of 39.5. The tractor weighed 4512 pounds and carried a list price of $2170. The Super G has a higher driver's seat with a steering wheel that is angled rather than vertical.

The Super G hood can be raised to simplify engine service and chrome trim.

another, or how he hoped to produce a new model with a minimal investment. Some were very good and should have made it. Under different circumstances, these tractor designs might have endured and perhaps would still be in production today. There were also poorly designed ones that fell by the wayside, and we're probably better off for it. Then there are the bad designs that endured in spite of themselves. Even the majors made an error now and then. They had the backing to weather an embarrassment. Every one of these tractors has such a story to tell. Some men had their whole hope for the future pinned on these machines.

Marshall Cook and Solomon Shelton, who work here at Dexton, help me with these projects. Seven years ago I got serious about restoring. I would buy tractors, tear them down, and then Marshall would restore them mechanically. He is a gifted man with a wrench. I am fortunate to have Solomon Shelton for about six months each year. He comes here in the winter, refinishes what Marshall and I have brought in, then goes back to his business of restoring antique and custom automobiles in July. We can handle a lot of the restoration in the shop here, but we send out precision machine work, like crank turning and boring cylinders. When we do a tractor, we try to make it as good or better than new. Some of these represent about all of the known examples from some builders, so we try to do it right the first time. We spend a lot of money on parts and paint, but I am proud to do it. Two years ago, I guess you might say I blew my own cover and took some of these lesser known classics to the first Ageless Iron Expo. The interest was staggering. In 1997 we brought even more, including the only known example of a Gibson model Super G.

I had heard of a collection of Gibsons at Pueblo, Colorado, that was going to be broken up. In my conversation with the collector, Wes Straithman, he told me of four he owned (all model Hs or Is) plus one which he thought to be a prototype or experimental tractor. I had pretty well dealt for one of his model Is and this odd one, when he decided he would just sell the whole works at auction. This was disappointing, but I understood his thinking. I hadn't seen any of his tractors until I got to the auction, but from the moment I saw the
experimental—a Model Super G—I knew it was something I wanted. When the bidding started I hung in there until it fell to me. This caused a big disappointment with Mr. Strathman's son, who wanted to buy the Super G and fix it up for a Gibson reunion scheduled for Longmont, Colorado in 1996. When I promised him I would have the tractor looking like it did the day it was new and that I would positively have it there for the reunion, it smoothed things over. In fact, we have become the best of friends and his father, Wes, has helped me find some other tractors since the auction.

We had just a bit over one year to see this tractor finished, so it was on the front burner for most of 1995. We took the engine to the machine shop and turned it over to them. The crank only required polishing, but most everything else in the Hercules engine was rebuilt or replaced. Solomon finished the paint and detailing just before the reunion. I will say it was the hit with most everyone there. There were exceptions.

A couple of Canadian Gibson collectors, who owned a dozen Gibsons between them, were convinced this was something that a tinkerer had concocted, rather than a tractor built by the factory. It does have several features that are uncharacteristic of any known Gibsons, like the seating position, which is much higher than either an H or I Gibson. The steering column angles down, rather than going straight ahead with a vertical steering wheel as is the norm. The hood opened in a more conventional manner and there is a nice, chromed casting on the hood carrying a letter "G." It had a deeper maroon color that some other Gibsons carry. It appears to be a tractor that was trying to fit in, to be more in keeping with what the other manufacturers were building in the early 1950s, possibly 1953.

There were six Gibson employees at this reunion, one of whom was the official company photographer. He overheard the conversation I was having with the two who were convinced this was a homemade modification. The photographer was familiar with the tractor, and told us that this was without a doubt, the last Gibson built. It was Mr. Gibson's own tractor. He soon produced photographs he had taken himself, decades ago, showing the company president on this very tractor. This was the documentation we were all looking for.

Unfortunately, at the time this tractor was built there were shadows on the horizon for the Gibson Company. A cosmetic firm, Helene Curtiss, had invested in the company when Gibson was expanding. A new product line for them was fork-lift trucks for the military. Several of the employees at the reunion told of those times, when the drive "to get them out the door" overrode the testing and proving department. The new units failed miserably, and the company was obligated to take them all back. Faced with certain ruin, Wilbur Gibson left the company for some independent consulting and later designed the Harvey tractor, which is another story.

I recently retired, and my wife and I are having fun chasing lesser known classic tractors and their stories. Our current passion is the Corbett tractor and an American tractor that we are working on. Our museum currently houses 55 beautiful machines, approximately 23 completely restored.

Every day is a vacation for us, doing what we like to do best. I am always happy to talk tractors, particularly these "Lesser Known Classics." You can reach me at 1324 2nd St., Rock Island, Illinois, 61201. Phone (309) 788-1881 days or (319) 381-1728 evenings.