Rare Lawn Tractor Prototypes

By Lydia Noyes, Contributing Editor

Ron Erickson of Menomonie, Wis., is the proud owner of a trio of Allis-Chalmers Simplicity prototype pieces. These one-of-a-kind pieces were built at the proving grounds in Port Washington, Wis.

Erickson's interest in Allis-Chalmers equipment spans decades. "I bought my first B series Allis in 1981, just after getting out of high school. I've been collecting and working on them ever since," he says. Erickson secured the pieces from Butch Plier, a former A-C/Simplicity senior product engineer who wanted them to remain a set.

The first piece is a cab mounted on a Big 10 lawn tractor. It was built sometime in the 1960s by A-C engineers who modified the cab and tractor to make them fit together. While the design never hit the general market, some Cozy Cabs were available on later-model A-C lawnmowers.

"I found this tractor cab on Facebook Marketplace. It was part of a package deal for B series tractors and attachments," says Erickson. "We got the load home, and after looking it over, I knew it was something special. We contacted a retired engineer who'd worked on it, and he confirmed my suspicions that it was pretty unique."

Erickson shared this quote from the engineer who inspected it. "Many modifications to the tractor have been made to allow the other attachments to be used with the cab on the tractor, all using factory Allis parts that have been adapted to fit. Wheel spacers have been used in the rear because it's top-heavy, and it also has hydraulic lifts and accessories to run a rototiller. The engineers went to great lengths to make the cab fit around the original seat and rear fenders; the workmanship is excellent."

Some design elements make it clear that this cab is a prototype. Only one of the two doors can be opened, and only the front and back windows can be removed for ventilation, meaning that it has the potential to get very hot inside.

Allis-Chalmers mounted a prototype cab on a Big 10 lawn tractor in the 1960s.

The second prototype is a lawn edger mounted on a B-10, also built in the mid-1960s. Though it was never in production, the edger was used at the A-C golf course for several years to edge around the sand traps. "I'm certain that Allis-Chalmers was looking for ways to make the lawn and garden tractors useful year-round," says Erickson. It's made entirely from A-C sourced parts, including three cutting blades—two made from plow coulters with other attached pieces. The first had sickle sections, another had tine pieces. The third cutting blade was made exclusively from tines.

Erickson's third piece is a prototype cultivator for lawn tractors. He suspects it was never put into production because it's heavy and likely struggles with traction.

Erickson is proud to hold onto these pieces of A-C history and preserve their legacy. "I have twin boys who are 28 years old, and they're taking over the entire collection. We'll keep it safe."

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Handy Ideas For Used IBCs

IBCs (international bulk containers) offer versatile, cost-effective liquid storage for farms and homesteads. Most hold either 275 or 330 gal. When cleaned, they offer many possibilities for reuse. If you're looking for inspiration, consider some of these ideas.

An IBC tote makes a durable, weather-resistant chicken coop for small flocks. Cut a chicken-sized hole in the side and add a roost and nesting boxes to the interior. Many poultry owners add fencing around the opening to create a portable chicken tractor.

IBC totes are designed for fluids, making them ideal for small aquaponics systems. Growing plants with fish creates a system of natural nutrient cycling and toxin removal. IBC tanks can hold a sizable number of tilapia, and you'll get an abundance of herbs and salad greens grown above them.

And, while IBCs offer an excellent way to transport water to livestock in fields, you can also cut spare totes in half for use as watering troughs. Are you looking for a purpose for the other half? It's the perfect size for raised garden beds. You'll get plenty of square footage that's easy to weed. Plus, they're lightweight enough to change your garden's location.

If you have plenty of roofline, consider setting up IBC totes for a rainwater collection system. Attach a hose to the spout at the bottom for easy access to watering your garden. And, unlike standard rain barrels, IBCs don't create breeding grounds for mosquitos. Likewise, these totes work well for creating solar hot water systems. Simply wrap the exterior in 7 mil black plastic or paint it black, then put it in a space that maximizes heat exposure. You can even build a clear plastic or glass pane box around it to concentrate heat further. This method works well for the start of an off-grid shower.

Another way to utilize this natural greenhouse effect is to use IBC totes as mini greenhouses. Choose a sunny spot and create a ventilation system in them. Some people drill access holes through the sides, while others cut off the top to prop it open. The interior then offers plenty of growing space for heat-loving plants.

You can also use IBCs as root cellars. Add ventilation holes and bury the totes in a hillside or protected space. Consider adding shelves for optimal storage space; produce might stay fresh throughout the winter. Then, consider using half a tote as a compost bin in the spring. The durable plastic won't degrade, is rodent-proof, and has a large capacity. Just ensure there are several holes for drainage, or you'll be greeted with rotting produce when you look inside.

This list only scratches the surface of IBC tote uses. They might also be used for firewood storage, as animal kennels, and even kiddie pools. Don't limit your imagination; you'll find yourself looking for more totes to experiment with.

Bishop manages about 800 breeding ewes and numerous rams, with her lamb populations exploding in the spring. She uses six solar sites for about 100 acres throughout the New Jersey area.

They Graze Sheep Under Solar Panels

Julie Bishop of Newfield, N.J., manages Solar Sheep LLC, a farm of Katahdin sheep that graze under solar panel arrays.

"It all started with an Australian Cattle Dog, actually," she laughs. "I wanted to train her for herding, but the training was a long monthly drive up north. I already had fencing from horses, so it made sense to upgrade it for sheep."

Bishop began with four wethers, then added ewes and rams to her flock. Before long, she had over a dozen sheep. "That really stretched the carrying capacity of my land. But I enjoyed keeping them, so I realized I needed to expand my operation if I wanted to have a chance of making a profit. The reality of farming is you have to do things at scale."

She spotted a nearby solar array with an 8-ft. fence. "I'd watched these guys just mow all that grass; it seemed like such a waste." Bishop looked for a way to contact the solar company but came up short. Solar grazing hadn't yet gone mainstream, though now the American Solar Grazing Association (ASGA) works to connect farmers across the country with suitable solar fields.

"Eventually, I just called the emergency number on their sign out front. I quickly clarified that it wasn't an emergency; I just wanted my sheep to eat their grass." The solar company was equally thrilled to hear from her. "They told me, 'We've been looking for you. Where have you been?' It was the first time I've ever gotten the right person on a blind phone call like that."

Solar Sheep LLC took another 1 1/2 years to launch, even with the solar company's blessing. "We needed a lot of permission from the city to make this happen. It was a little crazy; we needed permits to use the land for agriculture, even though it was zoned agricultural from the start!" Bishop also faced concerns with neighbors. "No one knew what to expect with the sheep because no one else was doing this. I couldn't point to many examples. But I kept saying, 'It's sheep, it's grass, it's a big fence—what could go wrong?'"

Bishop manages about 800 breeding ewes and numerous rams, with her lamb populations exploding in the spring. She uses six solar sites for about 100 acres throughout the New Jersey area. Each spring, she places her sheep in the lots based on calculations of how well the property will feed them. "Weather can change my calculations a lot. I often bring in more water if we're in a drought." She's found the sheep take well to the panels and like to rest under them during the heat of the day. Most male lambs are sold to the butcher by fall, while many females are sold to other sheep farmers.

For Bishop, the business' most significant challenge has been making connections and convincing neighbors to get on board. "One of my early sites had neighborhood houses on three sides. So those people woke up one morning, and suddenly, there were dozens of sheep grazing in front of them. I'm not surprised they had some questions."

For those looking to start a similar venture, Bishop stresses the importance of being picky with your location. "Make sure you inspect the fencing around the panels. And look for water! A lack of easy water access means you might have to pay to use a fire hydrant, or you'll have to haul it in. And water's heavy." The distance between your home and the panels is also important, as is the size of the array compared to the number of sheep. "For example, I don't lamb on solar because most of my sites are too far from home to monitor for lambing difficulties comfortably," she says. Likewise, she suggests scoping out the neighborhood for signs of predators or stray dogs. She also stresses the importance of joining the ASGA to connect with like-minded farmers and learn about local grazing opportunities. "It's a great community. I'm so glad this sustainable form of grazing is growing in popularity."

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