

Hoffman restored this 100-year-old Pond/Wheel Horse tractor to its original condition.



## Restored Garden Tractor Is A Classic

"I found a rare 1925 RJ-25 Pond tractor that looked like it'd been sitting outside for around 40 years and decided that I could restore it, using my machining equipment to make parts if needed," says Eston Hoffman. "I'd worked on other Pond and Wheel Horse tractors before, so this was just another challenge."

Hoffman says, "The original frame, pulleys, and wheel parts were in very rough shape, but the hood and engine had been stored inside and were in decent condition. I was really pleased with that because the hood and engine are extremely rare, and

only a few exist anywhere. The 70-year-old RJ-25 is the rarest Pond/Wheel tractor known."

Hoffman has collected and worked on Pond/Wheel Horse garden tractors and other models for over 25 years. Always buying, restoring, and selling, he owns about 40 of them now. He's done museum-quality restorations, going through each tractor to make sure it's nut, bolt, part, and factory correct. He finishes others with original paint and patina.

Hoffman says his RJ-25 tractor was likely built by Harold and his son Cecil Pond in

their two-car garage, probably in 1954. The Ponds had been building walk-behind garden tractors when Cecil extended the frame of that design, added wheels to the front, and built a riding model. They called the tractor the Ride Away RJ-25, which referenced the 2.5-hp. Briggs and Stratton engine that powered it. The business initially operated under the moniker Pond Tractor Company and later changed its name to Wheel Horse. Equipment was built in South Bend, Ind.

Hoffman's tractor has a simple channel frame and a smoothly molded hand-built hood. Cecil Pond built the hoods out of cardboard and covered them with plaster of Paris and then fiberglass. Hoffman says about 100 hoods were made that way until production shifted to steel for more efficient manufacturing.

On Hoffman's tractor, the steering shaft extends through the top rear of the hood. It has a cast aluminum steering wheel. A throttle cable and lever are attached to the hood beneath the shaft. A 1-in. dia. hole in the rear of the hood allows the operator to reach in and push the ground against the spark plug to turn the engine off.

While restoring his tractor, Hoffman carefully matched the original design and components down to the valve stems. The engine is mounted on a metal platform just in front of the driver's seat. Hoffman says driving wasn't very comfortable, especially as the engine heated up in warm air conditions.

He disassembled, cleaned, and re-

assembled the variable belt drive system. A lever on the left side moves the drive belt onto different pulleys to change ground speeds. He located early two-part front wheel rims and Goodyear tires used only on models built for 1955. His tractor also uses the early cable mechanism for steering the front wheels. The larger rear tires on his tractor have the BFG Silvertown checkmark design that only a small number of production tractors had.

Hoffman says his Pond restoration took about 6 mos., and the tractor is probably one of only 10 in the country today. The company's RJ-25 production build was followed by the RJ-35, which signified a 3.5-hp. engine. Other models had Clinton or Kohler engines. The company made several attachments for the tractors, which were popular for gardening and small vegetable farms. Wheel Horse continued to expand its product line with more powerful and sophisticated lawn tractors until the company was acquired by American Motors (AMC) in 1974. The brand was eventually sold to Toro, which discontinued the name in 2007.

Hoffman's RJ-25 attracts a lot of attention at shows he attends every summer, the largest of which is the annual Wheel Horse gathering in Gettysburg, Penn.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Eston Hoffman, P.O. Box 14, Berrysburg, Penn. 17005 (Facebook: Eston's Hobbies and Restorations).



Mill features 1,000-lb. millstones brought over from France in 1876.

## Water-Powered Mill Still Going Strong

By Jim Ruen, Contributing Editor

After nearly a century and a half, Schech's Mill is still milling corn, wheat, buckwheat, and more. Turbines in the water flowing from the 1/2-mile-long reservoir power the 48-in. dia. 1,000-lb. quartz millstones brought from France in 1876. The historic mill once produced Schech's Best Flour for local stores. It can still grind flour and corn meal, animal and bird feed, ground corn cob bedding for animals, and ground grain for a local, farmer-owned distillery.

"We have three original turbines and a newer one purchased in 1924 using the 16,000 gal. per min. water flow from the mill pond," says Edward Krugmire, mill owner and operator. "It's the last, original, water-powered mill in Minnesota. In addition to grinding grains, we offer tours every weekend from late May to late October so people can see how it works."

Krugmire's great-grandfather, Michael Schech, purchased the mill from its founder, John Blinn, in 1887. Over the years, it passed down to Michael's son, Edward, and Edward's daughter and husband, Eleanor and Ivan Krugmire, in 1946.

Schech's Mill was nominated for the

National Registry of Historic Places in 1977. At the time, it was the only mill in the state to contain unchanged, operable milling equipment with original stone.

Krugmire describes the mill as a non-profit but without official non-profit status. That means it's ineligible for state or federal historic grants to help with upkeep. He's responsible for maintaining the 125-ft. wide dam that produces the mill's 10-ft., 3-in. water drop and the mill itself.

It's the water drop that drives the turbines to power the grain cleaning system, corn sheller, burr mill, millstones, sifters, and more.

"Our biggest problem is flooding and the damage it causes to the dam," says Krugmire. "Beyond that, an ongoing problem in the winter is water bubbling up and freezing the gears."

One of the turbines drives a belt, while the others drive gear systems. Krugmire notes that the belt drive requires more maintenance; however, the water-powered system is relatively straightforward.

Belts need to be replaced, and millstones need to be dressed. Dressing a millstone restores the grooves in the surface ground down by the grain over time. Krugmire uses a right-angle grinder with thin, beveled, diamond wheels.

"Some of the grooves are less than 1/16 in.

wide," marvels Krugmire. "I have no idea how they made them in the 1800s."

Krugmire is proud of the mill and his family's heritage. He especially enjoys visitors who appreciate the mill's history and mechanics. "They ask questions, and we have great discussions," he says.

Krugmire also serves as an unpaid consultant to many individuals and organizations working with old mills. "I have connections with people at other mills and those who can help with problems," he says. "I know where to get screening, belts, and other parts. Groups who want to display a historically accurate mill will send someone here to copy parts so theirs looks more authentic."

Krugmire also sells sifting screens for home millers. "With a couple of different-sized screens, you can remove the bran from flour and make commel," he says. "I make frames for the stainless-steel screening."

He adds, "But even with the screens, you can't get grain as fine as my large stones do."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Schech's Mill, W. Beaver Rd., Caledonia, Minn. 55921 (ph 507-896-3481 or 651-245-5566; www.schechsmill.com).

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