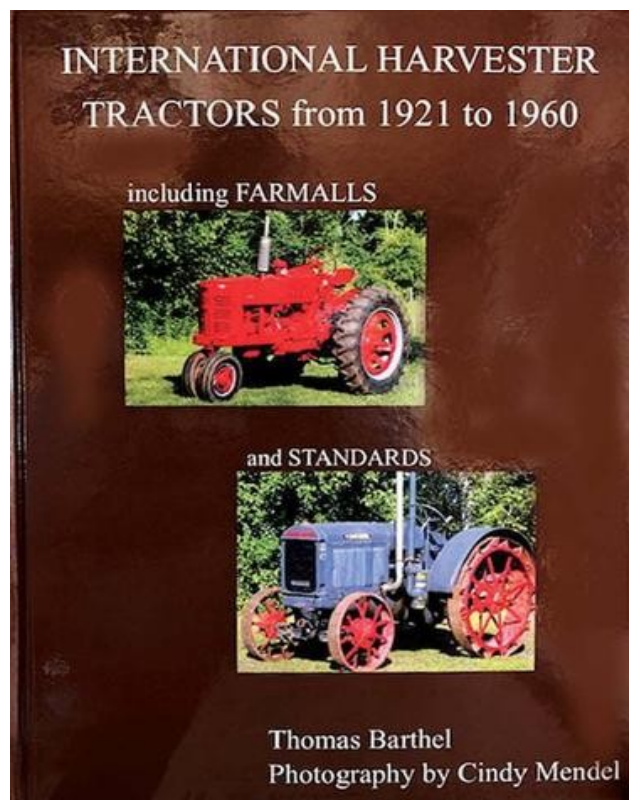


Land Minds: Tom Barthel has us seeing red

by Dick Hagen Apr 8, 2021



A special satisfaction of my life has been the meeting of unique people of Minnesota agriculture. And then the opportunity to share some of their unique adventures in printed words here in *The Land*. My listing could be lengthy. That's just the advantage of hanging around for several decades to which I have been blessed.

After my Iowa State University indoctrination, my first four years were traveling Iowa as ag writer for *Wallaces Farmer* magazine; then six years covering four states with *Farm Journal*; then six years into the turbulent seed industry (1970-1980's era) with both Trojan Seed Company and Keltgen Seed Company (both headquartered in Olivia, Minn.).

In 1993, this Renville County farm community was officially designated as the "Seed Corn Capitol of Minnesota" by none other than the Minnesota State Legislature. This notoriety compelled the erection of a 100-foot Ear of Corn statue on busy U.S. Highway 212 on the west side of Olivia — complete with information booth at its base depicting the bragging rights of this unique Minnesota cornucopia.

But I digress, because during those tumultuous years of the seed corn industry I got regurgitated (so to speak). More specifically, I quit the seed industry because the reshuffling just didn't fit me. But being adventurous, the idea of a vineyard and bike shop on our 80-acre residence immediate to the north side of town seemed a potential new life. And so it was for a few years. However, the planting of 800 grape vines plus the 'new life' of selling and repairing bikes takes some time.

And then, the good fortune to again being an ag writer — this time for *The Land* magazine. And thus, once again the opportunity to meet more intriguing Minnesota agricultural personalities.

Like this guy: Thomas Barthel, who with loving wife and devoted family, for several years now have propagated their unique Minnesota farmstead at Becker into a remarkable family experience for visitors from everywhere. Called the Snake River Farm, this incredible

Sherburne County local offers fun and tasty adventures for kids of every age — especially during the more temperate stages of the Minnesota calendar, like early April through late October.

But what I really appreciate about Tom Barthel is his ubiquitous sense of adventure writing a book about tractors — a most handsome, colorful and descriptive hard-cover book titled “International Harvester Tractors from 1921 to 1960.”

With great photography by Cindy Mendel, this intriguing 208-page publication does indeed cover the history of the International Harvester Corporation which was established in 1902. Yes, you only see red paint in this book. My early farm-boy history involved JD green, so I can overlook Tom’s dedication to Red. But his intense detail on history is fascinating in itself.

Note these examples:

- IHC was formed by the merger of the McCormick Harvesting Company, the Deering Harvester Company and several other farm machinery makers.
- J.P. Morgan financed the new corporation. His goal was to create the world’s largest agricultural machinery company.
- By 1909, IHC was the fourth-largest U.S. corporation.
- Farm tractors in the early 1900s were enormous and expensive machines. The size and cost of early tractors limited their sale to only the largest farms.

The book goes on with considerably more history covering the rapidly expanding role of farm power in U.S. agriculture and always including the introduction and lifespan of the series of IH farm tractors beginning with the McCormick Series (1921-1939); the Farmall F Series (1923-1039); the Farmall Letter Series, Farmall H, M, A, B, C and Farmall Cub (1939-1954); on up through the International 40-60 Series (1958-1963).

Then, page after colorful page of each tractor — photos and complete descriptions including horsepower, total number manufactured of that particular model, speeds of each gear in miles per hour, weight, and price at year of introduction.

Though anything but a ‘tractor nut,’ I was fascinated with the details Mr. Barthel and his helpful and invigorating staff put into this tremendously informative and pleasurable book. Curiosity compelled me ... why write such a book?

On page 6 of his tome, Barthel answers: For a lot of reasons. I am sharing just a few:

- There are many Farmall tractor books, but none cover the Standard tractors thoroughly. I wanted to do so.
- None of the books I have read actually have photos of all the common tractors. No matter what they claim on the cover.

Tom notes tractor books often have an excess of pictures and a dearth of information on each model.

Tom lists seven other reasons. And his #7 it all: “These tractors take me back to my youth as a 1950s farm boy. The 1950s were a good time to grow up. These tractors bring me close again to the good men I worked with and admired.”

Also from page 7, a few more words about this author: “I am a life-long farmer. Born and raised on a central Minnesota dairy farm. I have enjoyed writing throughout my life. I have had many article or vignettes published but nothing anyone paid for. The first tractor I

operated was my Pa's 8N Ford. I cannot say I actually drove it. I was only four at the time. Pa had me start and stop it by standing on the clutch pedal. He hand-picked corn for the hogs while walking behind."

"In 1955, Pa bought a new IH 300 Utility. He never bought anything but red after that. Pa's brothers all farmed with IH too. The first tractor I bought was an Allis WD. Over the decades, I have worn out many good Allis-Chalmers, Massey Harris, Massey Ferguson, Oliver and IH tractors. Now I only own IH tracts, and a fair number of those.

"I have never owned a John Deere. I am fond of the old Popping John sound however. I once mentioned to my wife Gail that I might buy one just for that sound. She said she would be happy to call our good neighbor Arne and have him fire one of his up whenever I feel the need."

And now the nitty-gritty: Price is \$50 per copy plus \$10 shipping if necessary, and applicable taxes. I chuckle about Tom's sense of humor. He says, "Autographs are no charge. Just ask." Order directly at tom@snakeriverfarmmn.com. And smiling, Barthel added, "I seldom answer phone calls."

There you have it. Today is Feb 15. Wake up temp this morning was 23 degrees below; wind chill even better at minus-36 degrees. As I gaze to my bird feeder, a few sparrows flitting over for a couple of quick bites; then back to their sun-drenched pine at the southwest corner. Beneath the bird feeder, two squirrels judiciously scamper over to nibble up the spilled bird seeds as my swallows vigorously ingest their hunger needs. Even in this frigid environment, all is well with the Lord. And yep, next time my travels get me to Snake River Farm I feel comfortable hot coffee will be available.

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