

Why are tractors called tractors? And why do we call semi-trucks, tractors too?

It is not a long story but it is best to start at the beginning.

The steam engine was invented around 1700.

Inventors quickly mastered the use of large stationary engines to power factories.

By the early 1800s, locomotives and railroads were developed to move goods and people. That meant engines on tracks.

By 1850 inventors were working on ways to make steam engines transportable under their own power, off-track. An engine that could move itself on normal roads and through open spaces.

It was tough. Steam engines tended to be massive and messy.

Fortunately, around 1875 the internal combustion engine was invented, in both spark ignition and diesel versions.

Internal combustion engines, still used in cars, trucks and tractors today, are relatively small and fuel-mass efficient. Coal burning steam engines use a large volume of fuel and typically hauled a coal (fuel) car behind them.

Engines for farm use needed to be portable across changing terrain. Farm engines were first used to power semi-stationary threshing machines. Machines that were moved from farm to farm. Simultaneously, farmers needed engines that could pull ganged breaking plows to open and till the prairies.

By 1900, huge, costly, but effective, self-powered engines, called “traction engines” were sold to provide drive power for threshing machines and motive power for large-area tillage.

That was good, but all lesser agricultural tasks required human or equine labor.

No common farmer could afford one of these huge traction engines.

In the early 1900s, hundreds of agriculture equipment companies were working to develop a smaller, economical, versatile, traction motor.

It is often told that about 1906, a sales manager at a company named Hart-Parr, coined the word “tractor” by combining parts of traction and motor. It is true that Hart-Parr first commercialized the word tractor, but this “tractor” story was promoted by the Oliver company.

The word “tractor” was actually used in an 1880 US patent application and in other pre-1906 documents.

Hart-Part by the way, eventually became the Oliver Company. Oliver was acquired by White in 1960.

In any case, the new word, tractor, was quickly applied to any machine that used an internal combustion engine to pull loads on roads or fields. That could be either a wagon or a plow.

Many of the same companies that were developing farm machines were also developing road machines, the machines we now call trucks.

In fact, many early farm tractors had truck transmissions and truck engines, and vice versa. Traction engines that hauled wagons on roads were a tractor-trailer combination. To this day we call the locomoting part of a “semi” rig a tractor.

Semi is a shortened form of the word semi-trailer. A semi-trailer is a trailer without front wheels. Exactly what is connected to a road tractor, a truck.



ABOVE: Trailer and highway TRACTOR combination. A “tractor-trailer”, also called a “semi”, or a “truck”.

This rig is loading at Joel’s cold storage warehouse in Florida.



ABOVE: Farm tractor. A McCormick-Deering W-30 farm TRACTOR driven by my son, Joel.