South Dakota Agricultural Heritage Museum to display restored Overby corn picker

Viewing to take place Nov. 2

BROOKINGS, S.D. – Oct. 25, 2013 – When Bill Lee started his restoration work on the 1904 Overby corn harvester and husker (corn picker), he was amazed how the original creators of the machine were able to put it together.

Lee, who recently retired after 30 years as the South Dakota Agricultural Heritage Museum’s exhibit and restoration curator, spent 1,600 hours working on the Overby picker at his farm north of Colman.

There will be a premier viewing of the corn picker Nov. 2, starting at 2 p.m. in the Agriculture Heritage Museum, located on the South Dakota State University campus. The museum, which does not charge admission, is open to the public 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Saturday and 1 to 5 p.m., Sundays. It is closed Sundays, January to March.

The picker, patented in 1904, was made in Mellette. Lee estimates the Overby brothers, John and Theodore, began work on the corn harvester in the late 1890s.

Glenn, John’s son, and his wife, Ruth, donated the corn picker to the Agricultural Heritage Museum in 2004. Family members made a sizable monetary donation for the restoration.

“This picker contains many innovative ideas,” Lee said. “It was the most complicated machine I’ve worked on. When you consider mechanical farming was in its infancy—the first internal combustion farm tractors were less than 4 years old and even the word tractor wouldn’t be coined until three years later—that makes it that much more impressive.

“I’m not sure what they had for shop equipment to make it. I learned they built an iron smelting foundry on their farm 10 years later. Knowing they probably had little more than hammers, chisels and saws, it’s a great accomplishment. I know I had a challenge with the tools I have now,” he continued.

The picker contains 79 unique Overby-designed castings made by a foundry in Minneapolis. “That’s twice as many castings as a gas engine,” he said. “I’m not sure how they were able to communicate so well at that time with a foundry that far away.” Lee guesses the Overby brothers were frequent train travelers.
“They were farming at the same time as building the picker. You can see there were a lot of modifications,” Lee continued. “You can see they tested it, made adjustments and tested it again and again. Once they got it right, they used it until it was worn out.”

Knowing the amount of work the machine performed and considering it sat in a grove of trees for approximately 100 years, the restoration was difficult.

“I knew it was going to be a challenge because of the condition,” said Lee. “A third of the wood, the entire back end and most of the snouts had completely rotted away. The goal in any restoration is to keep it as original as possible.”

With that perspective, Lee used six original Overby photos to re-create the machine.

“I built pieces, put them together and then had to take them apart and reposition them for the next part to fit or work properly,” he said.

To keep the picker as original as possible, Lee estimates he rebuilt more than 150 of Overby’s handmade carriage bolts in the renovation process.

The main frame of the picker was made of oak, a fact that helped keep it together over time. After three months of fruitless searching hardwood specialty dealers, Lee was able to get the needed dimensions of oak and poplar, the largest measuring 3 inches by 6 inches by 16 feet long, from J&K Building Center in Flandreau.

“I don’t think I’d do it again,” he said. “I don’t know who had it tougher, them building it the first time or me building it the second time.”

Photo taken at Bill Lee's farm near Colman in 2013 (Photo courtesy of the South Dakota Agricultural Museum).

About South Dakota State University

Founded in 1881, South Dakota State University is the state’s Morrill Act land-grant institution as well as its largest, most comprehensive school of higher education. SDSU confers degrees from six different colleges representing more than 175 majors, minors and specializations. The institution also offers 29 master’s degree programs, 13 Ph.D. and two professional programs.

The work of the university is carried out on a residential campus in Brookings, at sites in Sioux Falls, Pierre and Rapid City, and through SDSU Extension offices and Agricultural Experiment Station research sites across the state.

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