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Forest Feature

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A Piece of History Departs Harney County for Forest Service Museum

HINES, ORE. – On April 19, 2016 an antique Trail Beetle Tractor departed Harney County in route to the National Museum of Forest Service History in Missoula, MT for display.

The tractor, donated by Robert Wolfskill of the Wolfskill Trust, was designed and developed by the Forest Service Equipment Laboratory in Portland, OR around 1945.



Only 17 Trail Beetle Tractors were produced for the Forest Service. The original bid to Washington Gear Works was for 25 units, but only 17 were produced (serial numbers 101-117). The very first one produced, serial number 101, was operated for a predetermined number of hours and then disassembled, where parts were checked for wear to determine the potential longevity of the machines and to predict maintenance costs. Unit number 117 was used extensively, requiring a second set of tracks, which were tracks reused from unit 101.

The tractor was designed to pull a fire-line plow, it was also equipped with a hydraulic controlled dozer used for safety to push lightweight debris out of its path.



“The idea for the machine was great, the design and workability was great, the potential value to the firefighting effort was great, but what actually took place was a misadventure,” says Forest Service retiree Robert Wolfskill, “Instead of using the fire-line plow, most every operator pictured themselves as a skilled ‘cat-skinner’ and tried to construct fire-line with the angle dozer, which it was not intended nor designed for.”



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Wolfskill noted that while this could be done, sooner or later, many operators would crawl the machine upon rocks or logs and become airborne, taking the tracks past balance point and would pitch down, slamming the tractor into the earth, launching its operator into the air from the seat extended behind the tracks. "The tractor quickly became known as the 'catapult' rather than the 'trail beetle'."



After a short time on the fire-line, the machine was deemed too hazardous for further use. A number of the machines were placed on surplus, but others were retained for trail maintenance where they were used to pull small, hand-fed, rock crushers.

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