

17-year-olds plow into unusual hobby

 chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2008-06-24-0806230477-story.html

By Joel Hood, Tribune reporter



News

By Joel Hood and Tribune reporter

Chicago Tribune

•

Jun 24, 2008 at 12:00 am

They were a pair of typical suburban teenagers in Palos Park. Alan Shewchuk liked movies, and Nate Ferrin played football. They were active in church and both played instruments in their high school marching band.

Then, a tractor changed everything. Yes, a tractor.

Seemingly overnight, the friends were spending long hours -- before school, after school, Friday nights, weekends -- and thousands of dollars to rebuild the tractor's engine, sand the frame and paint it. Schoolwork, and on some days life in general, became an afterthought.

Rebuilding antique tractors is not the kind of hobby you'd expect from two urban 17-year-olds growing up in the shadow of Chicago. "When they go to school and most kids are talking about football and things like that, these two are talking tractors," said Len Shewchuk, Alan's father. "But you watch them work and how important this is to them. It's inspiring."

It took more than two years for them to restore a 57-year-old Ford front-end loader tractor to show quality in the Shewchuk family's garage. Now, they're restoring a 1940 Farmall Model A tractor once owned by Ferrin's late uncle, and an old riding mower a neighbor gave them.

The seniors at Stagg High School in Palos Hills are among a group of antique-farming enthusiasts trying to keep alive northern Illinois' rich agricultural heritage. They're two of the youngest members of the Will County Threshermen's Association, an assembly of farmers and retired farmers who rebuild and display the kind of tractors and equipment that once shaped life in the Midwest.

"It feels like home to us," Shewchuk said. "A lot of our friends don't understand why we'd put so much time into something like this. I'm not sure I can explain it very well."

Even Shewchuk's parents acknowledge they were at first puzzled by their son's passion for farming. Alan's grandfather used the old Ford tractor to pull tree stumps and plow the yard around his home in an old section of Palos Park. A great-uncle had once grown grapes in Michigan. That was the extent of the Shewchuks' farming family tree.

After joining the threshermen's club last year, the eager teens impressed some of the group's longtime members with fresh ideas on attracting a wider audience. One suggestion was to add a weight-pulling competition for smaller "garden" tractors at the association's popular annual antique-tractor show south of Minooka.

Garden tractors are smaller than traditional farming tractors and are akin to large riding mowers, making them popular in more urban settings. Since announcing plans to include the event in the coming show, July 17-20, organizers said it is generating interest.

"It's opened us up to bringing in people from urban areas we never would have thought of," said Terry Welshans, the club's secretary. "They both bring a lot of enthusiasm for farming, which is just great to see."

It started with that 1951 Ford tractor. When Shewchuk's grandfather gave it to Alan in 2005, it was in bad shape, having been stowed under a tarp outdoors for years.

"It ran very poorly and it got to a point where you could barely get it started," Alan Shewchuk said. "We almost couldn't get it up the hill."

They removed the rusted engine and took it to a local machine shop, where it remained for six months. Shewchuk spent many of those cold winter days cleaning and sanding the frame in his parents' unheated garage. He was joined by Ferrin, whom Shewchuk befriended in the

4th grade when he wore a John Deere sweat shirt to school.

Ferrin, who lived down the street, came from a farming family. He wants to study agricultural engineering in college, while Shewchuk is thinking about becoming a diesel mechanic.

With tractor parts littering the garage, the two stripped grease off the frame with a pressure washer. They bought replacement seals and a new hydraulic system on eBay with money Shewchuk earned by plowing neighbors' snow-caked driveways at 4:30 a.m. One Christmas, his parents gave him money to reseal leaking hydraulic cylinders. By the time the engine came back, the pair had spray-painted the frame by hand. It took 28 cans of dull red paint to give it its original look.

"The real motivation was that finished product," Ferrin said. "The best feeling is being able to restore something to what it once was."

jhood@tribune.com
