


Will County: 50th threshing show starts Thursday

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On Dennis "Denny" Christiansen's farm, just east of Manhattan, two ancient Advance Rumley steam engines stand disassembled on the south end of a machine shed.

Their massive steel wheels and heavy gears are newly painted red and stand beside big black fireboxes and boilers of the engines, which provided the mechanical energy for the threshing rings of collective harvests before tractors and combines became common.

"This is called the history farm here," Christiansen said.

It's history scented with coal smoke, sweat and cylinder oil that has seeped into Christiansen skins for several generations.

"We've got six in the shed -- no, seven; I forgot about the Avery," he said of the collection of steam engines owned by him and older brothers Alan and Larry. He's got another one, a 25-horsepower Rumley, on display in Wisconsin.

They also own three ancient threshing machines -- which were linked to the steam engines by belts to separate grain from shocked wheat and oats in the days of collective threshing rings.

They own other antique equipment, historic trucks and a collection of antique tractors, including the 1953 Farmall Super M that their dad, Norman, bought new. Restoration is making it "the world's most expensive Super M," Denny said.

Denny owns four steam engines, including the 1919 Advanced Rumley that brought him the introduction to his wife.

He bought the machine in 1993 in Billings, Mo. from Hal and Stella Carlock. Stella said bachelor Denny should meet her unmarried granddaughter, Cheryle Salchow, who lived in Indianapolis, had a full-time job and owned a new pickup.

Denny wrote to Cheryle and the rest is history -- including their wedding in June 1996 at the Will County Threshermen's Association Show at Burns Woods, just northwest of Kankakee River State Park.

The bride and groom exchanged their vows on the platform of her grandparents' steam engine, which Denny had restored.

Their limousine was the 1929 Packard, originally owned by Denny's great-uncles Harry and Chester Kirstein -- who were association founders.

They also were members of the Manhattan Township threshing ring, in which farmers collectively owned the steam engine and threshing machine that moved slowly from farm to farm, where they gathered to provide the labor of harvesting and threshing. Wives and daughters cooked and served the lavish harvest meals.

Denny and Cheryle live on the Kirstein brothers' farm, where the threshermen's association was formally organized in 1966. It built on the annual threshing bees that had been held starting in 1963 nearby on the farm of Ray Kestel, the association's first president. Denny's great-uncles, dad and granddad, Herman Christiansen, were all charter members.

The organization's 50th annual threshing show will be held Thursday through Sunday at the Dollinger Family Farm, along the historic Illinois and Michigan Canal between Channahon and Morris.

It will feature steam-powered threshing and sawmilling, antique tractor pulls and parades, and much more.

But Denny's disassembled Advance Rumleys won't be there.

He's in year two of the rebuilding project, which includes making some of his own parts. One rule with ancient equipment is: "You break it, you make it," Denny said.

Another of antique agriculture's adages: "If you want to own a steam engine, be ready to be dirty, hot and broke."

The Kirstein brothers saved the local ring's Rumley from the scrapper in 1963, buying it for \$35. New in the 1920s, it would have cost about \$2,000. Today it's "about what you'd pay for a new pickup -- \$30,000," Denny said.

His goal is to have the restorations completed next year. "Work gets in my way," he said "Have to make a living."

He, his brothers and Alan's son, Nathan, farm 1,700 acres together. Cheryle keeps the books.

They also operate a yard waste composting business, annually converting about 60,000 cubic yards of grass clippings, leaves and such from Homewood Disposal into new soil every year. "All the new soil you see in the big Interstate 55 projects at Blodgett Road and Arsenal Road is our compost," Denny said.