

Serial Number Plates

The Rusty Acres Approach

by Dan Kezeman

One of the most important pieces on a tractor — possibly the *most* important — is the serial number plate. It doesn't take much figuring to realize that if you have the very first of a certain model; or one of the six, or 10, or 25 built of a very rare model; you're in the tall cotton. Even if there were 10,000 built just like your tractor, it's nice to know that it was shipped to Kentucky on such and such a date, or was equipped with this or that option. That little plate riveted to your tractor unquestionably links it and you to a specific spot in history. We are very fortunate to have available to us the research service provided by the Two-Cylinder Club.

Without a serial number plate, some owners or prospective owners think a tractor isn't worth much. It's easy enough to argue against that point: Except for the absence of the serial number plate, does the tractor look or run any differently? I have a friend who has a Model "G" Hi-Crop. It's a beautiful piece that is restored to Expo Quality, but it has no serial number. The plate had rotted off due to unfavorable climate conditions long before he bought the tractor. I admire and agree with his decision to leave things as they are, and not try to come up with a remanufactured serial number plate upon which he could stamp a number. What's right is right, and what's fair to the next person is major part of what's right. Yes, there *can* be honor and dignity and ethics in how a person handles the absence of that little wafer of a serial number plate.

In recent years, I've seen a few tractors without a serial number plate where the owners went a different direction; they created an "information plate" and attached it, rivets and all, right where the original serial number plate had been. I discussed this with one of them, and he told me he had created a brass blank of the appropriate size and took it to a jeweler to have it engraved. The information on the plate included the tractor model, the range of years in which they were built, and "Restored By" with his name and the year 2002 following.

The occurrence that got me started on this subject was a recent bogus serial number plate on a rare tractor that was sold on an auction. Such things have happened before, but this time the owner of the *real* tractor that carries that serial number decided to do something about it. He did, and it has created quite a fuss, involving various authorities.

I think it is nothing short of a disgrace that new, fake, blank, serial number plates are being manufactured. They only provide the unscrupulous the opportunity to practice their trade. If the serial number of a tractor with a missing serial number plate can be determined with certainty, following the proper procedures that begin at your John Deere dealership and end at Deere & Company, it will net the owner an authentic replacement serial number plate. Although the replacement plates do not look like the original, they are, in a way, a victory of absolute assurance. When visiting with a collector a few years ago, who has a Deere-issued replacement serial number plate on his rare and beautiful tractor, I asked him how he felt about it. "Hey," he said, "How could it be any better than this? John Deere serial numbered the tractor, and then did it again almost 50 years later." I thought about that awhile, and began to appreciate the depth of his logic. It *would* be great to have a tractor that has been reconfirmed as absolutely authentic!

Sometimes I wonder if some people involved in tractors realize how serious the whole thing has become. It's not just a bunch of unsuspecting hucksters in this hobby. Most tractor guys are a lot more mechanically savvy over a wider range of functions than most car guys. Now, can you imagine somebody messing around with the serial number of a vintage Corvette, or trying to run a faked Ferrari through one of the huge classic car auctions? He'd be dragged off to the nearest tree with a sturdy limb, *after* the tar and feathers were applied.

Think about it... It can happen with a Styled "B" or a "620" Hi-Crop. No matter what the tractor is, even if the serial number plate is only hanging on by part of one rivet, it's still there. Clean it up with the utmost care. Treasure that thin piece of metal. It *is* the consummate identifier of a tractor that has reached the status of world icon. If it is in too poor of condition to re-attach, bond it to a backing plate to add body and strength. This was even done with the serial number plate on the John Deere All-Wheel-Drive (Dain) Tractor that holds the purchase price record for vintage models.

Resist the temptation to misidentify your tractor in the event that it does not have a serial number. There are people on the Internet selling serial number plates off of scrapped tractors. Will this practice lead to improper use of the plates by those who do not know better, or who wish to (improperly) enhance the value of their tractor? I know of a person who, over the course of time, parted out several two-cylinder tractors to serve as donors for his own restoration projects. When in his home one day, I saw what he had done with the serial number plates. He

had matted and framed a nice photograph of each type of tractor for which he had a scrapped plate, and had the plate showing below the photo through a second hole in the mat. This is a good and proper way to make use of a serial number plate from a tractor which has been scrapped. To complete the loop on scrapped serial number plates even better, I suggest photographing the tractor it came from, and writing down information (model, serial number, date plate was removed, etc.) so it can accompany the plate on its future travels through time. This, I believe, will add considerable value and interest to the serial number plate. Having the information sheet legally notarized would be of additional value. Perhaps we'll be seeing such items on *Antique Roadshow* someday.

Recognizing the value of serial number plates, and the fact that a few bad guys scattered through the hobby can spoil things for us, it might be well to think through a method that will work for you insofar as protecting your property. This could include a plate "guard," such as I first saw on a tractor at a past Expo; or even going so far as to removing the original plate and securing it at home, or in a lock box, before going to various shows. In the latter case, a replacement brass information plate as described earlier could substitute for the original.

Some people may wonder how to ethically handle a serial number plate in a circumstance of where they want to restore a tractor that is in need of extraordinary repair. In the previous issue, I reported on the restoration of the industrial yellow Model "60" Orchard Tractor. It arrived at my door as a pile of iron with a good serial number plate. We had to purchase another tractor to serve as parts donor, and the Orchard was essentially built from these two tractors. The original plate was still attached to the main case of the specific tractor I was restoring, and it remains there today. The plate was not disturbed from the day it was installed some half century ago. It would have been much easier to buy another "60" Orchard, paint it yellow, and just swap serial number plates; but it also would have been the wrong thing to do. The owner and I both appreciate being able to sleep at night.

So, what if the original main case was unusable? Then, *and only then*, it would have been appropriate to replace the main case and move the serial number plate to the replacement case; and, in doing so, such a move should be thoroughly documented and accompany the tractor in the event that it changes hands in the future.

I hope all of this has helped to get a point across: Serial numbers and serial number plates are a key ingredient in this hobby; improper care and use of serial number plates will help to destroy it. 🌀