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THURSDAY, AUGUST 21, 2025

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The 2025 Farm Progress Show, set for Aug. 26-28, will bring the latest ag technology, along with thousands of workers, volunteers, exhibitors and guests, to Decatur for its biennial visit.

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The News-Gazette's 'Our Communities' editor Dave Hinton reminisces about past Farm Progress shows he's attended — and the impending end of a more-than-45-year career in journalism.

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Earnest Agriculture, a startup co-owned by a UI grad and based at the former Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul, aims to improve yields and soil health while reducing input costs

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FARM PROGRESS SHOW

'THE SUPER BOWL OF FARMING'



In odd years, the Farm Progress Show site becomes a second city in Decatur. Provided

Event offering a look into agriculture's future back in Decatur this year

By DAVE HINTON

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DECATUR — Chris Hausman calls the Farm Progress Show “The Super Bowl of Farming.”

It's a time to “come and walk at your leisure and be able to interact with something that might catch your eye and say, ‘Hey, that's kind of an innovative thing you've got there, ... and the next thing you know, you might sign a sales contract,” he said.

The 2015 News-Gazette Farm Leader of the Year from Pesotum tries to get to the show every time it rolls around to Decatur, which is every odd year, unless he has to tend to some other activity or the weather doesn't cooperate.

“I think my very first one was in high school,” he said. “It's just always been a fun two or three days of activities.”

This year's Farm Progress Show is set for Aug. 26-28. It rotates locations, with the show being held in Boone, Iowa, on even years.

Hausman said he has used the show as a research point before making a purchase. It beats trying to do business online.

“You can always find a competitor there, too, so you can hear it from both sides,” he said.

Hausman said there's nothing that substitutes for being able to see an item in person and interact with a sales representative.

A good example came several years ago when he was looking to buy a chisel plow. He was able to watch the plow perform in the demonstration area. He made up his mind from that viewing which one he would buy.

This will mark the 20th year that the Decatur show will be held at its Progress City location.

Prior to the permanent sites in Decatur and Iowa, the show rotated between several Midwestern states, never in the same location.

The first one was held in 1953 near Armstrong on the Earl Bass farm. It drew 75,000 visitors.

“It's exciting to celebrate our 20th year in Decatur,” Farm Progress Director Matt Jungmann said. “It's hard to believe 20 years have gone by. The show has grown and improved in those 20 years.”

Jungmann, who has been with the show for 30 years, remembers the days when it used to move to a different cornfield and was built “out of nothing,” then returned to the way it was.

He doesn't miss the former arrangement. Having two permanent sites is decidedly

DAVE HINTON

One lesson from a past show: Listen to your parents



The upcoming Farm Progress Show in Decatur sparks memories of past shows I have attended. There have been three of them.

The first happened in, I believe, the early '70s, when I was in high school. Our ag class made the trip by bus.

The most memorable aspect about it was the weather. It was raining cats and dogs that morning, and my parents insisted I wear my boots.

Being a teenager, I resisted. I didn't want to wear boots. It would look dorky, uncool. You know how teens are.

My parents wouldn't budge, despite all my protestations and remonstrations. Maybe they didn't want to have to buy me a new pair of shoes. We didn't have any money-growing trees on our farm. Just a few fruit trees surrounded by corn and beans.

I carried the boots onto the bus rather than wear them. I noticed none of the other kids were wearing boots.

My thoughts likely centered around, “Their parents must be way cooler than mine.” Or maybe they didn't care if their kid had soggy feet all day.

When we got to the show site, the weather outside was still frightful. Wet. It was more than unpleasant. Soupy.

I decided maybe I'd better put those boots on. We trudged around in the muck and mire looking at all things ag-related.

I can't remember if I received any envious glances from my classmates or others attending the show.

I also don't remember anything about the farm-related equipment and program offerings. About the only thing I remember is show-goers trudging around with mud on their shoes and mucking between show tents.

Some had even tied bread wrappers around their shoes as makeshift boots.

Hmm. Maybe my folks were a little smarter than I thought.

When I got home, I doubt if I said, “I'm sure glad you made me bring those boots. You were right all along!”

Thankfully, neither did they say, “I told you so!”

You know the old saying. It goes something like, “As I got older, I realized my parents were a lot smarter than I thought they were.”

My second trip to the Farm Progress Show happened in the '80s on a farm north of Dewey. This time, I was covering it for the Paxton Record.

A young photographer and I attended a media day a few days before the show opened, and then made the trip to the show on its first day.

I remember as I pulled up in my car hearing WGN radio ag stalwarts Orion Samuelson and Max Armstrong doing their show from the grounds.

Those two were big time when I was growing up on the farm. I was thrilled that they were doing their show just a short ways away.

easier.

At Decatur, the exhibit field is 85 acres. Another 150 acres are available for parking, and 350 acres surrounding it are for field demonstrations.

The show comes to Decatur biennially, just like the Half Century of Progress show in Rantoul. This year's Half Century show is set for today through Sunday on the



Field demonstrations are a popular attraction at the Farm Progress Show. Provided

The show had its requisite displays of the future of agriculture, but I remember little else about it.

I did, however, marvel that a few weeks after the show, you couldn't even tell it had hosted a show. The Farm Progress people and the farmers who hosted the show did a good job at site prep and recovery.

Show No. 3 came in the '90s near Bloomington, and this time there was work of a different kind involved. I filled orders at a food stand our church had.

I remember show-goers flashing some large bills to pay for meals under \$10.

Some members of our church had to work a lot harder than I did. They got the unenviable chore of scrubbing pots and pans.

I remember being impressed by how the Farm Progress folks worked with area groups like our church to be able hold money-making events on site like our food stand.

At all of these farm shows — whether it's the Farm Progress Show that touts the future of agriculture or the Half Century of Progress show held biennially in Rantoul that celebrates farming's past — I'm also impressed by the friendliness of the people. Even when talking to total strangers, it's like meeting up with old friends.

The first Farm Progress Show was held in 1953 at the Earl Bass farm near Armstrong. Every year after that, it was held at a different farm in a Midwest state. That all changed in 2007 when show officials decided it would rotate between Decatur in odd years and Boone, Iowa, in even years.

This year's show will be held Aug. 26-28. It will be preceded the week before by the Half Century of Progress show in Rantoul — a look at farming's past followed the next week by a look at its future.

Dave Hinton is editor of The News-Gazette's 'Our Communities' section. He can be reached at dhinton@news-gazette.com.

“Most of the companies hold back their unveiling because this is the largest gathering of their customers and ag media,” Jungmann said. “I know John Deere, Case IH and Agco have new products” they will be displaying.

Unverferth, based in Ohio, will also be unveiling the world's largest grain cart — 3,200 bushels. It will have an unloading rate of 1,000 bushels a minute.

Jungmann said the grain carts get bigger as the combines do. When the new technology is unveiled at the show, it's more global in nature, he said.

Attendance has remained strong over the years. An estimated 150,000 people are expected to turn out to this year's event. As always with farming, though, it depends on the weather and the farm economy.

“Agriculture is a consolidating industry, so there aren't as many farms as there were 20 years ago,” Jungmann said. “It's still the trade show for agriculture.”

“Since we've gone to these permanent, sites we've seen more international visitors.”

The show has a decided economic impact on the Decatur area — in excess of \$30 million, “which includes a lot of hotel rooms,” Jungmann said.

Setup for the show — much of it involving tents — started the last week of July.

The work was done by an estimated 400 volunteers from central Illinois plus 150 full-timers employed by Informa, which host the show and also publishes the nation's oldest continuously published farm magazine — Prairie Farmer.

Add in the people working for the individual exhibitors, and the number working at the show could total up to 7,000.

“We work closely with everybody” to hold the show, Jungmann said, “whether it's the state of Illinois, Macon County, the Macon County Sheriff's Office, Decatur fire or the city of Decatur.”

The show benefits not just Macon County.

“The hotel footprint is about 7,000 rooms, and only 1,500 of them are in Decatur, so it expands to Springfield, Decatur, Monticello — hotels are sold out,” Jungmann said.

Hausman said at times, the crowds can get overwhelming.

“Overall, it's a great experience,” he said, “and I would encourage anyone who hasn't attended one to do so, because it's only every other year that they have it in Decatur.”

“That was a great move for Farm Progress to go to a permanent site.”

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MOSAIC BIOSCIENCES

Rural Arthur farmer part of biological seed-testing project

By DAVE HINTON

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ARTHUR — Rural Arthur farmer Makenna Frantz said her family isn't one to look before it leaps into the newest thing on the farm. Trial and error is a better method.

That's one reason Frantz agreed to be one of six farmers in as many states to participate in a Mosaic Biosciences YouTube docuseries to test how Bio Crop Nutrition products work on their farm.

"We're not quick to implement a practice across our whole farm," Frantz said. "We have a pretty rigorous system ... before we decide whether we'll purchase" a new product.

Frantz said she was selected to be part of the trial because she was part of a group called "Total Acre" last year. "They just reached out to me," she said. "They wanted a young female face on a farm. I tried their product last year."

Biologicals are a quickly growing innovation in agriculture, and Frantz said the trials are a chance to see how 20 acres of treated corn compares to 20 acres of untreated corn.

Frantz said the participating farmers aren't paid to take part in the trials.

"I just enjoy doing things like this," she said. "We get a little different look at their products. They give us free trial products to try on our farm."

It's an opportunity for the farmers to try something new and learn more about how different products perform on their operations. And, as biologicals remain one of the fastest-growing segments in agriculture, many farmers are especially curious about how these products work, and why.

The inaugural season of Frontier Fields garnered more than 1.7 million views on YouTube as six farmers provided real-world insights about the yield advantages and return on fertilizer investment that biologicals can provide while they did trials with BioPath, a bio crop nutrition product from Mosaic.

Frantz said the farmers are given biological product in liquid form.

"We applied the product in-furrow

with our planter," she said. "We already apply starter fertilizer in the seed trench as our standard practice, so the trial just added the Bio Path product to the tank mix on the treated acres."

Frantz said biologicals "has been a buzzword over the last couple of years."

"I think as we continue to chase higher yields along with the topic of sustainability and environmentally friendly and face the threat of different regulatory issues, biologicals seems like it might be a next step address those issues," she said. "It's kind of the next new frontier. We haven't gotten there yet. Now everybody's coming out with the latest biological product that addresses various issues."

In agriculture, Frantz said, it's the job of farmers to work for the consumer. If they demand a certain product, farmers have to answer to their customers. That's where some of the questions come forward.

In the YouTube series, the six farmers are featured in four episodes — one during a planning session, one a planting episode, then a growing episode and finally during harvest or post-harvest.

Frantz is joining farmers from Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska and Wisconsin in taking part in the testing.

The six farmers all represent different-sized farms and different levels of experience in using biologicals.

Throughout the season, the Frontier Fields farmers will discuss their perceptions and experiences of using Bio Crop Nutrition products and how they affect a crop's success.

The biologicals undergo rigorous in-lab and on-farm testing to understand how factors like soil types, moisture levels, growing conditions and more can affect crops if and how well a biological product works, according to Matt Sowder, director of field solutions at Mosaic.

As the farmers test BioPath or PowerCoat and discover the potential that bacillus-based plant-growth-promoting rhizobacteria products offer, each of their stories will come to life through updates via audio, photos and videos, all housed at frontierfields.com.



Provided

Makenna Frantz, who farms in rural Arthur, is one of six farmers in as many states chosen to participate in a Mosaic Biosciences YouTube docuseries to test how its Bio Crop Nutrition products work on their crops.

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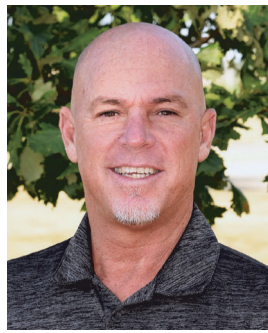
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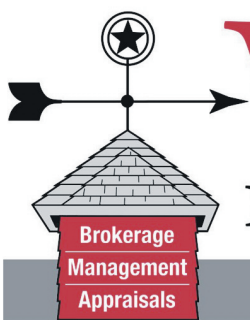
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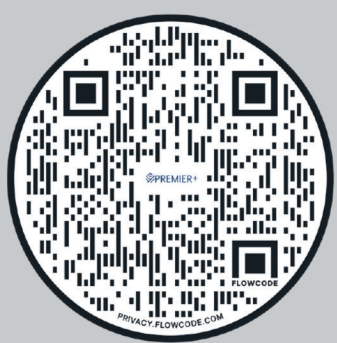
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AGRIBUSINESS

EARNEST AGRICULTURE

LOOKING TO GROW

Rantoul startup's goals: Improve yields, soil health; reduce input costs

By DAVE HINTON
dhinton@news-gazette.com

RANTOUL — University of Illinois intern Umair Syed sat among a group of fellow interns homogenizing (crumbling) larger soil pieces and sifting them through a screen for soil samples.

"Eventually, when it's sifted, we collect it in vials so that no matter where we sample it ... it's the same nutrient concentration throughout," Syed said.

The air-conditioning system worked overtime to cool the lab, where the interns and employees all did the same soil work. It's part of Earnest Agriculture's operation in a 25,000-square-foot brick building that, decades ago, served as the import center at Chanute Air Force Base.

Railroad tracks, long since removed, used to run up to the side of the building; now, corn plots grow on the east side.

Today, the building is one of a number of former Air Force facilities put to different uses by the civilian sector.

The soil work is part of a painstaking process with a goal of developing an all-in-one probiotic seed coating that helps corn and soybean seeds get more nutrients, grow stronger and fight off diseases so farmers can realize higher crop yields.

"There's a number of ways bacteria can increase yield,"

said Earnest Ag's co-owner and chief science officer, Gabriel Price-Christenson. "Some ways include reducing disease impacts (and) increasing the availability of nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorous. ..."

Other areas of study include drought tolerance, seedling survival and germination rate increases.

Lab tech Mason Clark said that after the soil samples are sifted, they are placed in tubes for testing to determine what is in the soil and "to see what's in the plants that are growing."

Lab manager James Woods said the interns have been a valuable help collecting and isolating new microbes to use in various combinations and testing them to see what attributes they may have "as well as helping us process plants and soil samples from all of our contract research organization sites around the country as well as our field sites right here outside and at the University of Illinois."

Getting to a finished product has been a long process, starting in 2018 at the University of Illinois through the iVenture Accelerator program.

The work moved to Rantoul in 2022. The goal is to have product on the market in 2026.

Earnest Ag has done pilot programs with farms and contract research organizations conduct-



LEFT: Interns from the University of Illinois analyze soil samples in the lab at Earnest Agriculture earlier this month on the grounds of the former Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul.
BELOW: Gabriel Price-Christensen, co-owner and chief science officer, talks about the startup's work.

Robin Scholz photos/
The News-Gazette



ing research trials.

The business is funded from a variety of sources, such as SOSV and IndieBio (an early-stage biotech firm), as well as AgLaunch, a Memphis, Tenn.-based, farmer-led investment company; and AgVentures Alliance of Mason City, Iowa.

The owners believe in the work. They, as well as family and friends, have also invested.

In total, the investors have put to put nearly half a million dollars in the work. Co-owner and CEO Eddy Mejia sold his house and used his retirement savings to invest in the company.

Work is seasonal, and just like farmers, the company's work depends on weather and time of year.

"During this time of year, you'll either see us in the field collecting plant and soil samples or in the lab processing plant samples and soil samples so we can get information about the nutrients and the perfor-

mance of plants," Price-Christenson said.

The company has test sites in 48 locations across 14 states ranging from the University of Illinois to the North Dakota Grand Farm to the University of Georgia Grand Farm and many spots in between.

That number is a marked jump from last year, when Earnest Ag was doing trials at eight locations in five states.

One day recently, interns and other employees were working with soil from a Nebraska site.

The project has come a long way since it moved to the Rantoul facility three years ago. Then, Price-Christenson was the only employee working full time, and the company didn't have any product. Earnest also hadn't done any initial field testing.

"We've gone all the way from not having any bacteria or products to having a fully functioning program that performs well in the field and raising enough capital to support our five employees," Price-Christenson said.

Mejia handles the financial end of the business, reaching out to investors, attending conferences, establishing relationships and talking about the company to see how it fits investors' portfolios or their strategy.

As things progress and potential investors get curious,

Price-Christenson explains to them the science and outlines how the company is positioning itself relative to competitors.

Earnest Ag's operational goal next year is to have product on 50,000 acres and increase the number of employees by another three to five.

Mejia said the ultimate aim is to help farmers.

"How we get there, that's the hard part, and make the business profitable and at the same time help farmers be more profitable," he said.

When technology is needed, especially in agriculture, it takes money to run the trials to show farmers "we're not selling a pipe dream."

"You're showing investors we can make money here ... (and show we can) eliminate some of the chemicals we use in agriculture," he said. "There are a lot of doubters who say you can't."

"The goal is to improve the yield and soil health and reduce input costs. Instead of applying 10 different things, they can apply ours. Finding the right bacteria that consistently (improves yields) and works well everywhere" is the goal.

Mejia said Earnest Ag is working in a competitive market, and the margins can be great, but not in the beginning.

The immediate goal is to develop a bacteria community on top of a seeding coating.

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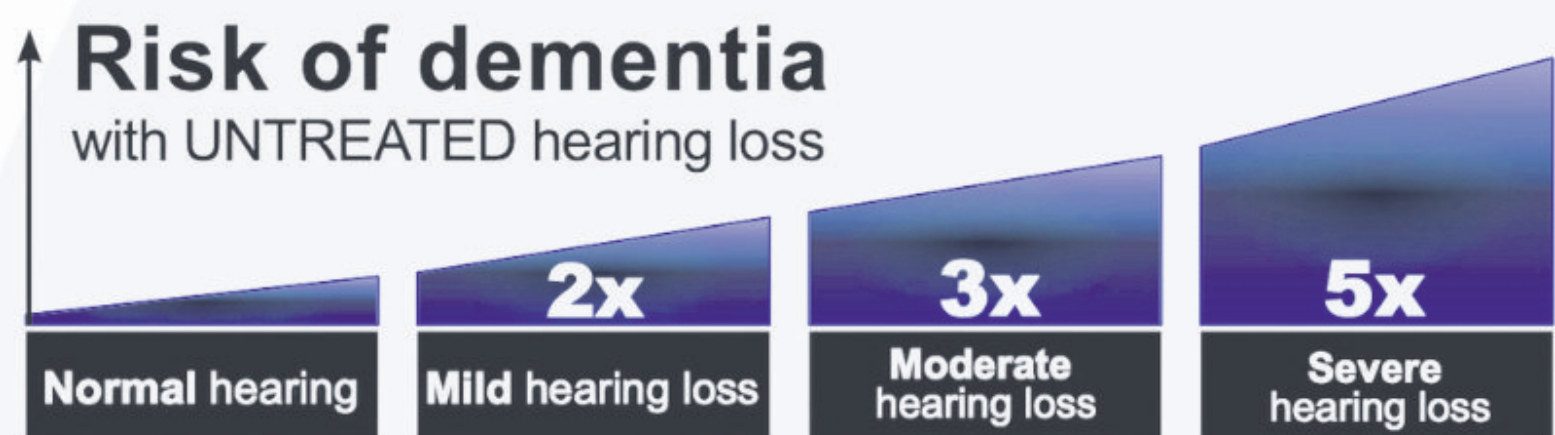


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AGRIBUSINESS

DAVE HINTON

The time draws near to head out to pasture



Turn out the lights, the party's (almost) over.

As of the end of this month, this old gray mare is going out to pasture. The big R — retirement.

Ironically, the first day of my retirement is Labor Day.

The time has come for an end to deadlines, story ideas, columns and eating at my desk.

After more than 45 years in the business, including the last six with The News-Gazette, I didn't want to leave without saying "goodbye."

What a long, strange trip it's been.

I'm sure I will miss the people I've met along the

way, but it's time for the next chapter. Yes, I've heard there is life after full-time work.

I've heard both sides: "Every day's a Saturday" as well as "I've got nothing to do and all day to do it."

I believe there's got to be a balance in retirement, so I plan to stay busy, just not as busy. It's important to have a reason to get up in the morning.

I want to thank everyone at The News-Gazette who has put up with me.

I also want to thank God for telling me this is the career I should be pursuing.

It's time for the next generation to man the position. So, please welcome Rob Le Cates, who will be handling the "Name Dropping" and "Farm

Family of the Week" columns as well as news and feature stories.

I can already feel good vibes from him. He's eager and has lots of energy.

And that attribute — energy — is an important ingredient for a newspaper guy. That's why it's time for me to try something new.

A number of stories have stood out along the way — too many to mention, but I'll bring up two.

Ironically, those two have come as bookends of my newspaper tenure — one in 1979 about a year after I started. It was the tragic shootout that left five dead on Interstate 57 near Paxton.

The other was the Aug. 9

shooting of two police officers and house fire in Gibson City. Strangely, both have involved manhunts.

In the I-57 manhunt, the culprit (Monroe Lampkin) was caught a couple of days later. In the Gibson City case, the man being sought (David Jordan) remains at large.

Making it all the more strange is that Jordan was seen naked in his yard and may have fled the scene *au naturel* riding a bicycle.

As someone once said, "You can't make this stuff up."

I covered two of the three Lampkin trials, all of which happened in Kankakee. He testified in all three trials, and in each one gave a different story of what happened that

fateful night.

Newspapers have been struggling all over the country. In many cases, people would rather watch the tube or play video games than read. That's their loss.

Keeping newspapers alive is important. You're not going to get a comprehensive account of what's going on in your community by watching TV news.

That's why I ask you to please continue to support your hometown newspaper wherever you live. Quality newspapers are essential.

Dave Hinton was editor of The News-Gazette's 'Our Communities' section. He can be reached at dhinton@news-gazette.com.

HALF CENTURY OF PROGRESS SHOW

HERDING CATS

At least 100 vintage Caterpillars expected at this year's event; Farmall tractors also marking anniversary

By DAVE HINTON
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RANTOUL — The oldest-known Peoria-built Caterpillar equipment and maybe as many as 300 classic International Harvester tractors will be among the vintage ag pieces on display at this weekend's Half Century of Progress farm show at Rantoul.

The show opens today and runs through Sunday at the Rantoul National Aviation Center at the former Chanute Air Force Base.

Built in 1912, the Holt 60 crawler tractor is still owned by the family that originally bought it — the Peterson family of Indiana. It still runs and will be used to do a plowing demonstration.

On the 100th anniversary of Caterpillar's production beginning in Peoria, the Yellow Power Caterpillar Club is hoping at least 100 pieces of Cat equipment will be on site for this year's show, which highlights farming's past.

Caterpillar was formed when the Holt and Best companies opted to merge.

"Holt owned the factory in Peoria, and that's where they moved their production to," said Mahomet resident Clayton Smith, a member of the Yellow Power club.

To bookend the new with the old, one of Caterpillar's special-edition 100th-anniversary D-6 bulldozers will be on display.

Caterpillar's display will be located near the south main gate. Demonstrations will take place throughout the four-day show.

Smith said he's always had a love of Caterpillar.

"I went to diesel mechanics school ... at Parkland" he said. "I got into restoring tractors. The Caterpillar



stuff was something different than the standard John Deere and Internationals that you see in the shows."

Caterpillar started out as an ag equipment company, he said, and its later models were geared more toward construction equipment.

Don't get him wrong; Smith has nothing against other brands. He's fixed up a John Deere 730, a Farmall M and a Farmall 400, and for the past 20 years, he's also fixed up a lot of Caterpillar equipment with yellow enthusiast Chuck Ehler. He likes Cat because it's more unique.

One of the pieces was an old-time combine that they cut wheat with.

Smith has observed that vintage construction equipment is generally more worn out than vintage farming equipment. That in itself presents more of a challenge to Smith and other Caterpillar lovers as far as restoration.

Kristin Gall poses with his prototype preproduction model of the Farmall 1206 Turbo tractor, with the original tires from 1965. The model's 60th anniversary will be marked at this year's Half Century of Progress farm show today through Sunday in Rantoul.

"I guess it's more of a departure than what I'm used to working on," he said. "They're more unique. You don't see a lot of them at shows. You see a lot of Ms and a lot of two-cylinder John Deeres."

At the show, much of the Caterpillar equipment will be doing demonstrations — road graders, bulldozers and scrapers moving dirt. Some, however, will be doing ag work — plowing demonstrations.

IH 1206 turns 60

This year also marks another anniversary — the 60th for the start of production of the Farmall 1206 turbo-charged tractor. Farmall is a fore-runner of Case IH.

Kristin Gall, co-chairman of the anniversary observance with Brad Twiss, said organizers have a goal of having 300 of the vintage model trac-

tors on hand.

There are commitments from 1206 owners from Canada and from six states ranging from Maine to Texas.

What makes the model so special? "It was the first turbo-charged row-crop tractor over 100 horsepower," Gall said.

There were nearly 8,500 of the Farmalls manufactured, along with about 1,200 of the same tractor under the International Wheatland brand, all at the Farmall plant in Rock Island.

"As for now, it will be the largest" showing of such tractors in the world, Gall said. "It's quite an undertaking, and it usually takes a show this size to get this many together."

The 55-year-old who hails from Missouri has a great deal of sentimental attachment to the 1206. It was the first tractor he used while farming. He now owns seven of them, one an experimental prototype. His father and grandfather also both owned a model.

Gall found his grandfather's model in a salvage yard and restored it.

The Wall Street Journal did a front-page story on his salvage project. Case IH officials saw the article and flew Gall, his wife and the tractor to Walt Disney World in Florida, where he gave a presentation to a group of Case IH dealers. The intent was to instill in the dealers a sense of the company's heritage after Case and International Harvester merged.

This year also marks the 60th anniversary of the 18.4-by-38 Firestone tractor tire. It was developed especially for the 1206 because of increased horsepower.

A complete Half Century of Progress schedule is available online at halfcenturyofprogress.com.



Caterpillar aficionado Clayton Smith operates a Cat 44 grader owned by Chuck Ehler. The 100th anniversary of Caterpillar production will be observed at this year's Half Century of Progress farm show today through Sunday in Rantoul.

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