

# LIFE IN THE VALLEY



Steam engine belted up to a threshing machine at what now the 2600 block of Summer St. SE in Salem in 1894. Scenes like these were common summer sights in the Salem area in the late 19th and early 20th century. WILLAMETTE HERITAGE COLLECTIONS

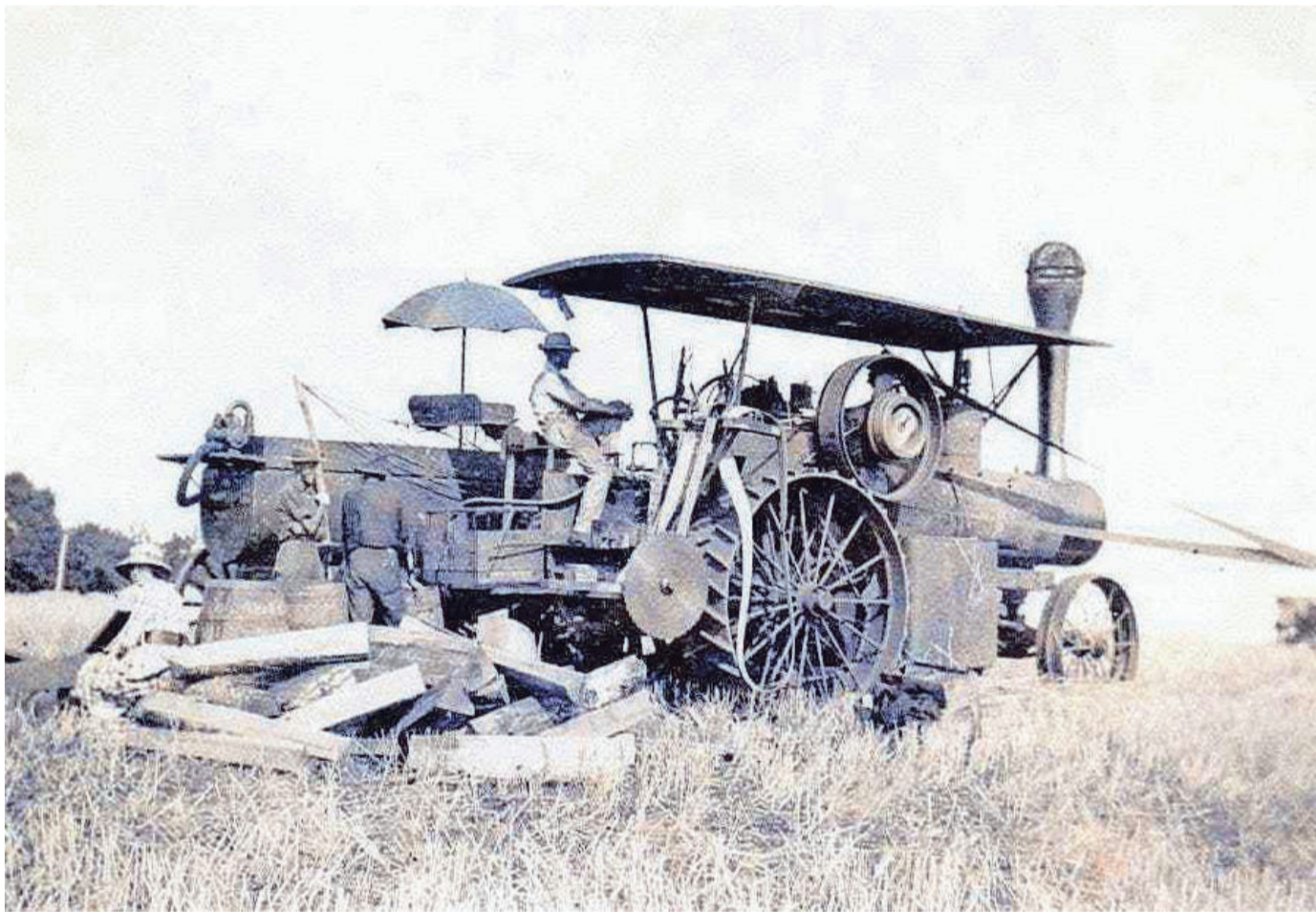
## Heritage: Celebrating the steam era on Mid-Valley farms

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Take a moment and conjure up a vision of harvesting on a wheat farm. What do you see? Today's air-conditioned-cab combines operated by one person is a far cry from the technology used on Mid-Valley farms a century ago. Then, threshing crews banded together with steam-powered engines resembling little locomotives to thresh crops. Even though the steam era was eclipsed by gas-powered tractors, many Mid-Valley farmers harbored a love for the old engines. In the 1950s, yearly festivals were established to celebrate and remember. The tradition continues today. In fact, the Great Oregon Steam-Up held yearly at Brooks was just awarded Oregon Heritage Tradition status.

In the wake of the Civil War, steam was the latest trend in new and efficient farming technology. Advertisements for steam-powered threshing engines start appearing in Oregon newspapers as early as 1862, claiming capability "of running the largest sized Separator, and threshing in one day, in a good and workmanlike manner, 2,000 sacs [sic] of grain." Powered by water and wood, straw or coal (the former being readily available in the Mid-Willamette Valley), these portable power units could be moved into the field and belted up to a separator machine, processing grain crops right on site. The early models were horse-drawn, but later models could drive under their own steam power. The new technology was expensive. One 1868 advertisement listed engines for sale starting at \$900 dollars (About \$16,800 in today's money). Farmers sometimes banded together to purchase threshing machines and engines to run them, ensuring use on their own fields and a ready and invested crew of neighbors.

Until the 1920s, steam threshing crews were a regular summer sight and sound on Mid-Willamette Valley farms. Unlike modern tractors, boilers on threshing engines take hours to safely heat up and be ready for the day's work. This meant early mornings. Keeping the fire going and the water levels up in the boiler meant a constant stream of supply wagons and workers to supervise all the activities. With so many people involved, often over large distances, crews developed a series of signals that could be blasted out on the whistle attached to the engine for easier communication. As one Oregon Statesman reporter noted in August of 1905: "Harvesting time is now in full swing in most every section around Salem. Early in the morning one can hear the whistles of the threshing engines as they are



Steam traction engine is belted up in the fields. While steam powered engines were eclipsed by gas-powered equipment in the early 20th century, collectors kept these antique machines running for demonstration in a variety of shows and festivals that cropped up in the mid-1950s and continue today. WILLAMETTE HERITAGE COLLECTIONS

making preparations to begin the day's labor, which generally lasts in Oregon from sixteen to eighteen hours to the day, knocking off one hour for dinner..."

Agricultural technology changed again with the easier to run and cheaper to produce internal combustion engines. Steam traction engines, when they escaped the scrap heaps and metal drives of World War II, became curios. One local collector was Silverton-born Harvey E. Mikkelson, whose father Albert had worked on a threshing crew on Howell Prairie in Harvey's childhood. Harvey began, as one reporter romantically noted, rescuing all the engines he could find "neglected and rusting in leaking old barns." By the 1950s he had acquired 12 engines and restored nine to working order. A demonstration of a few engines from his collection in a parade celebrating Silverton's Centennial garnered a lot of interest in the community. So, Harvey and his wife Myrtle decided to host an old-fashioned threshing bee at their farm in Bethany, about a mile out of Silverton. October 3, 1954 brought over 1,000 people from nine states out to see the Mikkelson's engines and started a tradition that would

continue almost annually for the next 12 years. Crowds would surge in the upcoming weeks to 6,000 people. Over time, other groups like the Silverton-based Silver T Horseless Carriage Club brought in additional attractions for the large crowds that would gather. Silverton's Harvest Fest also grew up around the event offering pageants, parades and more entertainment with the threshing bee as an anchor event.

For many old-timers in the region nothing quite beat seeing the old equipment in operation. Centenarian Hans Nelson, who had farmed for nearly 60 years in Monitor, even lent a hand pitching bundles. His only concession to his age, he quipped: "I used to climb up the stack; a ladder's a bit handier now."

Mikkelson was a member of the Western Steam Fiends Association, a group of collectors and enthusiasts from all over the Western United States, Canada and Mexico. The group had their first "field day" in Oregon at the Rodney Pitts Farm outside of Canby in 1955. It drew large crowds, too, and added plowing and engine races to threshing demonstrations every Labor Day

weekend on the Pitts farm until 1959. The Western Steam Fiends Association also hosted the Steam-Up events associated with the Clackamas County Fair in Canby and North Marion County Fair in Woodburn, eventually landing at the Frank Petzel farm just west of the 1-5 interchange at Brooks in 1970, the site that still hosts the Great Oregon Steam-Up every year and is now home to the Powerland Heritage Park and 16 independent museums and associations.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Great Oregon Steam-Up at Brooks, but, as with most everything these days, Covid-19 has canceled the event in the traditional sense. You can still get a taste, though. The Antique Powerland Museum Association has devised a drive-thru version of the event. You still have time to catch it Aug. 22 and 23. Find more information here: <https://www.antiquepowerland.com/events/crusin-thru-powerland-1>.

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