

Sears' Mail-Order Tractor

The 1930s Economy tractor

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A vintage ad for the New Economy tractor from Sears, Roebuck & Co. in the late 1930s.

When you think of economy, you think of something reasonably reliable and relatively inexpensive.

Early on, Sears, Roebuck & Co. was a major player in agriculture. The company's goal was to provide farmers with reliable, low-cost, efficient machinery, whether horse-drawn or mechanized.

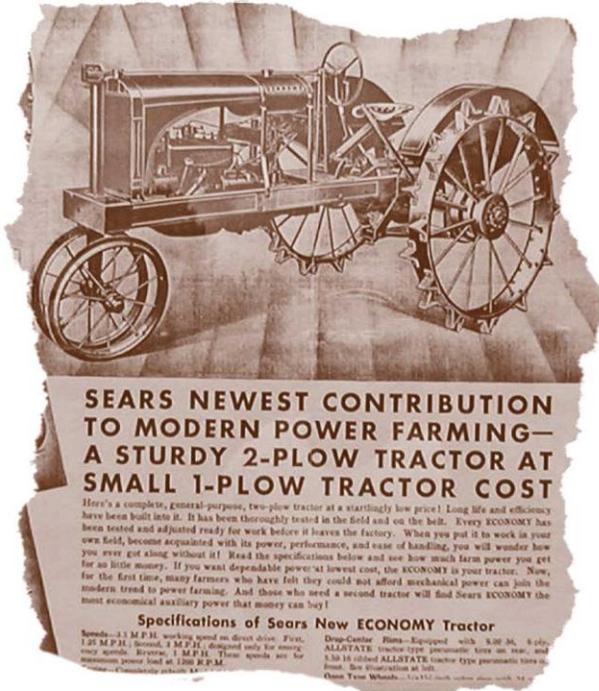
In 1931, Sears developed and marketed an Economy tractor. The tractor was produced for about a year. Then, in 1937, Sears contracted with the Peru Wheel Co., Peru, Ill., to build a tractor both reliable and affordable. Peru proposed a plan using rebuilt Ford Model A engines. The frame and most of the castings were to be produced at the Peru plant.

Plans called for a 2-plow tractor (two 14-inch plows) with a self-starter, a revolutionary concept in 1938. Other features included an air cleaner, automatic spark control, a special carburetor, governor and oil filter. The tractor used an automotive-type 3-speed transmission and an automotive rear axle with mechanical brakes at each rear wheel.

Its universal swinging drawbar allowed for easier hookup to implements and smoother operation of towed implements. Options included a belt pulley and PTO, fenders, wheel weights and extensions, headlights, and rubber tires. A 2-row cultivator was also adapted for the Economy.

Dave Elmore, Newark, Ill., is a Sears Economy enthusiast. He claims a soft spot for Model A Fords and also is interested in Thrifty Farm Model A Ford conversions. He and his son Chad have worked on Sears Economy tractors for more than 20 years. They have owned and restored about 15 in that time and still own six. Three are 1938 models and three date to 1939.

According to Dave, the Economy's transmission was a standard Model A 3-speed with only a slight change in the shifting lever to make it easier for the driver to shift gears. The transmission is connected through a short drive shaft to a speed reduction unit mounted directly to a narrowed



Timken truck rear axle (some people, he says, believe it to be an Eaton axle rear end). That arrangement reduces ground speed in third gear to 3.5 mph.

The 1938 model tractor was patterned after the Farmall F-12. It was a tricycle tractor with dual front wheels, large rear wheels, an over-the-hood steering shaft and front-mounted steering assembly. It used a foot clutch and mechanical handbrake on each rear wheel.

Sears marketed its New Economy tractor in 1938, but as with many new products, it had a few flaws. The major problem was that the over-the-hood steering shaft connected to open-gear steering located at the front of the tractor, quite like that on the Farmall F-12 – but the Farmall used a closed worm gear. Dave explains that the Economy's front end gearing is very light duty, and dust and dirt collected in the grease in the open gears at the top, causing hard steering. Worse, he says, the front wheel steering stops were weak. If they broke off, the front wheels could turn a full 90 degrees, a less than satisfactory development.

By 1939, the entire steering mechanism had been changed. Instead of the over-the-hood steering rod, a different steering gear box was located near the transmission with a steering rod going forward to a steering box over the front wheel. The Economy used a hardened steel worm gear completely enclosed and running in oil. The new gearbox had adjustable roller bearings to allow for proper adjustment. Otherwise, the tractor was virtually the same.

Sears offered its Economy tractor without an engine and transmission (but with a radiator and 4-blade fan) for farmers who might have a suitable Ford Model A engine and transmission on hand. However, the company recommended the buyer purchase a governor, fan belt, carburetor and air cleaner. Sears also offered a complete belt pulley arrangement and PTO, as well as headlights for night work.

In a 1939 ad, Sears offered “a 2-plow tractor at 1-plow tractor cost.” The tractor sold for \$495 (about \$7,600 in today's terms); the buyer paid freight from the factory near LaSalle, Ill. Dave says about 500 Economy tractors were built in 1938-39, most of which were sold in 1939. Not a bad deal for a not-half-bad tractor. **FC**

