

# THE OLD FORDSON

as told by Helen Olson

(nayna, nayna, nayna)

There are rules about telling family stories, unwritten though they may be. One rule is that there has to be someone new to tell the stories to. In a big family, that isn't much of a problem since new people come along with fair frequency. There are always the newly engaged, or about to be engaged, who surely wouldn't want to hook up with the clan until they learned what we were really like. Sometimes just a casual friend or passerby will do. And, of course, people grow up all the time who haven't paid attention to the stories before, but now like to sit around the table after dessert and join in the grown-up chatter and are willing to pay for that privilege by listening to the stories. The bottom line is: there has to be one person in the group who hasn't heard the story before, or hasn't heard it "since they were little," or "can't quite remember it."

Of course stories have to be worked up to. You can't just announce, "It's time to tell the Tractor (or the Bobsled, or the Daddy Breaking Grandpa's Team) story." Usually stories are best told after a good meal over coffee, though just a lot of coffee will do. So will a van and a long trip, either to a wedding or a funeral--something that says "family." And there has to be a lot of idle chatter preceding the stories. All the absent relatives have to be inquired after; the newest babies discussed; health has be assessed; jobs and projects described. Somewhere along this circuitous route, hints begin to be dropped. Someone is "reminded" of something. Someone else says, "What's that about?" "Oh," says the speaker, "Don't you know about.....? Well..." And the story begins.

No story gets told completely by one person, of course. Everyone has a little something to contribute, often having to insert it right into the middle of the teller's sentence. Family story telling is not for the timid or well-mannered. Family stories are like any folk-lore, always subject to variation and interpretation by the member of the family whom manages to grab it and go. Usually quite a number of us can tell the best stories, but there is another little rule that says that the story belongs to a certain member of the family when that member is present. That's why I'm feeling a little smug at this moment, because I consider this one of our favorite stories and I've told it lots of time, but when we are all together, it belongs to the oldest of the clan, my brother Frank.

It has to do with our big old Fordson tractor. During The War (for you unenlightened younger generation, THE WAR was W.W.II), all factories were converted for The War Effort, and it was impossible to buy new farm equipment, or cars for that matter. Now that I think of it, we probably wouldn't have been able to afford anything new, anyway, but everyone also had to keep what they had going, so even buying second-hand stuff was nearly impossible. Anyway, Daddy found someone North of Alpena, up by Spratt I think, who had this Fordson and a clunky old garden tractor for sale. We bought the Fordson for eighty dollars and declined the garden tractor. (I made the mistake of talking to Frank about this part way through the writing, so he gets to comment after all.) *Frank: The guy made us take the garden tractor. Wouldn't let Dad leave without it. Said we couldn't buy the Fordson unless we took the garden tractor, too.*

The Fordson was high and green with huge metal lugged wheels in the back and small, close together metal wheels in the front. Though I didn't know it at the time, my brother tells me it was highly tippable. *Darn thing would rear right up and go over backwards. They called 'em "Widow Makers."* I remember riding on the fender while Daddy drove it across the field. I also remember that it was illegal to drive it on the road because the lugs would cut into the blacktop, but Daddy did drive it along the edge one day and there was about a three-foot strip where he strayed too far over and the lugs cut in. I went for years being sure that the sheriff would come along and demand explanation.

Anyway, since it was war time, we kids played war games all the time. The three "leaders" were usually Frank (Sonny to us), my cousin Joyce Dekker and second cousin Glen Olson, both who spent time with us on the farm and were a couple of years older than Frank. Our next-door neighbor, Bobby Oliver, was often also in on the fun as were assorted younger cousins and friends. Kathryn found all the marching and shooting of homemade wooden guns boring and was usually inside reading. I don't think she enjoyed taking orders from Joyce, either, and when Joyce was around, Joyce gave the orders. I was the youngest and considered a pest, probably with justification, but I usually managed to get myself included at the end of the marching order.

Anyway, on this particular summer day, there was quite a mob, including Joyce and Glen. We did a lot of marching around with Joyce giving orders and Glen cutting up, and then, when that got tiresome, someone big decided that we should dig a fox hole. That none of us any idea what a fox hole was didn't deter us. We knew that soldiers dug fox holes to live in during battle, so that's what we did too.

It was quite a fox hole. Making it took most of the day and a lot of youthful labor. It was squared off in a nice rectangle large enough to hold several of us and deep enough that by squatting down a little you couldn't be seen. We shaped a nice little dirt bench along one side. Then, when we finally finished, we carefully laid branches and grass over it so that it was completely camouflaged. It was right in the middle of the hay field.

Daddy always got home from work about 4:30 and we had an early dinner (supper, we called it). After supper, Daddy always worked around the farm until dark. This night he jumped on the Fordson and took off across the field, headed toward the "little woods." The camouflage job was as good as we thought it was and he drove right into the fox hole. Luckily, the Fordson didn't tip, but it did lose a front wheel right onto our carefully crafted bench.

I can't remember how we got the tractor out or how we got it fixed, though both must have happened, because we used the tractor for several more years until we bought a wonderful, second-hand Farmall AV from Milo Thompson, the International Harvester dealer. (That tractor deserves a book of its own, because it has given out so many wonderful tractor and trailer rides, bouncing though the woods with loads of laughing adults and kids. It lives still with Kathryn and Lloyd. We think we'll bronze it when it goes.)

To get back to the Fordson. How it was rescued, none of us seem to remember. What we do remember is that Daddy turned the air blue and his face red with his yelling. Even more unreasonably, from our point of view, he made us fill in the fox hole. He was completely unappreciative of either its aesthetic qualities or the fact that we had worked a whole day on it and that he, himself, had demonstrated how effective it was. He simply ordered us to fill it in NOW. I suppose we must have filled it in, since there are no holes in the field, but I can't remember doing it. I just remember how frustrated I felt with the total unreasonableness of his adult demands.



*Drawing and Mechanical Comments by Frank Olson*

*The Garden Tractor was a tippable, hard-to-handle thing. Mom couldn't hang on to it at all. It had a single cylinder engine, water cooled by a fan driven by a flat belt. Dad overhauled it; took the piston and rings out of an old '39 Hudson. There were fly wheels inside the wheels on both sides that revolved opposite to the wheels. The Fordson reared up all the time; was know as a widow maker. The clutch wasn't worth a nickel. Didn't work at all. You had to kick it into gear and jerk it out.*