

# Statues Of the Soil

*Eastern Washington  
'yard art' tells a story  
about our proud  
agricultural past*

*By Dale Anderson*

Most of us have seen yard art, such as those metal cutouts of cats, frogs, chickens, quail or that weird space alien creature used to decorate a garden.

The purpose of the "art" is to add a bit of character to a flower bed or lawn. The objects are not guaranteed to help ward off crows, aphids or grasshoppers, but people seem to feel good about putting them out for neighbors and friends to see.

Driving through the open spaces of Eastern Washington, especially in Adams County, travelers can see life-sized yard art along the highways.

But this yard art is never to be used again. It is farm equipment that maximized its potential for profitability many years ago.

The old plows, seeders and pull-type combines were once the difference maker for many small family farms.

The combines cut down on labor costs, even though some of them still needed three or four men to operate them.

Each of the combines located in abandoned coulees or farmsteads has a story, which will likely never be heard. Some of these machines were dragged to an out-of-sight spot by a farmer, who thought he found the perfect hiding place.

But when new roads are built, a piece of early American agriculture may also be unveiled.

The combines were bought to make life easier and make the farms more efficient. They would be



*Above, harvesting with a combine pulled by a steam engine tractor about 1907. Photo courtesy of Harland Eastwood. Below, working days are over for this Case combine. Many such farming hulks dot the scrubland of Eastern Washington, where they once helped put food on the table for dryland farmers. Photo by Dale Anderson.*

replaced by bigger, faster and better machines, which would eliminate even more harvest labor.

Driving past the remaining hulks of the John Deere 36Bs, International 51s, J.I. Case, Harris and Holt machines, travelers may wonder what the harvests of 60 to 70 years ago were like, when these machines gobbled up dryland acres of wheat and brought in a farm's annual income.

There were long, arduous days filled with chaff, sweat, blood and short tempers when things didn't go so well.

But ask any hired man of those days and he probably would say it

was the long tables full of food he longed for. Sure, there was some money to be made, but the great harvest crew cooks could make any troubled day feel a whole lot better.

For anyone traveling through the Big Bend Electric Co-op service area, it doesn't take much of a glance off the pavement to find these statues of the soil. The color may be red, green or even a silver-gray of galvanized metal, which may tell little about the manufacturer.

Curious motorists may wonder about the make and model of each machine. Some don't notice or care. For others, it is a big part of our agricultural past that slips away a little more each day we drive by.

It is hard to romanticize about today's farming and the harvests, because the behemoth combines travel so fast and make such quick work of a 160-acre field.

In its day, there was something about a crawler tractor pulling a combine, lumbering over and around the rolling hills, that was a sight to see.

The tractor's tracks clattered, the combine's Hercules engine roared with a deafening exhaust, and the belts and chains rattled as they moved the grain and straw through the belly of these formidable machines.





*Above, an International Harvester rests peacefully amongst the sage. Below, a John Deere derelict.*

When there was a breakdown in the miserable heat, the sounds of men screaming out verbiage to make a sailor blush somehow made it easier to replace a sprocket or broken chain and finish out a long day.

There is an interesting phenomenon about harvest. It seems that the longest side of a field always had a tail wind, which meant the chaff spewing from the back of the combine would blow onto the necks of the harvest crew.

A more miserable feeling is tough to imagine. That is why the men wore long sleeve shirts that were buttoned to the neck.

There were no air conditioned cabs to crawl into. The workers were out in the elements, no matter how intense the heat.

The value of these machines can never truly be measured by today's standards. Just realize that one of these combines was responsible for harvesting the crop that the farm family would need to survive for another year.

Equipment dealers from the small towns sold the combines to local farmers. They had parts ready to go on the shelves, which they hoped could fix any major break-

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They also had mechanics available in case the problem could not be easily fixed by the harvest crew.

Many of the farm equipment businesses have long since closed their doors or were bought out by bigger dealers that have survived through economic downturns and upswings.



There were a lot of small family farms back then. Each farm needed at least one combine. Today, six or more small farms now may be operated by one farm entity.

Technology has changed farming forever. The new equipment has allowed the American farmer to be more efficient and a better steward of the soil. That fact, we can all appreciate.

But as you travel through the dryland farming country of this state, take a look at some of the remnants from days gone by. Envision what made this country truly great.

Don't look at the remaining hulks of obsolete farm equipment as junk. Look at it as part of an American agricultural history lesson.

Maybe then, you, too, will see the real value of this yard art. ■