

Lion Tractor

Minneapolis, MN 1914-16



Many companies and tractors have been named after animals, like the modern day Steiger Panther and the Melroe Bobcat. At least 20 companies adopted animal names so their products might seem wild, independent, and tough. Some were well-known tractors like those of the Bull Tractor Co. of Minneapolis, whose Little Bull sold 4,000 units in the first six months, making it the fastest selling tractor ever at that time. Others were much less known, such as the Alligator Tractor Co. of St Louis, which manufactured the Model 66-G crawler in 1964-1965. Little else is known about this company.

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During this time, there was much competition between many of the small start-up tractor companies and many were short-lived. The fierceness of competition among tractor companies is exemplified in the story of the Lion Tractor. Billed as the "King of the Farm" and claimed to be "Strong as a lion, made of steel, sensation of the world, never tired, never hungry, never sick," it was first marketed in late 1914 by the Lion Tractor Co. of Minneapolis.

The Lion Tractor caused an immediate uproar from the Bull Tractor Co. (BTC), which brought a patent infringement lawsuit against the competitor. According to BTC, they had commissioned tractor designer D.M. Hartsough to make a better and less expensive Bull tractor. Hartsough accepted the commission and patented the tractor, but instead of turning over the design to the Bull Tractor Co., he sold it to the Lion Tractor Co. There was also a legal complaint against the Lion Tractor Co. According to Farm Implements Magazine, the name Lion was selected in order to mislead buyers into believing the tractor was being sold by P.J. Lyons, a stockholder in the Bull Tractor Company.

A restraining order was placed on the Lion Tractor Co. prohibiting them from manufacturing or selling any more tractors. Simultaneously, the court discovered the Lion Tractor Co. had made only three tractors by that point in time. The Lion Tractor Co. ignored the injunction and continued making a few more Lions. The company was

subsequently found in contempt of court and fined. The Lion Co. was then ordered to not make Lion tractors with the identical brake-steering devices as the Bull. After this, the Lion Co. added "Inc." to its name, reorganized, and sold a few more Lions before going out of business in 1918. Unfortunately for many farmers, the Lion Tractor Co. took down payments from many farmers, but never delivered tractors.



Lion Tractor Co. pinback.

The many frauds in the tractor industry resulted in changes. Advertising became more heavily scrutinized and the Nebraska Tractor Tests were initiated to help assure all farmers the tractors they bought would work. Competition was fierce in the early 1920s because America had 186 tractor makers. Ten years later, there were only 37. Poor-quality tractor companies quickly went out of business and the intense competition in the tractor market calmed down a bit.