

# Port Huron Steam Engine

Port Huron, MI



The Port Huron Engine and Thresher Co. began making steam rollers starting about 1890. They made a total of over 6,000 steam-traction engines along with portable steam, water wagons, threshers, sawmills, hay press balers, corn shellers, and other road-building machinery.

Port Huron Steam Engine and Thresher Company has its roots in the city of Battle Creek, Missouri. In 1851, a blacksmith named William Brown began custom blacksmithing and foundry work. Brown was soon overwhelmed with requests. He constructed a small building and hired a few men to assist. He named his facility the Upton Manufacturing Company.



In 1875, the city council decided to take the risk to invest in the town's industry, hoping to grow and improve Port Huron. Prominent citizen, Charles E. Harrington procured verbal commitments to invest capital and met with William Brown. Three years later, Upton Manufacturing relocated to Port Huron with a total of 51 people subscribing for approximately \$100,000 worth of stock in the company. Fourteen years after their start-up, Upton Manufacturing Company employed 102 factory assemblers/machinists, 15 traveling salesmen, and eight office workers, and offered an extensive line of agricultural machinery. In 1890, the

name of the company was changed to Port Huron Engine and Thresher Company and it continued to grow from William Brown's initial two employees to about 700 workmen in their three plants. By the 1910s, the firm was one of the leaders in the industry and able to count Case, Scheidler, and John Deere among its competitors.

During the early 1890s, America experienced a depression, and the company was on the verge of financial ruin on several occasions. What appeared to save the company from liquidation and receivership was a bicycling craze that swept over America in the mid 1890s. The company promoted road improvements and repair for bicyclists through the design and deployment of steam rollers and road graders. The relatively swift turnabout in sales resulted in an attempted takeover of the company in 1902, yet company leaders proposed to remain in Port Huron and expand the business into other areas such as manufacturing sawmills and corn shellers.

Like other traction-engine manufacturers, Port Huron was forced to complement its existing line through the development of a gasoline tractor. The Port Huron gas tractor was first produced in 1915, after nearly three years of planning. All components were manufactured by the company, with the exception of the engine. Unfortunately, the basic design of the tractor, particularly the drive train, proved to be so poor that hardly any farmers wanted one.

Instead of employing a standard gear-to-gear transmission, Port Huron engineers incorporated a friction-drive mechanism that consisted of rotating fiber disks driving against each other at perpendicular angles. When the tractor was under a load, these disks produced excessive slippage and disengaged the drive train. High fuel consumption and spark plug fouling compounded the miseries of this seemingly cursed tractor. Very few were built between 1917 and 1921, and none are known to exist in today.

In 1922, president A. E. West and treasurer J. I. Sullivan formally acknowledged overall sales had diminished and the attempt to break into the gasoline tractor market had not been realized because of flaws with the tractor. The gasoline-powered tractor spelled the death of traction steam engines, and, although Port Huron Engine and Thresher continued on as a business for many years, its day as a steam engine manufacturer ended in the 1920s.

Although the Port Huron Steam Engine and Thresher Company was able to weather mergers, attempted take-overs, and the depression of 1890 through ingenuity and innovation, their demise epitomized the transitional crises which faced all tractor manufacturers between 1910 and the Great Depression.