This Ford Tractor was not made by the famous automobile maker Henry Ford, but rather by an enterprising man named William Baer Ewing, who intended to capitalize on the well-known Ford name. Henry Ford wanted to manufacture a tractor, but the success of his automobile kept him so busy that W. Baer Ewing beat him to it by establishing The Ford Tractor Company of Minneapolis in 1915.

When Ewing set up the Ford Tractor company, he was working for the Federal Securities Company (FSC) in Minneapolis as its manager. He reaped all the profits as the FSC manager as he sold Ford stock, but also owned the company, which sold the machines to farmers. In 1914, Ewing obtained the rights to a tractor design through Lion Traction Co. and began looking for a name for his new tractor. Ewing knew he had to have a moniker both easily recognized and strong enough to pull in buyers. He found Paul B. Ford, whom he hired and made director of the Ford Tractor Co. in exchange for the use of his name. Ford Tractor Company claimed: “Mr. Paul B. Ford, inventor and designer of the Ford Tractor, has devoted years of his life to its study.” But Ford knew nothing of tractor design, and Ewing wanted Ford solely because of his last name.

Ewing then hired a Minneapolis designer named Robert Kinkead to modify the Lion tractor. Kinkead insisted the machine’s design was seriously flawed, but Ewing overruled those concerns and instructed Kinkead to proceed with the patent applications. Ewing knew Kinkead was right and the tractor needed more work, but was certain the Ford name would sell the tractor. Kinkead, reluctant to have his name connected with the venture, left the company. Henry Ford also tried to put a stop to a ‘Ford’ tractor coming out of Minneapolis, but he was unsuccessful and Henry Ford & Son were forced to sell their new tractor as ‘Fordson’ because Ewing had taken the name ‘Ford.’

Ewing claimed the company was making two tractors a day in its Ford plant, and when the night shift was started it would produce five a day. He said orders with the $75 deposit were pouring in from all over the world, and the tractors were being sold quicker than they could be produced. The company was making money.

Finally, the house of cards tumbled. Fewer than a 100 – perhaps only 30 – Ford tractors were ever sold, not thousands as the company claimed. Ford Tractor Company of Minneapolis went into bankruptcy and few Ford tractors still exist today.

There is an upside to Ewing’s greed and deception. When Nebraskan legislature representative Wilmot Crozier was duped with his Ford tractor, he proposed a bill allowing manufacturers to sell tractors in Nebraska only after thorough evaluations verified their claims. The bill was adopted and testing began at the University of Nebraska in 1920. Within a few years, the entire tractor industry adopted the Nebraska Farm Tractor Tests as the gold standard across the nation.