

'Toy Farming' Is Next Best Thing

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INDIANA (Indiana Co.) —

Ever since Fred Foster was a teenager and worked on Indiana County potato and cabbage farms in the 1950s, he has wanted to own and live on a farm. But he realized it's a tough business.

"It's probably best that I just have a 150-acre farm in my basement," he said.

Not only can Foster farm in the cool, well-lighted comfort of the lower level of his home, he can also enjoy the nearly 400 farm implements — including 258 tractors — he keeps down there.

It all started about Christmas 1986. On a visit to a local farm implement dealership, Foster decided to buy a one-sixteenth scale Ertl model of an Allis-Chalmers tractor like the one he had driven on the farm where he worked as a boy.

On the back of the tractor's box was an invitation to join the Ertl Farm Toy Club.

"I was a little uncomfortable listing my age," he said. "But this is where my interest started."

Today a large part of the basement of Foster's White Township, Indiana County home is occupied by a 17-foot by 13-foot scale farm layout, complete with farm implements, buildings, livestock, and farmers. And in lighted, glass-door display cases along the wall are dozens of the tractors and pieces of farm equipments Foster has added to his collection since that first Allis Chalmers.

These are not just toy tractors. Many are Precision Series models — nearly exact replica made of steel, with rubber tires, gearshifts that move and seats that have springs. When you turn the steering wheel, the front wheels turn on many models.

Many of the tractors in Foster's basement are from manufacturers' collector series — one tractor was offered each year for several years.

From behind a glass door Foster retrieves an Ertl model commemorating the five millionth 1066 tractor built by International. Foster said he paid \$45 for it five years ago. He estimates it's worth about \$250.

Models of a John Deere 620 tractor and hay baler — circa 1954 — were bought for \$20. The tractor alone today is worth \$100, Foster said.

So the models are good investments?

"Yes, but it's like the stock market. You have to watch it a lit-

tle bit," he said.

But it's evident Foster isn't in it for the money. It's for the fascination with tractors and farm life. The men he worked for as a teenager were "the first to give me the value of farming," he said.

Not all of his collection came straight from manufacturers. He lifts an old John Deere from the shelf and recounts how he found it at a yard sale. The tractor obviously was a child's toy. The green paint has been worn away along some of the edges and the steering wheel is missing.

That's not a problem, Foster said. When he gets time he'll repaint the tractor, and replacement steering wheels and other parts can be ordered from manufacturers to replace ones that are damaged or missing.

One of the oldest pieces in his collection is a cast-aluminum steam thrasher from about 1956. He also has several pieces of Tru-Scale implements and an old tractor made at Hubley. Both Tru-Scale and Hubley have been out of business for decades, he said.

But it's rare to find valuable collectible farm toys at yard or garage sales.

"This has become a smart industry," he said. "People know what the values are."

The best places to find farm toys already in circulation are organized toy shows, like the big one coming up in mid-July in Beaver Falls, Beaver County, he said.

Other collectors gather at the shows to sell and swap toys and parts and to admire each other's collections.

About eight years ago Foster came to a conclusion: "Now that I'm collecting, I should display them in some way," he said.

That's when he hit upon the idea for his "150-acre farm" in his basement.

On specially-designed tables with plastic foam tops, Foster designed and built a diorama depicting a farm scene from the 1940s and '50 — the era when he fell in love with farming.

The centerpiece of Foster's display is a scratch-built barn. Constructed to one-sixteenth the scale to complement his tractors and implements, the barn is 36 inches long, 23 inches wide, and 26 inches high at the peak of the roof.

Foster spent months building it. He hand-cut the rafters and siding boards and — just like the real barns built years ago — he pinned the rafters and braces together with small wooden dowels.



No, that's not a giant making its way through an Indiana farm. That's Fred Foster on his huge miniature farm, making some minor adjustments.

A section of the roof and floor are removable so that the working stanchions and bull pen in the lowest level are visible.

He even handmade the tiny hinges for the main double doors, fashioning them out of copper tubing he cut and hammered into shape.

One side of the barn roof is covered with miniature shingles Foster bought at a hobby store. But the hobby shop went out of business before he had all the shingles he needed. His solution: He built a small wooden extension ladder and positioned one of his farmers at the top of the ladder, depicting him installing the first row of shingles in a re-roofing project.

Other hand-built structures in the display are an L-shaped house with windows that slide up and down, a milk house with cooler and old milk cans, a corn crib with screened sides, a combination out-house and coal house, and a covered bridge crossing a small stream.

And everywhere around the display are Foster's busy farmers and their tractors — pulling hay wagons, plowing and disc harrowing fields, and spraying cabbage.

There are also lots of animals — cows, horses, sheep, chickens, barnyard cats and dogs, even deer and an owl in a tree.

Foster used a table saw in his basement workshop to rip soft pine boards into the sizes he

needed. But much of the diorama is made from other materials at hand. Torn up surface filters give the illusion of water in the stream. And carpet underlayment cut in strips and laid side-by-side looks like furrows behind a Farmall M and three-bottom Little Genius plow.

Foster was unable to find a replica of the Iron Age sprayer he had used as a teen, so he built his own. Scaled down from a parts list of an actual 10-row sprayer, Foster cut tin, aluminum, and rubber hoses and soldered connections to build his own sprayer. The boom, made of brass tubing, swings in and out, up and down.

An Oliver Super 88 pulls the sprayer across a field of make-believe cabbage plants in his display.

It takes a considerable amount of time and work, but Foster can disassemble his diorama, pack it into a trailer, and take it on the road to toy shows. At a toy show in Summerville, Jefferson County,

his farm display won awards three years in a row.

It was also featured in a 1997 issue of Toy Farmer magazine.

Foster is the senior buyer at FMC Corporation, a materials-handling firm near Homer City, Indiana County. When he retires in 16 months, he'll have more time to tinker on his farm. He wants to paint a Mail Pouch tobacco sign on the end of the barn and install lights in the barn and house.

He also plans to add a horse barn, a gristmill along the stream, and a main road near the back of the barn. Foster hasn't been able to find a toy manufacturer that is building replicas of some of the potato and cabbage harvesting equipment he used as a boy, so he plans to make those, too.

Out of all the toy tractors in his basement, Foster can still pick his favorite — a Farmall Super M.

"I like the red ones," he explained.



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Foster cares for a large tractor collection at his home.