

# ANTIQUE POWER<sup>®</sup>

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# The CRAWLER that Lindeman Built

This 1931 John Deere GPO is the oldest Lindeman crawler known to exist in running condition.

by Candace Brown

**O**n a Saturday in September 2015, scents of wood smoke and tractor exhaust wafted through the drizzle outside a building near Forks, Washington. Conversation, laughter, the clanging of a dropped wrench hitting the floor, the hiss of a pop can, and the panting of a friendly brown dog created the party's soundtrack. Ninety-seven-year-old Theodore Spoelstra settled into a lawn chair just inside the large open door to watch the fun. Since he could no longer play with the tractors in his vast collection, the next best thing was to see others do so. Friends had arrived for an annual weekend gathering devoted to keeping Spoelstra's old iron running and repaired.

With the final turn of the flywheel and a puff of exhaust, one of his favorite tractors, a low-slung green beast, rumbled to life. This was no ordinary "Johnny Popper." This 1931 John Deere Lindeman GPO crawler is one of only 26 or 27 ever built—all by the Lindeman Power Equipment (LPE) Co. in Yakima, Washington.

This example, serial no. 15045, is believed to be the oldest known to exist in *running condition*. It represents a vital link in the chain of events leading to





Lindeman Power Equipment Co. built no more than 27 of these GPO crawlers. The end came when Deere quit producing the GPO chassis.



This photo from the Lindeman Archives shows a Lindeman GPO crawler with the fenders intact. Farmers often removed them. None are now known to exist. *Photo courtesy of Ted Adams and the Lindeman Archives*

the more well-known John Deere Lindeman BO crawler that appeared later. Both crawlers came about because of Jesse “Jess” Lindeman, a talented pattern maker, equipment designer, and LPE Co. president.

“That crawler was strictly Jess’s idea, because of our area,” said Yakima resident Ted Adams, who was Lindeman’s good friend and business associate. “At that time, the apple trees were real big, so they had big limbs that stuck out. They had to have a small crawler to get under them.”

The original GPO model moved on wheels, not tracks. Deere & Co. had introduced the GP (General Purpose) model in 1928 to replace the ill-fated Model C, its first row crop tractor. In 1929, Lindeman lowered a standard version of the GP by several inches, allowing it to fit under tree limbs. Impressed, Deere began to produce this new GPO (General Purpose Orchard) tractor for sale.



With their power, great traction, and low center of gravity, the Lindeman crawlers were well suited to the needs of orchardists in hilly country. *Photo courtesy of Ted Adams and the Lindeman Archives*



This tractor's original serial number tag shows "0-15045." It is the oldest John Deere GPO crawler known to exist in running condition.

By this time, Deere & Co. had tried and failed to successfully produce a half-track crawler from the Model D. In 1932, the Lindeman company took tracks from a Best Model 30 and made its own crawler attachment to fit a D. It built only three or four of these tractors and shipped one to Deere & Co. headquarters in Moline, Illinois, for testing in 1933. Deere, however, saw too many disadvantages in the design, including cost, and it also had plans to discontinue the D model. The GPO became the best candidate for conversion to a crawler. Less expensive and lower to the ground, it also had the advantage of a 3-speed transmission.

After Jesse Lindeman died in 1992, the Lindeman family gave Adams all the company records, photos, and more. From these, Adams created the Lindeman Archives to preserve this important piece of tractor history. The Lindeman Archives website ([www.lindemanarchives.com](http://www.lindemanarchives.com)) offers, among many resources, audio files of interviews



with Jesse Lindeman that were recorded in Yakima in 1988 by Del Bice (now deceased) who represented the Yakima Museum and Historical Assoc. On the recordings, Lindeman recalled the success of the GPO crawlers.

“We built 26 or 27 of the [GPO crawlers], and they ran very well,” Lindeman said. “We had awfully good luck with them. We built our own track frames for those, and track rollers [as well]. We cast the pads. I made the patterns myself.”

LPE Co. produced GPO crawlers from 1933 through early 1935. However, official Deere documentation for Spoelstra’s tractor shows, based on the serial number, that it was shipped from the warehouse on April 6, 1931. Adams explained the discrepancy.

Of the 26 or 27 GPOs converted to crawlers by Lindeman, Adams is sure most were shipped to the Lindeman dealership with wheels. Spoelstra’s 1931 model was one of the earliest ones. Records that he obtained from the John Deere archives show a mere five GPOs sent as skid units—without wheels or axles. He also believes some of the wheeled GPOs that were later converted came from other dealerships outside the Yakima area.

“I am very sure that if a farmer had a wheeled GPO tractor, he could bring it to Jesse [Lindeman] and have it converted to a crawler, just like Jesse did later with the BO conversion kit,” Adams said. “There were no serial numbers kept or they were lost when Deere moved the production back east [in 1954].” (Deere purchased LPE Co. at the end of 1946, effective Jan. 1, 1947.)

According to Adams’ records, Lindeman did not receive any GPO chassis to be converted into crawlers until April 1935.

“Ted Spoelstra’s crawler was built by Deere in 1931, as a wheeled tractor to start with, and it was used as a wheeled tractor for a few years, then it was converted to a crawler once Lindeman started building crawlers in 1935 or later,” Adams said.



A bit of imagination is required to picture Spoelstra’s GPO crawler starting out as a wheeled tractor, but it did.



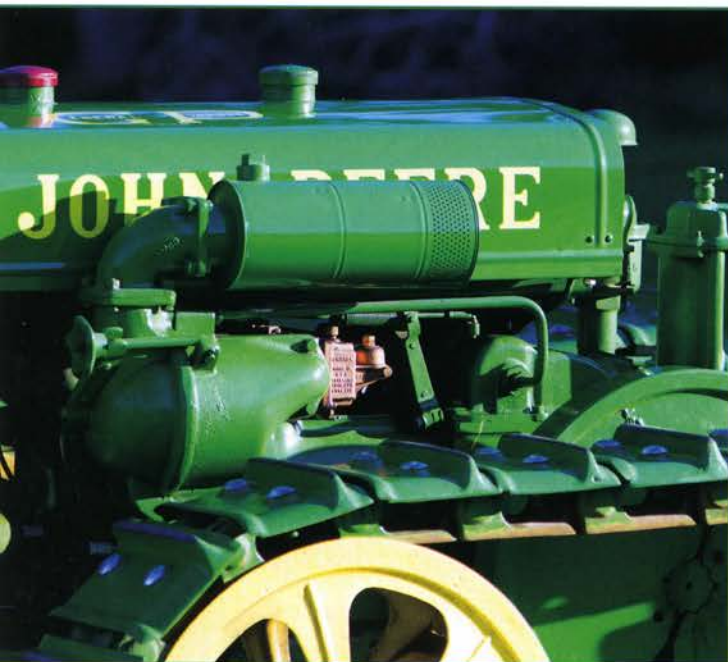
The GPO was steered through the manipulation of levers. Its transmission had three gears forward and one reverse.





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The GP and its variants were built during the "2-cylinder era" of John Deere production. The engine was designed to burn kerosene and displaced 339.3 cubic inches.  
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Jim Watt, who was an expert restorer, built the undercarriage and had new sprockets and a few pads recast.





Some people believe the GPO crawlers were offered with or without fenders. Adams repeated what Lindeman said.

"Jesse told me that every GPO crawler left the factory with fenders," Adams said. "Once in the field, they would get packed full of trash. The farmers would take them off to clean the trash out and never put them on again. Sadly, no fenders have ever been found."

In the late 1970s, Spoelstra's GPO crawler was rescued from the edge of a field near McCleary, Washington, by an unidentified man who no longer lives in the area. He told his friend, John Fields, about the discovery.

"[The man] got a tip that there was a BO Lindeman crawler in that area, and he went to find it," Fields said. "When he got up there, it was a GPO Lindeman."

Although rusty, the tractor was basically complete, except for a few of the cast-iron pads on the crawler assembly and, of course, the fenders.

"I don't think the pads deteriorated too much," he said. "When they retrieved the tractor, it was picked up with a front-end loader and set on a tilt bed trailer, so it wasn't moved or rolled at that time."

About a decade passed before Spoelstra acquired the tractor. During the 1990s, he hired Jim Watt (now deceased) to restore it. Not a nut or bolt escaped removal and cleaning. The steering bands and clutches were difficult to get in and out, but Watt went through all of them. The body was not bad, but he built a new undercarriage. He had sprockets and idlers cast, along with a few pads.

Spoelstra's days of watching others enjoy his collection ended with that September 2015 gathering. Memories of it will be treasured by his many friends.

"I took a trip with him, back through the Dakotas," Fields said. "We had a good time. I can't say enough about his hospitality and kindness and everything about him. I was really glad that he was the one to be able to bring this one back for everyone to enjoy." 🚧

*Antique Power was saddened to learn that Mr. Spoelstra passed away just before this issue went to print. We offer our condolences to his family. A delightful man who loved collecting tractors and so much more, he was beloved by countless friends and admirers throughout the Pacific Northwest and beyond.*



Theodore "Ted" Spoelstra (1918–2017) spent decades collecting the tractors and other mechanical wonders that he loved.

*This article could not have been written without the personal knowledge and resources so graciously provided by Ted Adams and the help of Spoelstra's friends, Rene Davis and John Fields. Please visit the Lindeman Archives website: [www.lindemanarchives.com](http://www.lindemanarchives.com).*

## Vision and Ingenuity Change Tractor History

**J**esse Lindeman was born in Iowa in 1899. He moved to Washington state in December 1919, at the age of 21, making his home in Yakima, a center of agriculture. He would be joined later by three younger brothers, Harry, Ross, and Joseph. By 1923, Jesse and Harry established, as a partnership, a small retail implement business called Lindeman Power Equipment Co. In 1925, it became a franchise for Cletrac and would sell many Cletrac crawlers for use in the hilly Yakima orchards. By 1928, Ross Lindeman had joined the partnership, and Paul H. Austin was hired as the general manager. The company also sold a successful orchard sprayer and other power equipment of its own design.

The effects of the Great Depression hurt sales. Then personal tragedy struck in 1930, when 29-year-old Harry Lindeman died in an automobile accident. The company had to reorganize, dissolving the partnership and incorporating. Jesse Lindeman became president, and his brother Ross and Mr. Austin became vice president and secretary-treasurer, respectively. They forged ahead. The decision to act as an agent for John Deere tractors, while building and selling its own equipment, kept the company going and propelled it toward its future place of importance in John Deere history.