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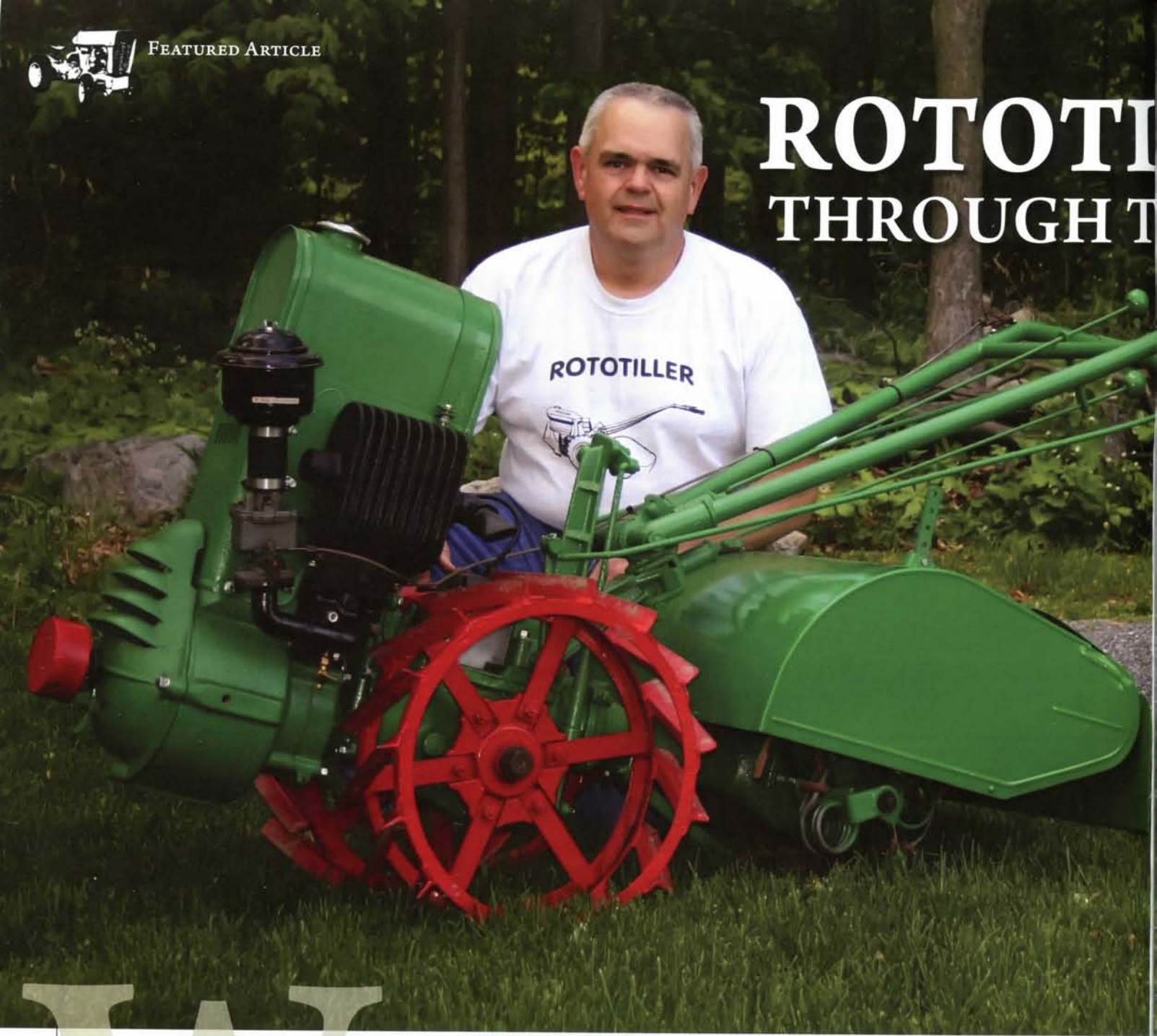


WITH VIRTUALLY NO EXPERIENCE IN AGRICULTURAL EQUIPMENT, Cadwallader Washburn Kelsey established the original Rototiller Company of New York City in 1930. He was born in Clarens, Switzerland on July 30, 1880 while his parents were touring Europe. He took an interest in machines and engines early in life. During the summers, he chose to be an apprentice at a machine shop instead of vacationing with his parents. By the age of 17, he had a complete machine shop in his home. His early experience was in the automotive industry, operating several dealerships for several makes of automobiles. In 1910 he leased an old factory and began to manufacture a 3-wheeled car called the Motorette. Although this venture was brief, a connection was made that would lead him into the rotary tillage arena.

LLER®
HE YEAR

By Charlie H. Zuck
Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania

The Author with his restored B1-3

1 >> Pictured is my SIMAR C-30 manufactured around 1937. It has a 3hp 2-stroke engine and tills 14" wide. It has a 2-speed transmission where low/high range is selected by inserting a long pin in the right hub for high or the left hub for low. Ratchet hubs are used for ease in turning.

In 1930, Siemens, a German tiller manufacturer, brought their tiller to America. Siemens offered a distributorship to Kelsey; thus The Rototiller Company was born with an office on Broadway in New York City. Kelsey was instrumental in making several improvements to the Siemen machines. In 1932, Kelsey added the SIMAR Tiller line to his business. SIMAR tillers ranged in horsepower from 2 ½ to 10 with tilling widths of 14" to 36". To accommodate this addition, he moved to a warehouse in Long Island City and incorporated his business as ROTOTILLER, INC. He also registered ROTOTILLER as his trademark.

In 1934, Kelsey designed and built a 4-1/2hp Model AA All-American Rototiller. Lack of money for a complete manufacturing facility prevented full production of the AA. In April 1937, Rototiller, Inc. purchased the former Draper Cordage factory on 102nd Street in Troy, New York and started the process for full production of American made Rototillers. The next year, the first tiller, an improved Model AA but renamed the A-1, was built in Troy.

The Wheelbarrow Cultivator came on the scene in 1939 (**see photo 4**). It was the first American tiller designed for the backyard gardener. Apparently the idea was ahead of its time and sales were poor, so for the next few years ROTOTILLER continued with the B series of tillers.

3 >> This A-1 is the oldest ROTOTILLER known to exist and is housed in the Burden Iron Works Museum in Troy, New York.

2 >> Model AA

The B-1 followed in 1940 (**see photo 5**).

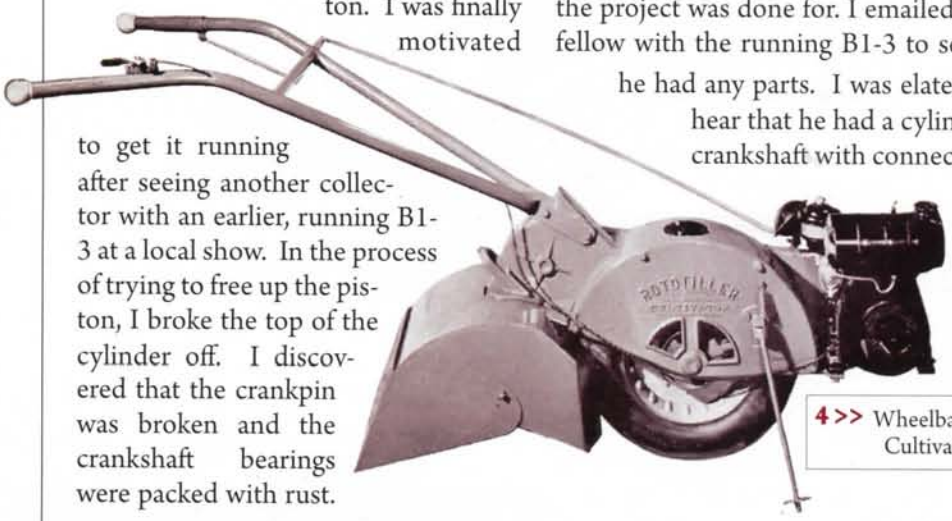
The very similar B1-2 followed in 1941, and the B1-3 in 1942.

Restoring My B1-3

Photo 6 shows a later version of the B1-3, that I restored possibly built in 1943 or 1944. It is a 5hp machine with a tilling width of 17" and sold for $485. I acquired the B1-3 in 2000.

The wheels and tiller section were the only things that were not stuck when I got it. I kept oil in the cylinder and manifold for seven years to hopefully penetrate the rust and free up the piston. I was finally motivated to get it running after seeing another collector with an earlier, running B1-3 at a local show. In the process of trying to free up the piston, I broke the top of the cylinder off. I discovered that the crankpin was broken and the crankshaft bearings were packed with rust.

5 >> Les Miller of New Jersey owns this B-1.



4 >> Wheelbarrow Cultivator

It took about 6 tons of force to push that piston from the cylinder. I thought the project was done for. I emailed the fellow with the running B1-3 to see if he had any parts. I was elated to hear that he had a cylinder, crankshaft with connecting rod and piston. All I needed was to find rings, which he gave me a source for. I was able to get it finished and running for the 2007 Rough & Tumble Show in Kinzers, PA. It was good to hear the old 2-stroke come to life again after being silenced for so many years.

Kelsey was now interested in producing tillers for the average homeowner. In 1944, through an agreement with Graham-Paige Motor Corporation, ROTOTILLER, INC. licensed Graham-Paige to manufacture tillers using the ROTOTILLER design and selling them under the ROTOTILLER brand. ROTOTILLER, INC. tillers would now

6 >> My restored B1-3.

7 >> My B1-3 before restoration.

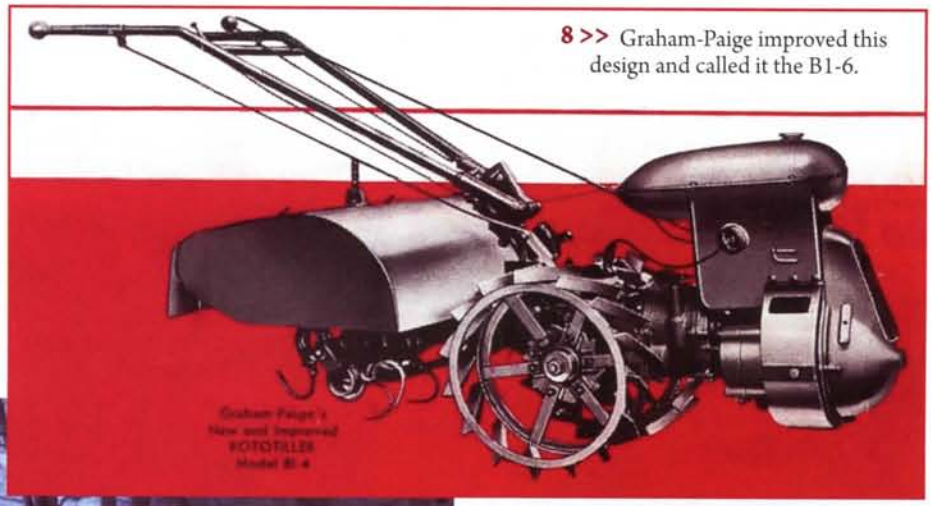
be sold under the Roto-Ette trademark. On a recent trip to Troy's Burden Iron Works Museum, I learned that ROTOTILLER built two B1-4 machines with one going to Graham-Paige and the other going to Kelsey. If you are planning a trip to the Troy, NY area, stop at the Burden museum and see the collection of Rototiller and Troy-Bilt tillers.

Graham-Paige built and sold the B1-6 and B1-7 with various attachments from around 1945 until about 1950. They also marketed a small, 4-wheeled tractor with the ROTOTILLER 2-stroke engine called Jaques-Frazer Model T.

In 1945, Kelsey made his second attempt at a small one-wheeled tiller. His earlier attempt in 1938, with his Wheelbarrow Cultivator, was not well received. Kelsey's automotive background resulted in his desire to come out with new models every year. This trait kept Rototiller, Inc. broke much of the time.

The new Roto-Ette Home Gardener had a 1-1/2hp engine and a two speed transmission. My Home Gardener pictured in **photo 10** was built in February 1947. All of the castings are aluminum, which made this a fairly light machine. Its eight attachments made it a versatile piece of equipment. Priced at $330, sales were a slow start but greatly increased by 1948. Serious competition from other manufacturers using cheaper front tine tillers forced orders to decline for the Home Gardener by 1949.

Kelsey's Chief Engineer, George Done, thought the Home Gardener was priced too high for the home gardener. He started designing and building a much simpler machine that could be built at almost half the price. Kelsey was impressed with George's design and ordered the machine into production.



8 >> Graham-Paige improved this design and called it the B1-6.

9 >> Pictured here is my restored B1-6, built in January 23, 1947 in Willow Run, Michigan.

In 1949 the Roto-Ette Model T came on the scene selling at $1 a pound; $194.50. Three months after the Model T went into production, a new one was produced every 9 minutes and they were selling like the proverbial hot cake.

In 1952, the Model 2 and Model 3 production started. The Model 2 had a 2hp engine while the Model 3 had a

10 >> My 1947 Home Gardener.

11 >> My 1951 Model T with 36" field mower.

3hp engine. Both were equipped with the new Lightning Change Front. This allowed quick mounting of various accessories to the front of the tiller.

In 1953, Kelsey unveiled the Model E; a small electric powered tiller that was 20 years in the making. While testing one of Kelsey's imported tillers in 1930, a gentleman named Professor Arche Stone asked him if he could develop "a little tiller on the end of a stick. Something you can just poke around under the plants with." Fifteen years later, Kelsey's wife suggested something light like a vacuum cleaner to till her flowerbeds. The Model E can be a tiller, chain saw, drill, trimmer, edger, auger, grinder, floor polisher, and even a snow thrower (**refer to photo 13**).

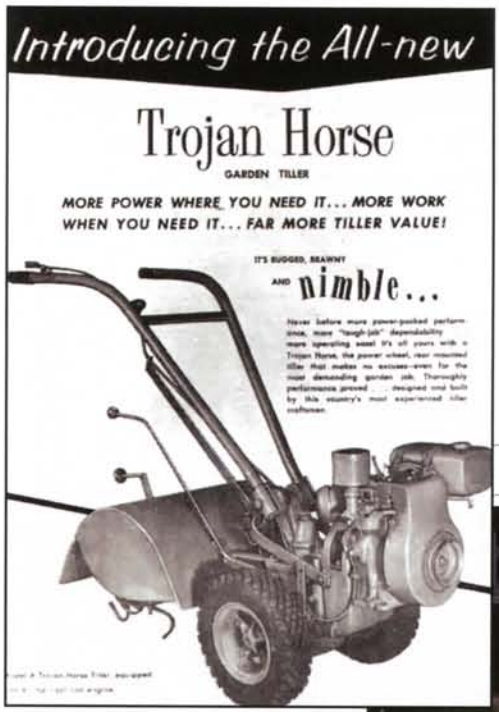
In 1959, ROTOTILLER, INC. decided to sell stock to refinance. The Porter Cable Company bought controlling interest in ROTOTILLER, INC. later that year. The Model 133A pictured in **photo 15** is one of the tillers produced when ROTOTILLER was under Porter Cable. In 1960 ROTOTILLER was sold to Rockwell Manufacturing Company of Pittsburgh. Porter Cable Rototiller was then sold to Moto Mower of Detroit. As a condition of the sale, Rockwell was required to supply replacement parts for the Rototillers during a 5-year period. Rockwell did not

12 >> My 1957 Model 3 and 1956 Model 2.

13 >> Model E

want this responsibility and started looking for someone else to do it. They knew much of the original machinery was still in Troy and that Kelsey's Chief Engineer, George Done, was there too. Rockwell offered to sell George the parts business and all the necessary equipment. On October 1, 1961, WATCO MACHINE PRODUCTS was formed to make replacement parts for Rototillers.

George wanted to do more than make replacement parts, so again went to work at home to design another rear-end tiller. In 1962 he introduced his new design and called it the Trojan Horse (**refer to photo 14**). Six years later, Eaton, Yale & Towne's Trojan Division, who manufactured large earth-moving equipment, forced WATCO to change the name of the tiller. It was changed to Troy-Bilt in honor of the city where they were made. Watco also changed the company name to Garden Way Manufacturing Company, Inc. Troy-Bilt enjoyed great success during the coming years as gardening became popular. I learned in my Troy visit that at their peak, Garden Way had a 26- week backlog of tiller orders. Gardening eventually lost its popularity and Garden Way bought too many other companies. They most likely, forgot what made them successful. They were forced to file for bankruptcy in 2001 and were eventually bought by MTD.



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Although not featured here, I do have a 1979 Troy-Bilt Horse that my parents bought new, to complete my collection.

Gardening Beyond the Plow, a Garden Way publication, was used as a resource for the information in this article.

Editor's Note:
To see more photos and information, check out Charlie's website www.paonline.com/chzuck. Charlie welcomes email at *earth_grinder@hotmail.com*.

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15 >> Model 133A