

Farm Tough: A Truck for Your Farm

Farm trucks have come a long way since their 1920s inception, but the way we use them remains the same.

by Daniel Broussard

1931 AA Ford Flatbed
A little history: Two Generations of Tough

Citrus farming runs in Bill Graham's family. Bill is a third-generation grower.

The 1931 Ford flatbed, ton-and-a-half truck that he now keeps in his hay shed, has worked the family orchards for two generations.

Bill's father, who was born in 1889, started with 11 acres of oranges and lemons and in 1931 bought the new ton-and-a-half flatbed truck from the local Ford dealer in Whittier, Calif.

Some of Bill's earliest memories are of the truck out in the orchards.

"The truck was four years old when I was born—it was always around," he says.

Bill's father used the truck strictly as a work truck, "to haul lemons and fertilizer, and water to the young trees; we had a tank we could put on it—it did every farm operation."

By eight years of age Bill had learned to drive the truck, and by 10 he was working in the orchards.

"Dad would say, 'down where the young trees are, take the truck out and get them water.'"

Later, and just like teenagers today, Bill would find any reason to get behind the wheel.

"Just as an excuse to drive the truck I would go down and get 500 gallons of water to irrigate the garden," he says.

During the growing season the truck worked from dawn to well after dark, hauling picked oranges and lemons all day and in the evenings carrying oil out to the heaters, which would protect the fruit from frost.

With just a 40-hp, four-cylinder engine the truck would haul 108 crates of citrus, often weighing up to two tons (trips to the local packing shed were not speedy).

When he was just 21, Bill purchased 12 acres of lemons.

Starting out, he used the '31 Ford model A, since his father had begun using some of the newer, more powerful trucks.

The '31 Ford was "the first truck I used to haul my lemons to the packing shed ... later I got a '36 Dodge, which could carry 162 crates, so every two loads I would have had [to make] three loads ... with the model A," he says.

Bill used the Dodge to haul his crop to the packing sheds and kept the '31 Ford to be used mostly to carry oil for the heaters in his orchards as well as perform many odd jobs around the ranch.

He was still using the Ford into the mid-70s when he sold his Southern California orchards and bought 40 acres of pears and hay near Placerville, in Northern California.

While the truck is still in running condition today, it has been a while since it has seen regular working duty.

Standard maintenance, a recent valve job on the original engine, and a couple of paint jobs over the years have been all the truck has required to keep it in great shape.

Although there are several old and worn out trucks sitting in Bill's back field, the 1931 Ford that has worked so hard for the Graham family over the years is parked under the roof of the hay shed. In memory of his father, the truck now carries the license plate "Dads AA." In every city and on every street in America the sport utility vehicle (SUV) is as ubiquitous as Starbucks.

Today's SUVs are just the latest manifestation of America's love affair with the ultimate utilitarian vehicle—the pickup truck. From the early 1900s to today, if you own a farm or ranch—large or small—odds are you own a truck.

A TRUCK IS BORN

In 1925, Henry Ford introduced the model T runabout with a pickup body, and ever since trucks have been irreplaceable in the American workplace.

Ford was not the inventor of the truck; several other manufacturers and individual owners were modifying and customizing everything from cars to tractors to make a utility vehicle to fit their needs.

Ford did, however, make the truck available to a mass market. In its first year, Ford sold 34,000 trucks at around \$280 each. In the years that followed, many manufacturers began producing trucks. Ford remained the most prolific producer, but GMC, Chevy and Dodge made great strides in pickup truck sales as well.

Smaller producers like Studebaker, Willys, Jeep, International and Mac also made pickups. Most of the smaller manufacturers either disappeared altogether (like Studebaker), stopped making trucks or moved on to manufacturing large heavy duty vehicles (like International and Mac).

As pickup trucks became more and more important to the everyday workings of big and small businesses, the manufacturers worked to create even more useful vehicles.

The 1925 Ford model T had a 20-hp, four-cylinder engine. Just three years later the 1928 Ford model A had a 40-hp, four-cylinder engine.

By 1929, Chevrolet was making an in-line, six-cylinder motor. Ford, not to be outdone, introduced a V-8, 65-hp engine that was the first mass-produced eight-cylinder engine.

Over the next two decades pickup manufacturers battled for market share, creating trucks that were more powerful and could carry larger payloads.

In the late 1950s, truck manufacturers began to take a harder look at the styling of their trucks. Pickups began to move away from the "classic" rounded front and rear fenders to a more modern, flat-fender look. By the late 1960s, trucks had taken on many of the styling queues that we continue to see today.

In the 1970s truck popularity declined due to new pollution standards that lowered the fuel efficiency of the standard, big V-8 engines.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s trucks began to make a comeback.

Manufacturers found ways to make truck engines even more powerful with better fuel efficiency. They began to create trucks with the everyday creature comforts regularly included in passenger cars. Air conditioning, comfortable seats and stereo systems became standard features.

Sales soared and in 1997 reached 7.2 million or 47 percent of all passenger vehicles sold. The Ford F150 pickup is not just the best selling truck, it is the best-selling passenger vehicle in the world.

SELECTING A FARM TRUCK

In recent years truck makers have begun to modify the truck to meet the needs of more and varied users, while still offering plenty of options for farm and ranch operators.

Deciding which truck to buy for your small farm or ranch is now more of a daunting project than in years past when the most difficult decisions were Ford, Chevy, GM or Dodge in white, red, black or blue.

In addition to the standard-cab, short-bed truck, every manufacturer now offers an extended-cab version with extra seating for kids and adults. Many now offer full crew cabs with full-size rear doors and backseats. In addition to expanded

offerings in the light-duty line, all current truck lines have several offerings in the medium- and heavy-duty lines.

When deciding which truck to buy, your first step should be to take a realistic look at what you need.

What are the most common jobs you will need to do, and what do you need to accomplish those tasks?

How many people need to ride in your truck on a regular basis?

Do you tow a trailer and if so, what is the heaviest trailer weight you expect to pull?

Do you need an eight-foot-bed or can you get away with six feet?

Will your truck strictly be a working vehicle or will it also do double duty as everyday family transportation?

Defining your needs will go a long way to helping you decide which truck is right for you. It will also help you to keep focused on your true needs when faced with the lust for power, polish and that new-car smell.

Once you have decided on what you truly need, you can start looking for a truck to fill those needs.

Before going to a dealer try to research each manufacturer's offerings on the Internet. All the truck makers have extensive websites with a vast array of information. You can get a good idea of what models, options and prices are available right from your home so you will be armed with this information before you head to the dealer.

Try to drive all of the candidate vehicles more than once—a second look will often confirm your first impressions, good or bad, and make your buying decision easier. With current super low (often zero percent if you can qualify) interest rates and incentives, as well as the end-of-the-year push to sell vehicles on the lot, this winter may provide some of the best opportunities to get the perfect new truck for your farm or ranch.

About the Author: Daniel Broussard is a freelance writer and photographer based in Camino, Calif. This article first appeared in the December/January 2003 issue of Hobby Farms magazine. Pick up a copy at your local newsstand or tack and feed store. [Click Here](#) to subscribe to HF.