

Johnny Tractor and His Pals

Johnny Tractor and His Pals was first published by the John Deere tractor manufacturing company in 1958. John Deere tractors are recognized by just about everybody because of their excellent branding, the book being only one small example. I picked up three copies for my grandchildren when I stopped in at Enns Brothers dealership at the Oak Bluff corner on my way back from the Peace Gardens recently. It was one of the first, and one of the few children's picture books we had in our house. We had plenty of books but picture books were noticeable only by their absence. I do still have the Illustrated Bible, which entertained me well into my teens.

Johnny Tractor helped a town kid understand enough about farm machinery so that when I was talking with my cousins I wouldn't sound like an idiot. I did anyway, but that's a different story. Many of my relatives farmed and also had copies, though the kids already knew this stuff. Only a few of them had John Deere tractors or farm machinery on their yards, because they were expensive, and often considered a sign of conspicuous consumption. Allis Chalmers, Cockshutt, Farm-All, and what I knew as Massey Ferguson, which had been Massey Harris previously were more common in my experience in the 1960s.

The illustrations in *Johnny Tractor* are fun and the conceit of inanimate objects coming to life in the dark and having conversations just as appealing as in the Nutcracker, which is in season. The gentle, if not subtle didactic lesson is easy to take because it comes with information, ending on (what we now call) an inclusive note praising teamwork over selfish pride. Subversive stuff, really for 1958, Joseph McCarthy only dead for a year. But perfect for Mennonites, not?

[Digression]

Massey Harris tractors were bright red. They were one of Canada's first multi-national companies, not leaving their Brantford, Ontario operation until 1997. The Massey family were, however, the last generation of Masseys to run Massey-Harris. Other members of the family went on to other accomplishments: [Vincent Massey](#) became [Governor General of Canada](#) and [Raymond Massey](#) became a noted actor in American films. The Massey family used its fortune to improve the city of Toronto and many institutions, such as the University of Guelph, University of Toronto, Upper Canada College, Crescent School, Appleby College, Massey Hall and Metropolitan United Church, were partially financed by the Masseys. Vincent Massey high schools in Winnipeg and Brandon were named after his appointment as Governor General. Also the first Governor General I remember. Massey Harris were major suppliers of self-propelled tanks and artillery to the U.S. Army in World War Two. Conrad Black owned the company for several years returning to profitability until the recession of the 1980s. He cut his losses when he could not negotiate a satisfactory bailout by the province of Ontario and the Canadian government. The company survived without him.