

BIG MACHINE | MANITOBA AGRICULTURAL MUSEUM

Manitoba's Big Roy still stands tall

Tourist attraction | Famous 600 horsepower tractor has received hundreds of thousands of views online

BY ROBERT ARNASON
BRANDON BUREAU

AUSTIN, Man. — Of all the tourist attractions in Western Canada, from wildlife in Banff to polar bears in Manitoba, Jeremy Progein of Switzerland travelled to Canada to see a different beast.

In October, he and his wife Karin came to Canada to see Big Roy, a 600 horsepower Versatile tractor at the Manitoba Agricultural Museum in Austin.

Following his two-hour visit, Progein summed up his impression of Big Roy in two words.

"It's big."

Progein is one of dozens of international tourists who stop at the agricultural museum every year to look the Versatile 1080, a one of a kind machine with four axles and the engine at the back. It weighs nearly 30 tonnes.

Versatile made only one of the tractors at its Winnipeg manufacturing plant.

"We usually ask (visitors), 'how did you hear about us (the museum)?' Big Roy," said Georgette Hutlet, chief museum officer.

"They've read about him in some farm publication, years ago or recently, and they've always kept it in mind and wanted to come and see Big Roy."

Progein, who owns a 150 h.p. Massey and competes in tractor pulls in Switzerland as a hobby, saw the Versatile tractor in a book.

Other museum visitors have seen the tractor in a YouTube video show-



Tanya Wiegand, curator of the Manitoba Agricultural Museum in Austin, holds up a 1/64 scale model of Big Roy. The real Big Roy, a Versatile Model 1080, attracts dozens of international visitors to the museum each year. | ROBERT ARNASON PHOTOS

ing Big Roy in action during the Threshermen's Reunion, which is held every summer on the museum's grounds three kilometres south of the Trans-Canada Highway near Austin.

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF BIG ROY

- Versatile built the Model 1080 in 1977, possibly as part of a "horsepower war" with other tractor manufacturers.
- Its design is unusual. The tractor has four axles and eight wheel drive. The 600 h.p. Cummins diesel engine is located behind the cab, and the fuel tank is in front of the cab.
- The tractor articulates between the second and third axles so that it can be steered.
- It's impossible to see behind the tractor with the engine and two axles behind the cab. Versatile installed a camera on the back and a TV monitor in the cab so that the operator could see the tractor's hitch.
- The tractor's downfall was likely its weight, which is nearly 30 tonnes. A single set of tires caused severe soil compaction.
- Versatile experimented with triple tires, for a total of 24 tires, but the tractor was difficult to manoeuvre. Apparently, Versatile had to knock down the fence surrounding its manufacturing plant in Winnipeg to turn the tractor around with triple tires.
- The company donated it to the Manitoba Agricultural Museum in the 1980s.

Source: Manitoba Agricultural Museum



Officials at the Manitoba Agricultural Museum have plans to restore Big Roy and promote the big machine as a feature attraction.

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"That YouTube video is up to something like 777,000 hits," said museum board member Alex Campbell.

Big Roy drives most of the traffic to the museum's website, she added. "The breakdown of visitors to our website, you can tell what they looked at and where they're from. A lot of Germans like (Big Roy)."

The tractor also generates souvenir sales. Progein bought \$179 worth of Big Roy mugs, T-shirts and scale models on his way out of the museum.

Hutlet and curator Tanya Wiegand, who both began working at the museum this year, realize they have something special in Big Roy.

They are developing a plan to capitalize on the tractor's notoriety, which will include restoration, promotion and a proper display building.

Versatile built the 1080 as a prototype in 1977, and the museum would like to have all its plans in place by 2017 in time for Big Roy's 40th birthday.

Glenn Lennox, a museum board member, said the tractor's 600 h.p. engine is in good shape, but there are other mechanical issues.

"Some gears they can't get it into right now because of the shifting cables (are corroded)," he said.

The tractor has non-standard parts that could be difficult to replace or fix because Versatile built only one, Campbell said.

A bigger concern is building an appropriate home for Big Roy.

The tractor is now stored outdoors in a wooden shed with no walls. It's difficult to get a good look at the tractor or take a proper photograph because it is parked next to other antique tractors and there is no

lighting in the shed.

Campbell said an Australian visited the museum in January this year to see Big Roy. Despite -30 C temperatures, he walked 500 metres through the snow to get a look at the tractor.

Museum staff and directors would prefer to have a more humane setting to display Big Roy and other showcase tractor, but the museum operates on a limited budget.

"For these tractors, we're going to need something like a double-long machinery shed ... built with insulation so it can be heated," Lennox said.

"That's going to be pretty expensive. But the flipside is, we have irreplaceable artifacts here we almost have to protect."

The museum continues to actively promote the tractor. Visitors paid \$20 to drive Big Roy during Manitoba's Open Farm Day Sept. 21.

About 40 people took it for a spin, including two dogs that went along for the ride.

Hutlet doesn't envision a future where visitors can drive Big Roy any day of the week, but she wants to create a memorable experience around

BIG ROY BY THE NUMBERS

- Length: 30.5 feet
- Weight: 57,580 lb. (with fuel)
- Frame: articulated frame with eight wheel drive
- Tire size: 30.5 X 32 singles
- Engine: Cummins KTA 1150-600
- Horsepower: 600
- Fuel tank: 550 US gallons
- Transmission: six gears, top speed of 13.2 mph



Glenn Lennox, a director at the Manitoba Agricultural Museum in Austin, points to a camera on the Versatile 1080, a unique tractor in the museum's collection. The Model 1080 had a camera on its rear and a TV monitor in the cab because it was impossible to see immediately behind the tractor.

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