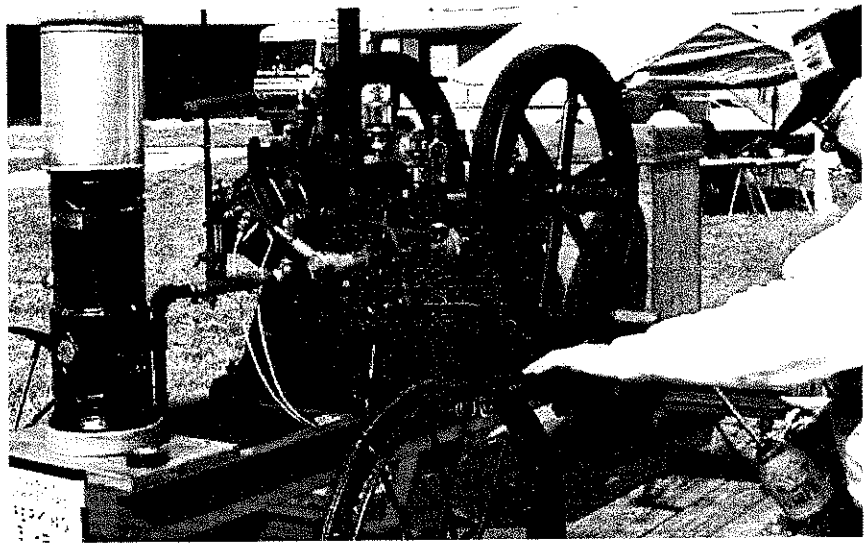
Playing the Waiting Game

Abandoned Perkins Engine Makes a Great Restoration – If it Can Be Bought

JULY 2004

By Glenn Karch



Left: *In April 2004, Glenn Karch's Perkins engine made its debut at the Hillbilly Flywheelers show in Irvine, Ky.*
Below: *The Perkins engine as it was found in an old shed.*

"Good things come to those who wait." The actual meaning of that proverb has probably been lost to time, but I have a hunch that whoever first said it was talking about an old engine. In my case, at least, that's *exactly* what it means.

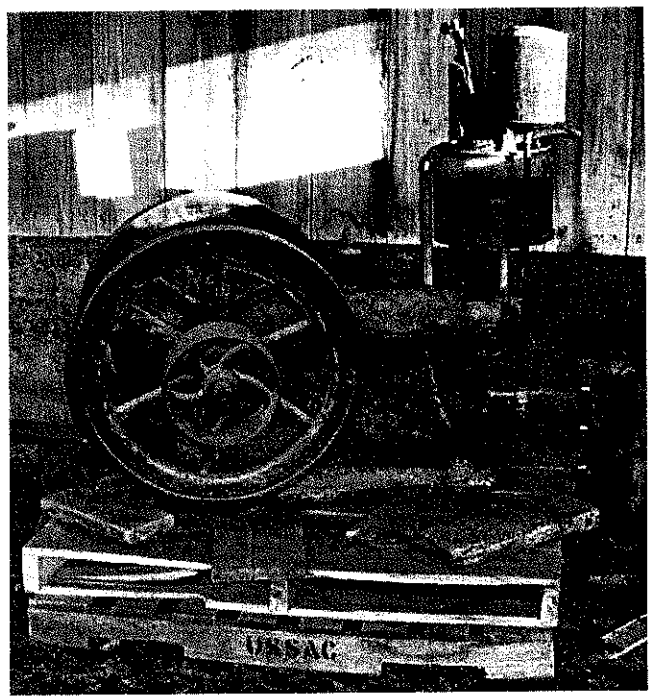
In 1975 while visiting a friend in Owensville, Ind., a neighbor just happened to stop by to say hi. As usual, one of us asked the neighbor if he knew of any gas engines in the area. "There's one in the shed down there on the corner where I used to live," he said. So, the three of us went off to take a look. On a concrete pedestal in the center of a small farm shop sat a 3 HP sideshaft Perkins Windmill Co. engine. A line shaft and a ceiling-mounted pump jack were situated directly above it, which kind of reminded me of a Rube Goldberg cartoon since the whole setup operated a pump out in the cistern.

The guy who rented the farm was a good friend of mine. With that in mind, I asked my friend to make contact with the engine owner, who lived out of state. Time passed and nothing happened. The tenant eventually retired in the mid-1980s, and his son took over the farm and built a new house on 2 acres near the farm. On top of that, the little farm shop that housed the Perkins had been torn down, and the engine was moved to a lean-to in another building where it sat slowly rusting. I told the tenant to cover it with old motor oil to preserve it, but he didn't heed my advice.

Every now and then, I kept inquiring about the possibility of obtaining the engine, but I always received the same answer: "The owner doesn't want to sell it." I even wrote a letter to the owner, but to no avail. All he told me was the missing igniter parts were still around somewhere, but they were never found.

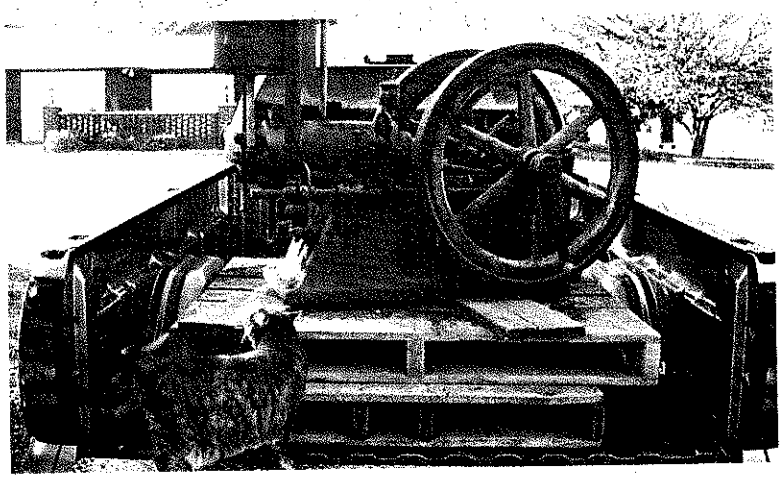
In late summer of 2002, I stopped by to see if I could take another look at the engine – it would only be the second time I had seen it. Seeing it again, I wanted it even more. The Perkins was rusty and stuck and was the kind of challenge that I love.

In late October 2003, I wrote another letter to the engine owner. Five days later, the phone rang, and it was the engine owner. After a pleasant conversation, he offered to sell me the engine. He told



me he had always planned to do something with the Perkins, but at 89 years old he doubted he would ever get to it. I asked what he wanted for it, but he insisted that I make an offer. Since I mess with these things and go to engine shows, he insisted that I would have an idea what these kinds of things are worth.

Gulp! Feeling put on the spot, I made him a generous offer, but he told me I was too high and gave me a lower counter offer. Evidently, he could tell that I had offered more than I really wanted to pay. The following Monday, I returned to pick up the engine and happily gave the check to the tenant – along with a tip for all his assistance.



After brief inspection, I disassembled the engine and sent the main parts to the local "metal laundry" for cleaning. There were, unfortunately, a few surprises. The head had been cracked along the bottom edge and stitched up, and the water jacket was cracked along the bottom. Mice had occupied the cylinder and valve pocket, thanks to an improvised spark plug hole that had been left open. The rod bearing was worn and loose with no shims left, the governor gears were worn to a knife edge, and the movable igniter points and driving mechanism were also gone. The improvised tank above the cylinder was mostly rusted away, too.

Necessary repairs were made in addition to reboring and sleeving the cylinder. The piston was regrooved and fitted with new rings and spacers, and a few thousandths were milled off the rod bearing to make it fit again.

I sent the head to the shop to have new valve seats put in, but the shop told me they would have to buy $1,500 worth of new equipment to machine the seats in their 3-inch-deep pocket. Having the shop do the new seats was out, so I used some old-time valve seat reamers to reclaim the seats and made new valves. To get the igniter back into shape, I used pictures sent from Internet friends and drove a total of 500 miles to see, photograph and measure the exact type of igniter I needed.

What appears to be a fuel tank atop the 1/4-inch pipe is actually the canister for the fuel tank. The real fuel tank has a spring-loaded valve in the lid. When inverted into the canister, the valve is pushed open to allow only a small puddle of fuel to collect in the bottom of the canister. The small puddle allows the fuel to consistently feed the gravity-fed fuel mixer.

The cooling tank isn't actually a tank at all. It's an old gas-fired water heater that has two copper coils inside. It works quite well as a water cooler, too. After several hours of running, it finally gets warm at the bottom.

In February 2004, I finally got the whole engine back together and mounted it on a newly made cart. Two months later, in April, the Perkins finally made its debut at the Hillbilly Flywheelers show in Irvine, Ky.

I'm very glad to have finally restored this Perkins engine after such a long wait. In fact, the former owner wrote down the history of the engine and its uses over the years. Evidently, his grandfather bought the engine new about 1910. I found it in 1975, and it took me almost 30 years to finally restore it. So, when someone says, "Good things come to those who wait," I know exactly what they're talking about.

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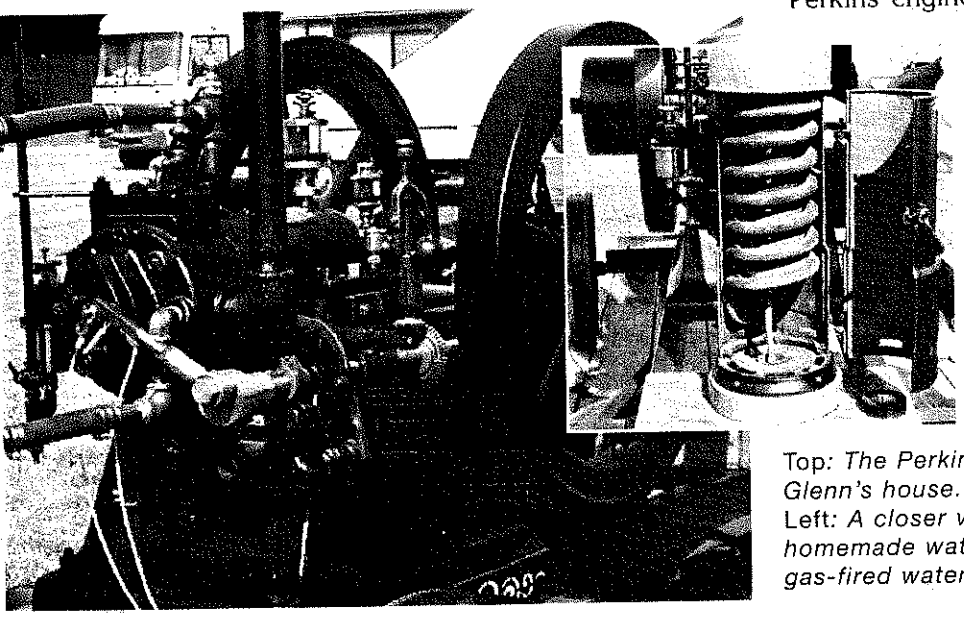

Top: *The Perkins engine as it looked upon arrival at Glenn's house.*
Left: *A closer view of the Perkins engine. Notice the homemade water cooler (inset), made from an old gas-fired water heater with two copper coils inside.*