

# ARTISAN Models by Steffens

## Precision Customs & Pullers

Chuck Steffens' skill in building artisan models evolved through time. As a youngster, Chuck played with and started collecting 1:64 scale farm tractors and implements. As he moved into the teen years, Chuck thought toy tractors should be more realistic so he began tinkering.

"For my first custom tractor, I got parts from Dakotah Toys. When I started buying these parts, I quickly learned that customizing tractors was expensive. One of my early projects was building a 1:16 scale John Deere Model 4320. The Parker casting, along with the Dakotah Toy parts, totaled \$160. That seemed pretty pricy; higher cost than a Precision and only half as much detail.

"During my teen years, Precision models started showing up and they were hot. Although these had a lot of detail, there was still room for improvement. My first high-detail custom was a 1:16 scale John Deere Model 4020, Precision No. 3.

"The thing I hated about that Model 4020 was the small rear wheels and tires. The John Deere 4020s working the fields around here had 18.4-34 rear tires. So outfitting the model to resemble those in our local area was a simple revision.

"My next custom Precision was the Model 4020 we farmed with. This was an older Model 4020 with wide front and the larger 18.4-34 rear tires. Ertl did not build such a tractor, but I had a spare 4020,

Precision No. 3 on hand. I also had a John Deere Model 4020, Precision No. 4 with wide front and power-shift. This provided all the parts needed for the desired features.

"My first major custom Precision resulted in a great learning experience. My second Precision transformation allowed me to use the leftover parts from the first custom. I was able to build the Model 4020 powershift with the narrow front," Chuck elaborated.

### Farm Background

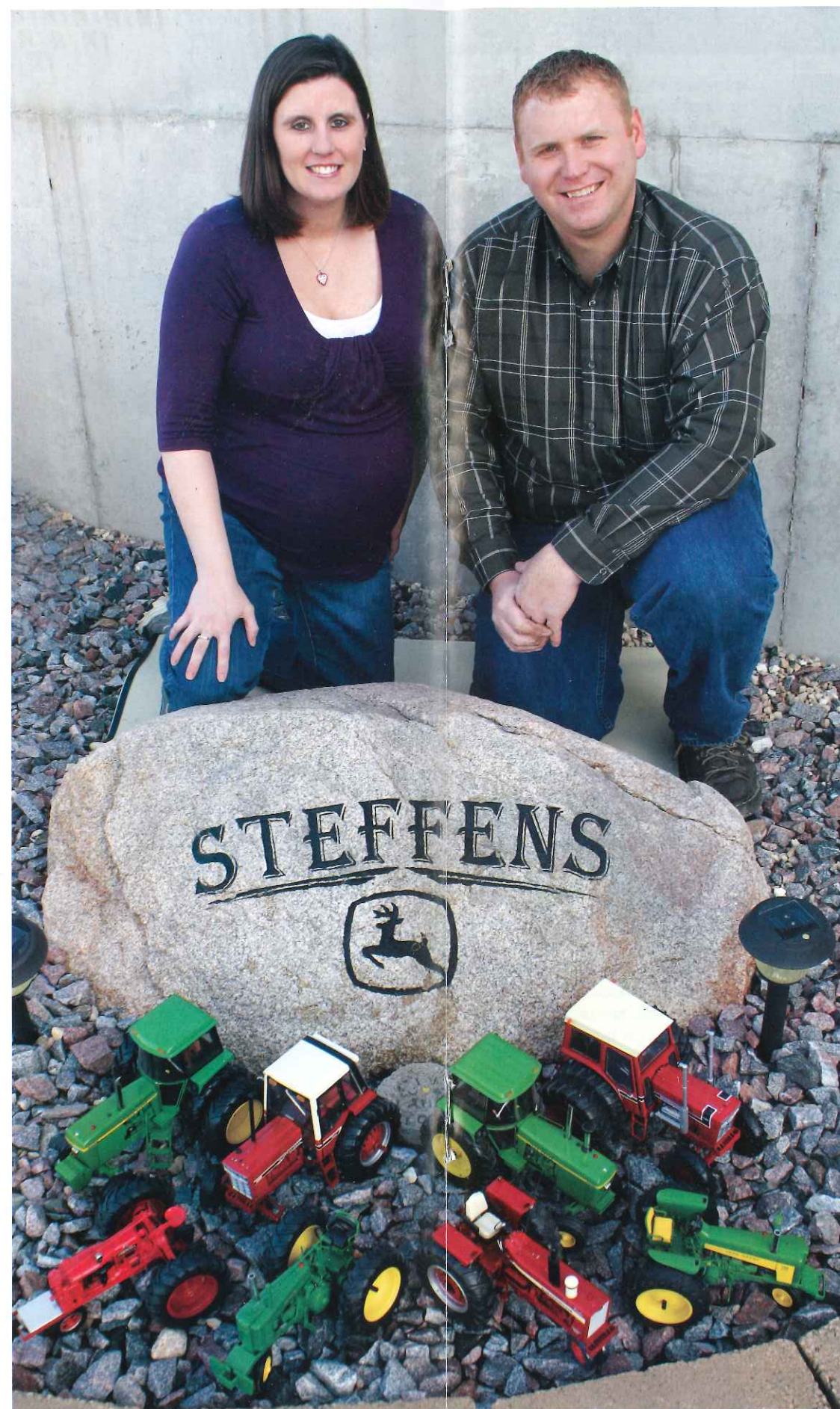
Chuck grew up on a small dairy farm in the eastern Iowa community of Bernard. He struck out to work for neighbors at the eager age of 12. This provided the first opportunity to make a little spending money to buy those early farm toys. His parents sold the farm when Chuck was 16.

Chuck soon landed a job in town at White Front Feed & Seed where he worked until 18. After graduating from high school, Chuck worked two jobs; his uncle's body shop and the CND Machine Shop. These experiences provided skills for his artisan customizing.

Currently, Chuck works full time in maintenance at A.Y. McDonalds, the second largest brass foundry in the United States. He also provides invaluable help for Angie in raising their young family of three children. And, he still finds time for the business, Chucky's Precisions & Pullers.

The Steffens Family resides in

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Above: Chuck Steffens is shown working on a Precision model at his workbench.

Left: Chuck and Angie Steffens are shown with a group of Chuck's custom Precision 1:16 scale model tractors. Back row, left to right: JD 4430, International 1586, JD 4430 and International 1568. Front row: Farmall F-20, JD G, International 1456 and JD 730.

**Chucky's  
precisions  
&  
pullers**

Chuck Steffens business logo – Chucky's Precisions & Pullers.

BY FRED HENDRICKS



Sherrill, located 20 miles northeast of Dyersville, Iowa. The tiny village sits near a ridge that provides a panoramic view of the rolling eastern-Iowa countryside. Sherrill was named after early settlers, Adam and Isaac Sherrill, and was originally called Sherrill's Mound or Mount.

In 1856, Peter Fries, an immigrant from Austria, constructed a large stone hotel that became known as the Sherrill Mount House. When completed, the building housed a tavern, beer garden, restaurant and kitchen on the first floor. There were family quarters and a dance hall on the second floor and overnight rooms on the third floor.

Jesse James, along with his gang, was reported to have bedded down in the Sherrill Mount House before their famed robbery attempt of a Northfield, Minn., bank in 1876. The structure has survived through the years and subsequently restored as the Black Horse Inn.

### Custom Precisions & Pullers

The seed to Chuck's booming Precision and puller business took root in his late teens. At 18, Chuck attended the Mason City, Iowa, farm toy show. At that show, he came onto a high-detailed puller that he purchased.

"When I saw that puller built by Dale Koplin, I had to have it. It was a 1:16 replica of an International Model 3688 pro-stock from Ohio called Shot Gun Red. Fortunately, I had two nickels that I could rub together so I bought it.

"The following year, I returned to the Mason City show and wouldn't you



Display shelves with a small portion of high-detailed custom John Deere Precision and John Deere puller tractors. On the middle shelf is a 1:16 scale John Deere Model 700 industrial, based off an Ertl Precision John Deere Model 5010.



These high-detail customized 1:16 scale International Precisions and pullers are on display in the Steffens home.

know, Dale Koplin had another top-notch tractor, so I bought it. I would save the needed dollars from one show to the next to buy a puller tractor off Dale. A lasting friendship developed through these transactions.

"With time, Dale became burnt out on 1:16 scale models so he moved onto the larger model pullers. But they were way out of my price range. I had been after Dale for a couple years to build another 1:16 scale puller for me, but he kept saying NO! Instead, he insisted on me buying his bench-top mill with instructions to build my own. I thought he was nuts.

"Once again, I asked him to build a puller for me. In 2008 I gave in and bought everything, including a 1:16 scale puller that was under construction. Dale sent it home with me and orders to finish it. The tractor in progress sat around for a couple years because of limited time. I was also a little reluctant to tackle it. Once I got started, it turned out way better than I expected and as they say, 'the rest is history,'" he related.

Not many collectors would think of customizing a high-detail or Precision tractor. Added features can be enhancements, but accuracy is a greater concern for the purist.

"As mentioned earlier, the 1:16 scale John Deere Model 4020 did not line up with those used by farmers around here. Manufacturers do a good job in building their replicas, but there are small things that set one tractor apart from another. Farmers will often have unique features added to their tractor.

"As collectors, many

people want the tractor to look exactly like the one they grew up with. In most situations, I can add those desired features. When the customizing is complete, the piece becomes one of a kind and personal. This has spurred tremendous interest for custom farm model tractors," Chuck explained.

### Prized Possessions

A prized possession in a collection may be the unique circumstances in locating it. Or the actual value of the piece. Chuck has captivating anecdotes about many pieces in his collection.

"When asked about my favorite pieces, I'm not always sure where to start. Dale Koplin built a special 1:16 scale Bauer Built puller sled. It is completely scratch built. Dale planned to make three originally, but the other two were never completed. It is high quality, rare and therefore very special.

"I am quite partial to my C&M Farm Toys puller tractor commemorating the National Tractor Pull staged at Bowling Green, Ohio. I've had the John Deere Model 4020 for many years. I always wanted the International 806. They were not high priced, just hard to find.

"After looking for 15 years, I learned that a friend in my wedding had the 806, but wouldn't sell it because of the sentimental value. In 2011 at our Chucky's Precision & Pullers open house, a customer-friend presented me with a curious Victoria Secret bag.

"The bag contained a surprise: the International 806 mentioned above and the missing link to my

collection. A longtime friend saw the amazed look on my face when I pulled the tractor from the bag. He said, 'I don't know what that will cost but, I bet it doesn't leave this house.' And it didn't."

### Farm Toy Junkyard

Farm machinery dealers, with a repair business or a body shop, work from their parts department. And they will typically have leftover inventory. Chuck's business is very similar. He related those challenges by saying, "I got into the parts business by default. When building a custom Precision or puller, there were always parts left over.

"The parts started accumulating so I began selling them on eBay and to other custom builders. I soon learned there was money to be made in parts. I started buying damaged Precision tractors from Burkholder's Midwest Parts and then sold the leftover parts. Check out my basement; I have a virtual junkyard of 1:16 scale bodies and parts.

"Some parts are hard to come by, especially tires. The farm toy manufacturers are unwilling to sell parts like tires to custom builders even though we're not in competition. Many aftermarket parts available today are outdated by as much as 20 years.

"To get around that obstacle, I began making my own high-quality 20.8-38 field tires. When specialized parts are required, I'll strip them from another model and sell what is left. There are builders, like myself, who have started manufacturing our own parts."



Chuck customized this pair of 1:16 scale Precision tractors. The John Deere Model 4430 was a busted-up replica. Chuck manufactured the larger 20.8-38 tires. He removed the pre-cleaner and added newer-style steps. The International Model 1568 started as a Model 1468. It was converted to a red-stripe tractor by removing the lower-front hood louvers, changing the rear cab window to a squared style, removed the lower cab door windows and repainting the cab and hood in the proper style. He also added mechanical front-wheel-drive.



This Contents Under Pressure 1:16 scale John Deere Model 410 is a Precision puller customized by Chuck. Note the unique exhaust feature.



Many detail features were added to this 1:16 scale International Model 1468. The model started as a Precision International Model 1468 by Ertl.



This high-detail custom 1:16 scale John Deere Model 4055 required 120 hours to complete. The attention to detail under the hood is remarkable.



This 1:16 scale International Model 1256 started as a Precision Golden pro-farm demonstrator. The original version was built for a family as a Christmas gift for their father. Note Chuck's manufactured 20.8-38 rear tires.





## Collector Enthusiast

Collectors and custom builders in the farm toy hobby are much like the never-ending debate, which came first, the chicken or the egg? Do collectors become builders or do builders become collectors? It can go either way.

"I definitely started collecting my 1:64 scale toys before I began customizing. But it all kinda happened together. I love my Precision customs, but my goal is having an amazing puller collection. I am shooting to exhibit a 1:16 scale tractor pull scene at a future National Farm Toy Show.

"I also aim to keep a version of every custom puller I complete for customers. I am nearly as passionate about high-quality pullers made by other builders. I am a collector first and a builder second. Knowing that I contributed a cherished piece to another person's collection with something that I've customized is very gratifying. I am very humbled by the faith people have in me. They'll send pictures of their favorite tractor and trust that I'll produce what they want.

"Through time, I have thinned out some of my early pieces. They were nice replicas, but they didn't have any personal meaning. The basement shelves are chock-full of both Precision models and pullers in 1:16 scale, numbering between 250 and 300.

"Although I've lost track of the custom tractors that went out the door, they would number more than 200. Angie has been very tolerant with my dominating our basement. Fortunately, there is room for more

model tractor collectables," Chuck reflected.

## The Whys and Wherefores

Chuck gives great credit to those who provided a helping hand along the way. "Family has been encouraging and supportive in every respect. Dale Koplin has given invaluable advice as a custom toy builder and friend. I've bought untold parts from Charlie Burkholder with Midwest Parts of Onsted, Michigan. My friends from Sign Makers have been great help with decals. And Fagan Hobbies is my source for metal, including brass. I'm also thankful to the many pirates who've provided assistance," he said.

Chuck had these final reflections, "Collect what you like. And don't get caught up in what it's worth or how it may appreciate in value. Collect for the enjoyment. It's easy to collect the commercial products, but having that special model of something that is personal will be invaluable. When your time is up, make sure your collection is worth something and enjoy it while you can."

If you're into customizing and need help, go to [piratefarmtoy.proboard](http://piratefarmtoy.proboard). You will find this chat room very useful with tips in overcoming custom-related problems. Chuck has written several step-by-step articles on customizing for the *Toy Farmer* magazine.

"I encourage people to customize Precision models. Once you overcome the fear of working on valuable high-detailed pieces, the end result will be more

appealing. Feel free to email me at: [csteffens@wildblue](mailto:csteffens@wildblue).

net or call (563) 451-7930," Chuck offered. TF



*Pulling For The Cure, a True Grit John Deere Model 6030 was a project for the Steffens family and friends who have struggled with cancer. The custom replica started as an Ertl Precision.*



*This Ready-To-Work 1:16 scale John Deere Model 4755 custom beauty started as an Ertl Precision John Deere Model 4960.*



*Chuck scratch built this 1:16 scale roller-packer from a rough casting made by Gene Ficken.*



*Shown is a beautiful pair of 1:16 scale 5 Millionth International/Farmall 1066 tractors. The model with the 12-hole rear wheels represents the original tractor built in 1974. The six-hole rear wheel replica depicts the same tractor manufactured later. Both were customized by Chuck from Ertl Precision International Model 1466s.*

*The original disc was built by Kenny Yantiss. Chuck retrofitted new blades using dish fender washers that he notched in 12 equal spaces.*

