When a notice of sale listing no less than ten ageing four-wheel-drive Wagner tractors appeared in his local paper, CLASSIC TRACTOR reader and Colorado farmer Roger Perry couldn't resist taking a look. What he found at McCue and McCue Farms, Arriba, Colorado, was almost beyond belief.

Big farming operations call for big tractors. No surprise then that McCue and McCue Farms, who farmed thousands of acres high on the vast wheat plains of eastern Colorado, relied on a fleet of high-horsepower articulated tractors. But here's the twist: the McCues operated a unique and ageing fleet of FWD Wagner four-wheel-drives - the forefathers of today's sophisticated articulated tractors.

Originally developed for the forestry industry, Wagner farm tractors were built by the Wagner Tractor Company at Portland, Oregon. The origins of the Wagner company can be traced to 1922, when Eddie Wagner and his brothers started a company called Mixermobile, named after an innovative machine that could mix and pour concrete. The Wagner brothers also began to experiment with four-wheel-drive wheel loaders. This, in turn, led to the formation of Wagner Tractors and the manufacture of construction equipment. In 1949 Eddie Wagner's brother, Elmer, invented one of the first four-wheel-drive articulated vehicles.

Following success with articulated vehicles in the forestry industry, the Wagner brothers adapted a forestry skidder for agriculture. The company's Pow-R-Flex articulated coupling and dual-axle oscillation were key elements incorporated in the pioneering design, the latter allowing all four wheels to maintain positive contact with the ground at all times. Early Wagner tractors were powered by Waukesha engines, although by 1956 the company had switched exclusively to Cummins power-plants.

In the early 1960s, the FWD Corporation of Clintonville, Wisconsin, purchased a controlling interest in the Wagner Tractor Company, although production of forestry and agricultural equipment continued at the Wagner plant in Portland. Another turn of events in late 1968 saw Wagner enter into an exclusive supply agreement with John Deere. Two tractors from the Wagner range, the 225hp WA-14 and the 280hp WA-17, were badged and painted in John Deere colours.

As it turned out, these tractors were only a stopgap measure to allow Deere more time to develop their own articulated four-wheel-drive, the 7020, launched in 1970. Sadly, a condition written into the original contract between Wagner and Deere stipulated that if Deere stopped buying tractors from Wagner, Wagner could not produce a competing tractor for five years. Wagner was effectively written out of the farm tractor business.

But 30-odd years since the last Wagner farm tractor rolled off the company's Portland production line, a number of prairie farmers still swear allegiance to the marque. One such operation was McCue and McCue Farms, whose vast acreage was spread over 50 miles at Arriba, 100 miles east of Denver, Colorado.

This is where crops of wheat stretch to the horizon in all
directions, and where, if the weather co-operates, yields as high as 2.5 tons/acre are possible. Keeping it big and simple is the name of the game. Step forward the Wagner - a service-friendly tractor that shares many of its parts with highway trucks. Just drive on down to your local truck parts store and you will find readily available parts for the Cummins engine, Fuller transmission and Eaton axles.

Seat like a sofa

Mechanics who have serviced Wagner tractors say they are a dream to work on. Loosen four bolts and the bonnet lifts away. They say you can replace the Cummins engine in half a day.

Fuel consumption is a miserly ten gallons (US)/hour (37.85 litres/hour) pulling at a forward speed of 6-7mph. The McCue family had fitted extra fuel tanks to all their Wagner tractors, capable of supplying enough juice to last for three days without refuelling. Things like that are important when you're working 50 miles from home!

Operator creature comforts are thin on the ground, but if you're sitting in a seat more like a sofa, surrounded by chromed instrumentation more akin to a '65 Ford Mustang, it sure makes up for a lot. Then there's the sound of a 300-odd horsepower Cummins engines purring away.

Sadly, the McCue family's unique fleet of Wagner tractors is no more. It was dispersed, along with a wide range of associated farm machinery and spares, at their retirement sale on 28 February this year. On the day, $5000-$7000 (£3475-£4870) was all that was needed to take home one of these lumbering giants. Perhaps the prices reflected the move towards a simpler no-till approach to crop establishment, using huge air-seeders and even bigger tractors? Certainly there is a move away from the traditional cultivation methods used by the McCue family.

Interestingly, farmers who were already operating Wagners purchased all the McCues' tractors. Maybe they know something we don't?

Top Left: Air conditioning systems were perched on the cab roof - one of few creature comforts.
Top Right: Wagner's unique 'Pow-R-Flex' articulated coupling and axle oscillation attracted many admirers, including Douglas and Maurice Steiger and Deere & Co.
Above: Obviously the Cummins engine in this battle-scared Wagner was feeling the heat - hence the additional radiator.