

Biography of John Froelich from Iowa Inventors Hall of Fame Pamphlet, 1994

John Froelich

Invented gasoline-powered tractor

1849 – 1933

Inducted 1991

John Froelich helped pave the way for modern farming. In 1892, this native of rural Clayton County, Iowa, produced the first mechanically successful gasoline tractor that propelled itself backward and forward.

He grew up in Froelich, Iowa, which was named for his father, Henry Froelich. John operated an elevator and tinkered with machines to improve their efficiency. One such innovation was mounting a gasoline engine on a well-drilling outfit — an idea that led him to mounting an internal combustion engine on a tractor. A few weeks later, the tractor — the forerunner of today's John Deere tractor — was shipped to Langford, South Dakota, where it threshed some 72,000 bushels over a period of 52 days.

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The new gasoline engine tractor was considered cheaper, safer, and easier to care for than a steam-engine tractor. Banking on these advantages, Froelich, with other investors, founded the Waterloo Gasoline Traction Engine Company in 1893. Eventually, this company would become what is today the John Deere Tractor Works.

Froelich received two patents for mechanisms relating to internal combustion engines before moving to Minnesota, where he was granted twelve more patents between 1906 and 1925. Most of these patents related to tractors and internal combustion engines.

His innovations helped to make Waterloo a center of internal combustion engine production in the United States in the early years of this century.