



# Gaar Family Celebrates Fifty-Year Anniversary: Solving the Mystery of a Photograph

By Robert T. Rhode and Mike McKnight

*Editor's Note: Please see the photograph on the following two pages.*

## A Rare Photograph Comes to Light

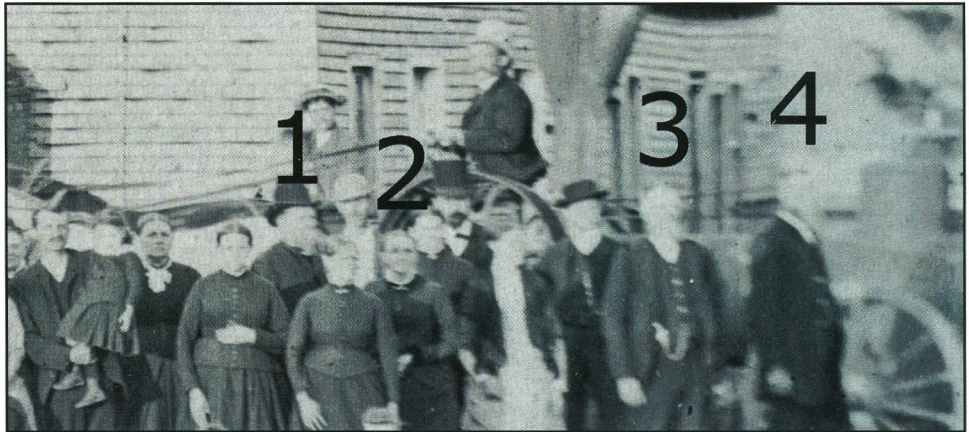
Seen here for the first time is a photograph that depicts Abram Gaar and Agnes Adams Gaar and that probably depicts John Milton Gaar, William G. Scott, other members of the Gaar family, and company representatives posing in front of a portable steam engine and a threshing machine manufactured by Gaar, Scott & Company in Richmond, Indiana. The occasion is most likely the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the business that eventually became the Gaar-Scott enterprise. Perhaps the house stood on the farm of Abraham Gaar (1769-1861), Abram's grandfather. How can so much be deduced from a photo purchased from an antique dealer with no accompanying history? Read on.

## Clues to the Photograph's Date

Gaar, Scott & Co. built the Vibrator thresher only through the 1880s. The 1885 catalog depicts a Vibrator thresher with a "hump" in the middle of the top that exactly resembles the thresher in the photograph. The hump covered a straw-picking mechanism. The hump vanishes from Vibrator threshers presented in the 1886 catalog. The thresher in the photo does not look brand-spanking new. It could easily be a year or two old.

During the 1880s and 1890s, the development of most of Gaar's portable engines followed the same pattern as their traction engines, including the Class E, F, and G engines, as well as their straw-burning return-flue engines. Still offered (in the larger sizes) until the later 1890s were the older style side-mounted engines with the crankshaft in front. The contours of the engine in the photograph are consistent with those of Gaar, Scott & Co. engines built in the mid-1880s.

The late Joanna Hill Mikesell, a direct descendant of the Gaar line, said that the Gaar family always gave 1836 as the founding year of their vast company. Accordingly, the fifty-year celebration occurred in 1886. Abram Gaar (1819-1894) and Agnes



This close-up identifies four individuals: 1. Abram Gaar, 2. Agnes Adams Gaar (Abram's wife), 3. probably John Milton Gaar (Abram's brother), and 4. probably William G. Scott (a brother-in-law of Abram and John Milton Gaar).

Adams Gaar (1831-1906) can be positively identified in the photo, and their hair styles and hair color look the same as they do in other photographs of the couple that are positively dated to the mid-1880s. It is quite likely that two men in the nuclear group toward the right of the photo are John Milton Gaar (1823-1900) and William G. Scott (1824-1897). Most of the men are dressed in fine clothing, and all the women are attired in the latest fashions of 1886. Many of the dresses must have been brightly colored. Only one woman wears an apron. Clearly, the crowd has gathered for a special occasion, not to thresh wheat, although the straw stack indicates that threshing has recently taken place.

## Clues to the Location

There can be no doubt that the people are the center of attention, for they practically hide the machines, which would have been featured, had the image been intended for advertising purposes. If such a commemorative photograph were to be taken at a location other than the factory, it would necessarily feature a place of special meaning to the family. Although it is not Abraham's log cabin, which is pictured on page 17 in *The Gaar Family: Pioneers of Industry*, by Joanna Hill Mikesell and Annette S. Warfel (1999), the house in the photograph appears to be a disintegrating

farmhouse. It is conjectural but certainly conceivable that the Gaar clan would choose to celebrate the success of their company on the farm south of Richmond near Elkhorn Creek where Jonas Gaar (1793-1875), the father of Abram and John Milton, had spent part of his youth.

Wherever the scene of the photograph might have been, the assembled members of the Gaar family from the oldest to the youngest obviously enjoyed the celebration!

## Acknowledgments

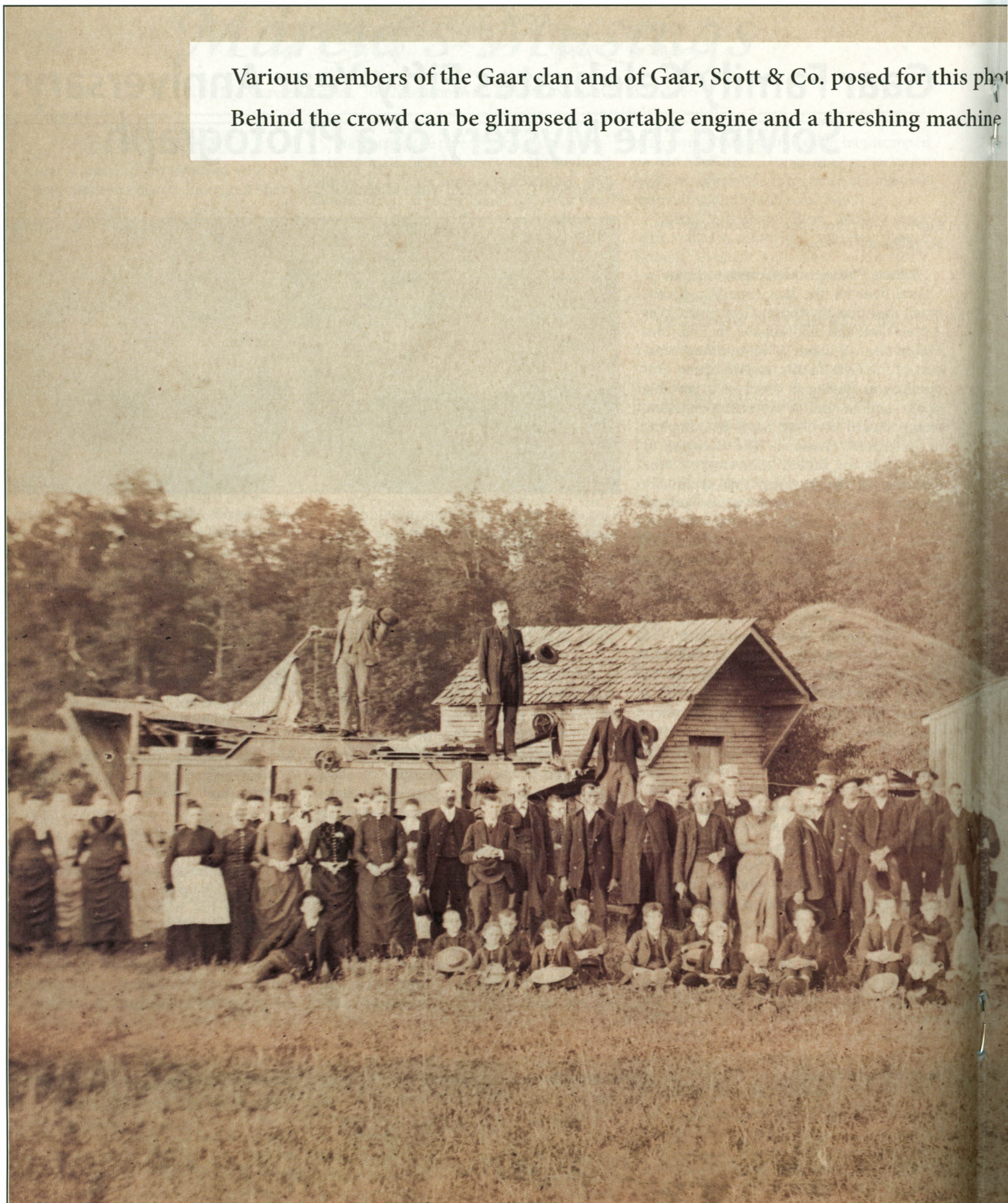
We want to thank Jim Harlan, who is associated with the Wayne County (Indiana) Historical Museum, and Dan Tate, who has posted online numerous photographs and commentaries related to the history of Richmond and Wayne County. Both helped clarify our thinking about the rare photograph, and Dan made his extensive collection of documents available to us.

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Various members of the Gaar clan and of Gaar, Scott & Co. posed for this photo. Behind the crowd can be glimpsed a portable engine and a threshing machine.





photograph most likely commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the business.  
nine built by the firm. *Please see Page 27 for additional information on this photo.*

