

The Checkered Career of J. O. Spencer

By Robert T. Rhode

I had the great privilege of co-authoring *The Steam Tractor Encyclopedia* with fellow EDGETA Hall of Famer John Spalding, whose collection of historical photographs of American farm steam engines is unrivaled. A present-day Sherlock Holmes, John is determined to bring to light the most obscure images, and he applies his discerning knowledge of agricultural history to that end. The mystery photo from the previous issue of this magazine offers a case in point: a case that I, the Dr. Watson of this duo, have entitled "The Checkered Career of J. O. Spencer."

Our encyclopedia offers a brief history of J. O. Spencer, Son & Co., manufacturers of Wide-Awake threshers and steam engines. For many years prior to 1882, Spencer was in Union Springs, New York, where he had taken over a business that had been run by William, Henry, and Lewis McFarland. According to Elliot G. Storke's *History of Cayuga County, New York* (1879), the brothers had established their firm in 1855. Storke alleges that the McFarlands were independent inventors of several thresher mechanisms that they failed to patent, including the beaters, the over-blast fan, and the straw carrier. Lewis had dropped out of the business after only five years. Henry had died in 1869; in 1874, William died. It was in the spring of 1875 that J. O. Spencer had bought the factory at auction from the administrators of the McFarland estate. In so doing, he was taking a risk, as the stock market had crashed (for the first time) in 1873 and had plunged the nation into a recession so deep and tenacious that the 1870s came to be called the Black Seventies. Storke says that, when Spencer was ready to manufacture portable

steam engines in 1877, Spencer "selected as a model one of the very best engines in the world," producing approximately twenty-five of them, as well as ten threshers. While I hesitate to identify the manufacturer of the engine on which the Spencer engine was modeled, I will observe that many builders imitated other builders. In 1879, Spencer had employed between forty and fifty workers at his Union Springs Agricultural Works, and production had tripled. J. O. Spencer had three sons and one daughter; his son Otto J. took a leading role in the business, serving as foreman of the machine shop.

In 1882, Spencer moved to Waterloo, New York. His factory in Waterloo came to be called the Waterloo Steam Engine and Thresher Works, or Waterloo Thresher Works. In 1886, he was involved in several court proceedings. He was perhaps improperly accused of misuse of company funds. His plant was shut down, and he was subjected to the indignity of watching helplessly while a receiver liquidated the assets of his factory. Ryan & McDonald bought Spencer's plant for about half of its value and sold Spencer engines and threshers for three or four years.

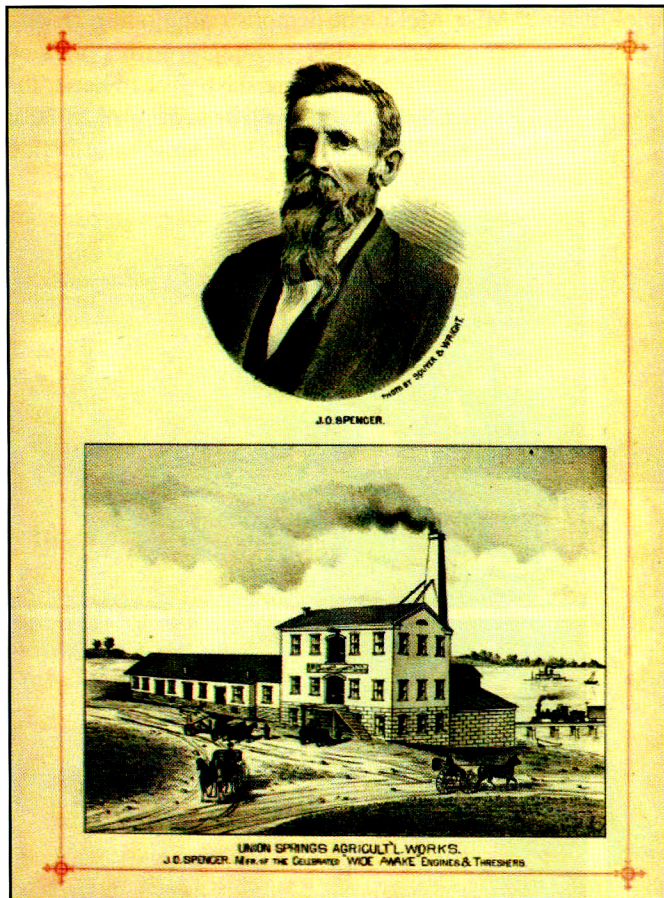
Ryan & McDonald had, as the saying goes, several irons in the fire. Beginning in the autumn of 1890, the firm famously served as chief contractor for the construction of the New York City subway system. In the second volume of his book entitled *The Story of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, 1827-1927*, Edward Hungerford explains that Ryan & McDonald were willing to tackle even the most daunting obstacles, such as those they had encountered while building the eastern stretch of the Philadelphia line of the B&O. Ryan & McDonald moved to Baltimore in 1891.

Cornelius J. Ryan had entered into a business partnership with Spencer prior to the receivership of the 1880s, and I have found evidence indicating that Ryan was one of several parties that had sued Spencer. In approximately 1888, J. O. Spencer revived his business back in Union Springs, and Oscar J. Spencer took a leading role. In 1896 (after the disastrous Panic of 1893), Oscar was named receiver for the Spencer assets. At the turn of the century, Charles B. Quick formed the partnership of Bowen & Quick to buy the Wide-Awake thresher business. The abandoned Ryan factory, the former Spencer factory in Waterloo, burned to the ground in 1911.

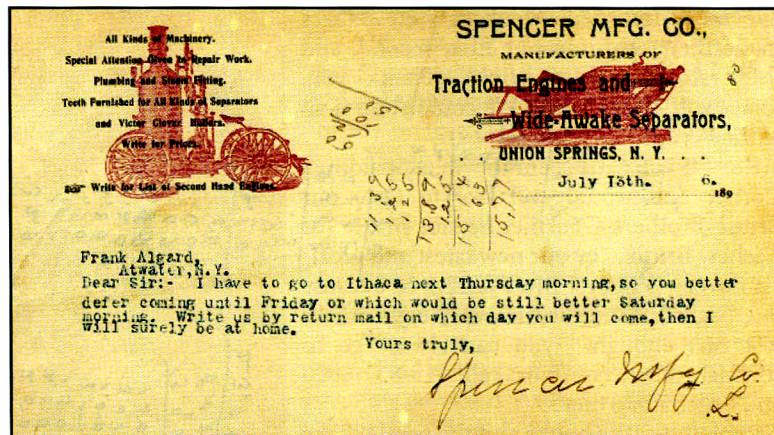
Spencer engines came in two different forms: one with a vertical boiler and one with a locomotive boiler. Incidentally, the Wheeler & Melick vertical boiler engine has much in common with the Spencer vertical engine, and, as Wheeler & Melick sold Watertown portables, it is conceivable that Wheeler & Melick sold Spencer verticals.

John Spalding's fascinating photograph reveals the Spencer name cast in the firebox door and the bedplate. The engine is arranged for traction and may have a chain or belt drive on the side opposite to that which the camera recorded.

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These impressive illustrations appeared across from page 374 in Elliot G. Storke's *History of Cayuga County, New York*, published by D. Mason of Syracuse in 1879. They depict J. O. Spencer and his agricultural works in Union Springs, New York.



This postcard includes a sketch of a Spencer engine having a vertical boiler. Courtesy Frontenac Historical Society and Museum