

Fordson Tractors (ca. 1917)

PRODUCTION COMPANY: Ford Motor Co. RUNNING TIME: 12.5 minutes.

Although the nitrate has partially deteriorated, *Fordson Tractors* survives to speak not only to advancements in mechanized farming but to a motor vehicle company's filming, editing, and distributing more than 200,000 feet of original material more than 2,000 theaters that year.¹

Made to accompany the international release of the Fordson tractor as well as the opening of several international factories devoted to its production, the film is both an advertisement and an educational piece, firmly entrenched in the modernization rhetoric of wartime without losing its universal appeal.

The Fordson tractor was introduced in October 1917 by Henry Ford and Son, a subsidiary of the Ford Motor Company overseen by Henry Ford and his son, Edsel. Although the original models were produced in Dearborn, Michigan, alongside the automobiles, a second plant was opened in Cork, Ireland, following the end of World War I. Public interest in the tractor was fevered even before its release, forcing the headquarters to send several telegrams a month throughout 1917 to various buyers and exhibitions: "Mr. Ford working day and night perfecting Tractor plans anticipating placing on market immediately. Talked with him few days since. He says Mr. [Thomas Alva] Edison will receive first one. Everything possible is being done to hurry production but doubt whether it can be put out in time for spring plowing."²

In addition to uses on the American home front, Ford was personally invested in providing technology to help Great Britain grow enough food to overcome the crippling German submarine blockade, and the first international plant to manufacture the Fordson tractor was in Cork. The lofty goal of debuting a model and saturating the British market within a year proved unachievable, and the Cork plant did not "start production until eight months after the end of the war, so all the Fordson tractors received during the hostilities came from the United States."³

1. "The Silent Celluloid Salesman," 534.

2. "Telegram, FG Liebold to WS Mallory."

3. Burgess-Wise, *Ford at Dagenham*, 14.

This desire, even before the tractor was released for public use, to saturate the international market explains the marketing campaign built around the tractor, with its references to broad progressive themes without explicitly addressing national audiences.

Advertisements for the tractor boasted that “being small, light, and economical, the ‘FORDSON’ Tractor is adapted for use on small farms, as well as the largest. It will pull all farm implements and do the work generally done by horses on the farm. In addition, by its belt pulley the tractor will drive farm machinery such as the thresher, ensilage cutter, sawmill, etc., making the ‘FORDSON’ a truly universal tractor.”⁴ Universal it was, with the tractor being sold not only in North America and Great Britain but in countries as far-flung as Soviet Russia, Japan, Norway, and New Zealand by 1930. To function as an effective advertisement in all these locations over the span of more than a decade, the film’s titles describe the tractor’s “simplicity of operation” or need for only “five minutes of instructions” to operate rather than referring to specific features that may be out of date or differ from model to model. By switching out the first title for a specific dealership, the film easily travels across (English-speaking) North America, Europe, and beyond without losing its relevance or potency.

Ford Motor Company mobilized its considerable resources to create the film, which is reinforced by the custom title card template bearing the Ford logo in the bottom corner. The motion picture department, officially created out of the photography department in 1913, operated with 24 men on staff, half a dozen cameramen, and state-of-the-art cameras and developing equipment—shooting, processing, and editing more than 200,000 feet a year.⁵ Ford boasted that it was the first corporation to establish a stand-alone department of this type, to be followed closely by GE. Henry Ford, driven no doubt by his well-documented interest in photography and close friendship with Thomas Edison, spared no expense in establishing production facilities that “rivalled any motion picture studio.”⁶

4. “‘Fordson’, Henry Ford & Son Inc. Tractors - Dearborn, Michigan.”

5. “The Silent Celluloid Salesman,” 534.

6. *Ibid.*, 537.

By the time of this film's production, Ford was not only producing advertising materials for its products but filming, editing, and distributing the national news reel *Ford Animated Weekly*. Teams were sent in Ford automobiles to picturesque American sights, breaking news stories and popular attractions to create news reels that Ford executives referred to as "a clever form of subtle advertising."⁷ They followed the form of popular reels such as *Hearst Metrotone News* although with more shots of Ford cars driving down the street. At its height *Ford Animated Weekly* was being shown in 2,000 theaters and seen by 3 million weekly, and by virtue of its self-distribution (using a network of dealerships as exchange points for the film material), it made Ford Motor Company the largest motion picture distributor in the country. When the market for news reels dropped off in 1916, the format was switched to feature more educational material rather than current events, and the series was renamed *Ford Educational Weekly*. Demand for the entertaining and enlightening shorts grew beyond Ford's distribution capabilities, and Goldwyn was recruited to expand their reach, distributing the material in 1919 to its highest number of theaters—well over 5,000.⁸

Although the tractor was quickly replaced with newer, more powerful models, and the motion picture department at Ford was scaled back considerably by the mid-1920s, the footage from *Fordson Tractors* continued to be used in other materials. In 1924, a film titled *Farm Progress* was produced, showing off the tractor's uses for modern farm upkeep and presenting original Fordson tractors featured in the 1917 film being used to run the electricity for a farm house and assist in the mechanization of milking facilities.⁹ Like the earlier *Fordson Tractors*, *Farm Progress* makes no mention of any nationally specific contexts but wraps the tractor in the rhetoric of progress and modernization, a universal message fit for domestic as well as international markets.

7. Lewis, "Henry Ford - Movie Producer," 19.

8. *Ibid.*, 44.

9. *Farm Progress* (1924).

The earlier marketing footage was used to create educational films in a program starting in 1922. The films and their accompanying study guides were intended to supplement traditional curricula at the cost of \$50 a reel. “The school film library of 105 subjects contains more than 5,000 scenes and 2,100 titles,” the brochure claims, and it is not far-fetched to guess that the footage shot for *Fordson Tractors*, or other similarly themed advertisements, would have been included in films such as “(61) Farming with Machinery” or “(32) Farming with a Tractor.”¹⁰ Just as *Fordson Tractors* in its form here presents a clear picture of the future of modern farming and its benefits and then proposes Ford products as the way to achieve such a vision, these educational materials validate the tractor as a desirable commodity and an advancement worthy of study. The educational film catalogues refer to tractors as objects of study and to the “Fordson method of farming” as a branded way of working, just as the Fordist model of production had been conceptualized outside the Ford automobile product.

“As a matter of fact, Ford motion pictures are almost as universal as Ford cars, and like the latter, they are the best on earth,” according to one Ford news organ.¹¹ By tying the car brand to the motion picture output, both benefit from the technological advances the other implies. Ford Motor Company becomes in this imagination a site of cultural as well as industrial production, further embodied in the progressive model of worker lifestyle conveyed by the “Five Dollar Work Day” and the company’s sociological department, both of which worked to improve the standard of living for workers on the line, often immigrants, by raising their wages and their education levels with English classes and standards for home life. By investing heavily in motion picture technology, whether in clearly commercial contexts such as *Fordson Tractors* or in more informative ones such as *Ford Animated Weekly* or *Ford Educational Weekly*, the Ford Motor

10. “The World of Sensible Things Pictured.”

11. “The Motion Picture Department.”

Company ensured that its products—the automobile, and later, the tractor—were portrayed in the cinema as a driving force of modernity.

— Katy Ralko

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