November 1951

Steve Kole of Winnie, Texas, behind the wheel of his Ford Model A, flanked by his siblings, (left to right): Lawrence, Ann, Tommy, Margaret, Mollie, Steve, Dorothy, and Louis.

It’s because of Steve that the feature article on rice farming appears in this issue. After seeing the photo of the experimental “MX” Tractors in the January–February 2003 issue, which was taken at Kole & Kole Rice Farm in 1942, he wrote and offered more photos on how things were in Gulf Coast rice farming from the 1940s through the early 1970s. It’s a fascinating journey. Please turn to page four.
Thank you for running the photo of the twin “MX” experimental pre-Model “R” Tractors in the January—February 2003 issue of your magazine. John Deere sent these tractors to the Kole Rice Farm in 1942. I am presently 63 years of age, and the delivery of these two tractors created such much excitement that this is the first memory I can recall as a child. I was almost three years old at the time. Incidentally, these tractors were painted battleship gray rather than John Deere green and yellow.

My father, J.S. (Skee) Kole, Sr., had a close working relationship with the John Deere factory people from the late 1930s to the early 1950s, until his health started slipping. In 1950, my father purchased four Model “R” Diesels when I was ten years old. He later purchased an “820” and “830” as soon as they became available.

As a teenager, my next younger brother, Lawrence, and I grew up on the Model “R”, “820”, and “830”. You haven’t lived until you spend most of the summer on a steel-wheeled Model “R” pulling a John Deere moldboard plow, with three 12-inch moldboards, plowing at a four- to five-inch depth, while having to travel all the time in low gear. We would start plowing in a 100-acre field with four Model “Rs” at 7:00 a.m. on Monday morning, take a 30-minute lunch break, stop plowing at 5:30 p.m. to grease and fill up with fuel, and it would take us until Friday afternoon to complete plowing the 100 acres. Plowing that Beaumont Blue Clay in the summer is like plowing compacted road base material.

When we got the “820”, and later the “830”, as teenagers we thought we had died and gone to heaven. I still regard the “820” and “830” to this day as engineering masterpieces. The John Deere engineers pushed two-cylinder technology to the edge of the envelope when they built these two tractors. The best analogy I can think of is the P-51 Mustang Fighter airplane. The “820” is like the P-51 with the Packard engine, and the “830” is like the P-51 with the Merlin engine.

My father died in 1962, at 52 years of age, from complications related to diabetes and undiagnosed sleep apnea. Eight months prior to his death, our farm experienced a once-in-50-to-60-year salt water flooding due to Hurricane Carla, which struck the Gulf Coast with an abnormal storm surge in September 1961. Our entire 2000-acre rice farm was covered by the Gulf of Mexico, with salt water from nine feet in depth on the south end of our farm to two feet in depth on the north end (which was three miles further inland). This once-in-a-lifetime event took its toll on my father, who had been slipping in health the last few years of his life.

At the time of his death I was 22, and the oldest son and second-oldest child of eleven children. My mother was 41, with eight minor children still at home. My brother Lawrence was in the Air Force, stationed in San Antonio, with three years to serve.

My new bride of six months, Joyce Ann Waguespack-Kole, and I willingly accepted the challenge of taking charge of the rice farm and assisting my mother with my eight minor brothers and sisters who were still at home.

Fortunately, we also had Adam Labove, Sr., our foreman, who had been working for my father since 1946. Adam worked back to back with us in turning the operation around after Hurricane Carla. Also, the early 1960s were a good time to be in rice farming because of technological breakthroughs such as herbicides, along with being able to get a second cutting of rice from the same plant in the same growing season.

A third major breakthrough in farming technology was the introduction of the John Deere “5010” Tractor. Some people may not understand how big an event this was, and how it positively impacted our lives. As well engineered as the “820” and “830” were and still are, the leap to the “5010” was as dramatic in technology as going from the P-51 Mustang Fighter to the F-86 Sabre Jet Fighter.

The “5010” not only eliminated the cranking engine, steel wheels, and the hand clutch, but it introduced to us the large capacity three-point hitch with effective draft control, along with having a quick-coupler feature. For the first time we had a fully adjustable wraparound armchair-type seat with a shock-absorbing cushioning mechanism.

The balance and agility for a machine this big and powerful was astounding. It could turn on a dime and give you a nickel in change. The increased productivity it afforded us reduced our manpower requirement, level of management intensity, etc., etc. I cannot say enough about how dramatic this leap forward was in one fell swoop. It was a fantastic experience, and I feel fortunate to have been a part of it.

I saw my first “5010” in the fall of 1963, at my cousin I.W. (Bill) McBride’s rice farm near ours in Chambers County, south of Winnie, Texas. He had just purchased it, and it was pulling an eleven-foot Taylor Way Disk plowing in new ground and walking away with the load. Adam Labove, Sr., and I saw it together, and we could not believe it. We were not even aware that John Deere was working on such an animal. I believe this was one of the first, if not the first, “5010” on the upper Texas Gulf Coast.

Our farm purchased a “5010” the next year, in 1964, when I was 24. Within five years of the introduction of the “5010”, the rainbow tractor (Oliver, Minneapolis-Moline, Allis-Chalmers, etc.) owners started to replace them with “5010s”. The John Deere “5010” completely buried the competition in the rice country along the upper Texas Gulf Coast, where we farmed between Houston and the Louisiana border.

Between 1963 and 1966, Lawrence would arrive on leave from San Antonio, and at every opportunity he would help part-time with whatever farming operations were going on that time. In 1966 he returned to the farm full time to help out with raising of our younger brothers and sisters. I was looking for someone to help take over as a partner, because I had my plate more than full. By this time, Joyce and I had four beautiful children. The first three children, Renee, Christine, and Jim, were born 12 months apart, and our fourth child, Maria, was born 14 months after Jim.

After taking some trips into Arkansas to look into Farm-Raised Catfish Farming, Lawrence and I decided to enter into the catfish farming business in 1966. Lawrence looked after that operation. At the time we entered into the catfish farming business, little did we know that it would enhance the value of the farm to the point that the 2000-acre farm would be purchased from us lock, stock, and barrel at a premium price in 1971. At the time I did not want to sell, but was out-voted by the family. Looking back, we sold out at the right time for catfish farming along the Texas Gulf Coast, as it did not pan out in the long run, and rice farming has also been on the wane since then along the Texas Gulf Coast.
The following photos (pages 6–11) were supplied by Steve Kole, most in the form of transparencies.

John Deere experimental plow mounted on “MX” Tractor. Kole Farm foreman Ray Kahn is at back center. The others are John Deere personnel. January 1943.

Model “820” on rear steel, pulling an eight-foot Taylor Way Disk to plow down old levees. Note the galvanized hood. 1962.

John Deere Model “820” (foreground) and “830” Tractors on rear steel wheels, each pulling a John Deere Land Leveler in 1962.

John Deere Model “R” on rubber tires pulling (double heading) a Model “830” on rear steel, while making rice field levees with a levee pusher. Note the galvanized sheet metal on both tractors.

Charlie Jones, Jr., is operating the 95R on the left, while Steve Kole is running the 95R on the right. The self-propelled grain cart was referred to as the “Doodle Bug.”

Filling the Doodle Bug with rice.

Bee Guillory is operating the John Deere green and yellow Doodle Bug, and Steve’s dog, Sam, has decided to ride along. Designed and built by Steve Kole in 1962, it started as a 1949 KB-7 International flat-bed truck.

A second shot of the 95R after it passed by. This is harvesting rice in ideal dry conditions.

Harvesting rice with a John Deere 95R Combine in 1963. This was Steve Kole’s first crop after having assumed the responsibility of running the farm after his father’s death the previous year. The combine is being operated by Tommy, while Peter is “riding shotgun.” Steve took the photo.

Harvesting rice in 1963 that had been blown flat by Hurricane Cindy.
Model “R” with all the sheet metal galvanized. Steve Kole started the galvanizing procedure because of the corrosion problems caused by high salt content in the soil and air. Their farm was south of Winnie, Texas, close to the Gulf of Mexico.

The IH TD4 Crawler was able to pull a levee pusher, but the arrival of the “5010” (and “5020”) retired most of the other tractors by the late 1960s. The operator was Tom Jenkins of Jenkins Rice Farm, 1964.

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Model “5010” preparing the rice field seed bed in the mud, a technique called “mudding in.” The purpose was to help the rice get a jump on the grass by dropping pre-sprouted rice from an airplane into the shallow water, where it would then sink and settle on the prepared bed.

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The shallow water would then be immediately drained off, and within three warm days there would be tiny green leaves on the pre-sprouted rice seed. This technique was developed prior to herbicides.

In extremely wet springs they were forced to use this method, even after herbicides were available, to get planted on time.

Pre-sprouting of seed was done by soaking sacks (162 pounds) of rice seed in the canal for 24 hours, and then placing the sacks in a warm barn for another 24 hours.

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By the time this photo was taken, a Ford V-8 truck engine and new hood cowl had been installed. Winch equipped, it was used to unbog combines as well as “5010” and “5020” Tractors.

The Doodle Bug will soon be winching out a “5020” (left) that was bogged down while leveling a rice field. The “5010” will be next. 1966.

Repeated maneuvers with the Doodle Bug advanced the 105R Combine to better ground. 1968.

Two “5010s”, and a “5020” with cab, working in unison to level land. The fluid mud was moved to low areas until everything was level, which aided in keeping the water level over the entire cut. Level water also meant straight boundaries, reducing the need to constantly turn and back up machinery during the harvest. 1968.

From 1968 through 1971, Kole Rice Farm was transformed into a Catfish Farm. Steve Kole became interested in the production of channel catfish when he visited Arkansas to learn about soybean production. He left there realizing that catfish farming was better suited to their land because of the abundant water supply.

The photos on page 11 were taken in 1968 during a harvest demonstration for farmers, businessmen, and members of the State Wildlife Commission. A true farmer to the core, Steve referred to the 100-acre, man-made lake as his “big pasture.” Steve and his brother, Lawrence, first caught the attention of local residents with their initial operation — a 40-acre, pay-to-fish lake that opened from September through November in 1967.

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Harvesting rice under adverse muddy conditions in 1968 with a John Deere 105R Combine. The Doodle Bug winch cable is being hooked on to “rescue” the combine.

Up to 50,000 pounds of catfish could be gathered up and harvested with a single haul of the 3000-foot seine across the Kole’s 100-acre lake. From 200 to 350 pounds of live catfish are picked up and weighed in each “dip basket” load. During this 1968 demonstration, 22,000 pounds of catfish was harvested in one hour.

Their market was for live catfish, which required designing special transport wagons — pulled, of course, by the John Deere Tractors used for rice farming.

The Kole Farm eventually developed several such lakes. The family sold the farm in 1971.
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