



## America's Last Homesteader

**THE ARRIVAL OF A NEW TRACTOR** is always an exciting event on any farm, but for Ken Deardorff (above) it was an ordeal that lasted several weeks and involved airplanes, dogsleds and work in subzero temperatures.

In 1973, Deardorff, originally from California, moved to a remote area in central Alaska, nearly 90 air miles south of McGrath, the closest village. There, about 200 miles northwest of Anchorage, he holds the unique title of America's Last Homesteader. The Homestead Act of 1862, which gave away millions of acres of land in 30 states, remained active in Alaska until 1986.

In February 1976, Deardorff purchased a 1942 Allis-Chalmers 4-cylinder gasoline-powered tractor from a dealer in Palmer, Alaska. Getting it to his homestead required disassembling the machine, loading it on a de Havilland Beaver bush plane and landing it on the frozen Stony River. Upon arrival, Deardorff then loaded the parts on a toboggan and pulled them to a makeshift workshop under the trees near his cabin. Three plane loads and several weeks later, Deardorff had himself a tractor.

"It would have taken this much commotion to get any piece of equipment here, but I figured that little Allis-Chalmers had something going for it to last all of these years working in Alaska," he says. In addition to farming—which Deardorff says is limited due to the area's short growing season—he estimates he used the tractor more than 200 hours just to remove stumps and pull driftwood from the river's edge, both of which he used for firewood.

Meanwhile, more than 3,500 miles away, the folks at Homestead National Monument (HNM) in Beatrice, Neb., reached out to America's last homesteader to document his experience. Through those discussions, Deardorff agreed to assist getting the tractor to the national monument. Yet, in addition to overcoming a few other complications, the National Park Service would have to come to McGrath to get it.

"There was a major evolution of tools during the period of the Homestead Act, so this will be a dynamic addition to our collection," says Mark Engler, superintendent of the HNM. "This particular tractor symbolizes the hard work and ingenuity of all homesteaders."  
—Diana Lambdin Meyer

■ The National Park Service is currently working to raise the estimated \$35,000 to deliver the tractor from McGrath, Alaska, to Beatrice, Neb. For more information about the HNM or how you can make a donation, visit [www.nps.gov/home](http://www.nps.gov/home).

# FarmLIFE FIVE

**Quick cuts about life on the land.**

**THIS ISSUE:** *Severe weather packs a punch, especially in spring. Read on about storm stats and satellite senescence.*

**2.6 MILES** The widest tornado ever officially recorded in the U.S. With winds gusting up to 296 mph, the 5El Reno, Okla., tornado traveled 16.2 miles and killed 18 people on May 31, 2013. In Canada, the largest recorded tornado was an EF-5 that hit Elie, Manitoba, on June 22, 2007. It traveled about 3.7 miles.

**8 INCHES** The size of the largest hailstone ever recovered and officially recognized in the U.S. Almost as large as a bowling ball, the 1.9375-pound monster was discovered on July 23, 2010, after crashing through a deck in Vivian, S.D. On average, it's estimated hail causes half a billion dollars in crop losses each year.

**17 MONTHS** The *shortest* projected gap in weather data collection caused by a delay in replacing aging satellites. According to a recent U.S. Government Accountability Office report, the loss of data could last as long as 53 months. While the U.S. gathers some info from satellites operated by other countries, as does Canada, any period without a complete U.S. satellite network could cause weather forecasts to be less "accurate and timely."

**10,000** That's approximately how many thunderstorms develop every year in the U.S., about 10% of which will be classified as severe. If a storm produces a tornado, generates winds of 58 mph or generates hail at least a half-inch in diameter, it is considered severe.

**25,000,000** The number of cloud-to-ground lightning strikes annually recorded within the United States. Canadian officials estimate they get between 2 and 3 million strikes in an average year. Each bolt can carry 100 million volts of electricity and can strike up to 10 miles away from rainfall. —Clair McLafferty

■ For tips on what to do in the event of lightning and for more information on the topics above, visit [myFarmLife.com/springfive](http://myFarmLife.com/springfive).

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