



KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

James Cummings & J. Earl McLeod – The Bulldozer

In addition to other notable firsts in Kansas history, Kansas is home to one of the most important pieces of construction equipment. Born out of necessity, innovation and a lot of hard work, James Cummings and J. Earl McLeod developed the world's first bulldozer in Morrowville, Kan.

In 1923, the oil industry was still relatively young. Sinclair Oil Company was in the process of laying an oil pipeline from Teapot Dome, Wyo., to refineries in Freeman, Mo. Gasoline was big business at the time, with the automobile become increasingly popular and increasingly accessible. The process of laying the pipeline was time consuming, and left a lot to be desired in terms of productivity and efficiency.

James Cummings, a young farmer in Washington County, Kan., surveyed the process as the pipeline was being laid nearby. Although the trench digging part of the process became mechanized through technologies developed during World War I, backfilling the trench proved much more elementary. This was still being done with mules and dirt slips.

Cummings approached the company laying the pipeline and was encouraged to bring his ideas to fruition. Cummings sought help from a local draftsman, J. Earl McLeod, and laid out plans for the machine. The two men began scouring junkyards to find materials used for the machine parts.

The frame of a Model T was used as the body of the machine, with windmill springs and other varied materials that, together, created the first bulldozer. Due to the success of their invention, the two men were awarded the contract for backfilling the pipeline from Deshler, Neb., to its final destination in Freeman, Mo.

Cummings and McLeod continued to collaborate on other inventions to benefit the growing oil industry. The partnership ended with the death of McLeod's wife, after which time he sold his share of the business to Cummings and returned to Washington County. Although the original machine wasn't pretty, it was solidly built and served its purpose well.

A replica of Cummings and McLeod's first bulldozer was created in 1985 for Morrowville City Park. This bulldozer is still on display in the park that now bears its inventor's name, Cummings Park.

