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A History of John Deere

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Introduction

Few companies have shaped the landscape of agriculture and industry quite like John Deere. From a humble blacksmith's shop in rural Illinois to a global titan of manufacturing, the story of John Deere is a compelling saga of innovation, resilience, and unwavering commitment to those who work the land. This book, "A History of John Deere: The Story of a Global Company," delves into the rich tapestry of this enduring enterprise, tracing its evolution from a nascent idea to one of the world's most recognizable and influential brands.

At its heart, the John Deere narrative begins with a revolutionary plow and a visionary individual who understood the profound needs of America's westward-expanding farmers. But the company's journey quickly transcended its pioneering roots, adapting to technological shifts, navigating economic upheavals, and consistently pushing the boundaries of what was possible in agricultural and industrial machinery. This book not only chronicles the key milestones in John Deere's extensive history—from the introduction of the iconic tractor to the development of precision agriculture—but also explores the underlying philosophies and corporate strategies that have cemented its position as a global leader.

Beyond the machinery itself, this history examines the broader impact of John Deere on global food security, infrastructure development, and the very fabric of rural communities worldwide. We will explore how the company's manufacturing prowess, extensive research and development initiatives, and robust financial services have created an interconnected ecosystem that supports progress across continents. The distinctive green and yellow livery has become more than just a brand; it symbolizes reliability, innovation, and a legacy built on trust and performance.

The scope of this book extends beyond a mere chronological account. It offers an insightful overview of John Deere's global importance and its current situation in a rapidly changing world. We will analyze the challenges and opportunities the company has faced throughout its existence, from navigating two world wars and economic depressions to embracing the digital age and addressing contemporary demands for sustainability. Understanding John Deere's past provides invaluable context for appreciating its present influence and anticipating its future trajectory.

Ultimately, "A History of John Deere" is an invitation to explore the remarkable journey of a company that has not only built machines but has also cultivated progress, fostered communities, and contributed significantly to feeding and building the world. It is a story of ingenuity, perseverance, and the enduring legacy of a company that continues to shape the future of agriculture, construction, and forestry on a global

scale. This exploration will reveal how John Deere has consistently adapted, innovated, and grown, solidifying its place as a cornerstone of modern industry and a testament to the power of enduring vision.

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CHAPTER ONE: John Deere's Early Life and the Plow That Transformed Agriculture

The narrative of John Deere, the man, is deeply intertwined with the development of the American Midwest. Born on February 7, 1804, in Rutland, Vermont, John Deere was the third son of William Rinold Deere and Sarah Yates Deere. His early life was marked by a significant personal loss when his father, a merchant tailor, embarked on a journey to England in 1808 to claim an inheritance. William Deere was never heard from again and is presumed to have been lost at sea, leaving Sarah to raise their children on a meager income.

This early hardship likely shaped John Deere's character, instilling in him a strong sense of resourcefulness and a drive for self-reliance. His formal education was likely rudimentary, limited to the common schools available in Vermont during that era. At the age of 17, he began an apprenticeship to learn the trade of blacksmithing, a skill that would become the foundation of his future success. He practiced this trade in various locations across Vermont, honing his craft and gaining a reputation for his workmanship and ingenuity.

However, the economic climate in New England in the mid-1830s was challenging. Facing depressed business conditions and with a young family to support—he had married Demarius Lamb in 1827 and started a family—Deere found himself in debt after his blacksmith shop was twice destroyed by fire. These difficult circumstances compelled him to seek new opportunities further west, a common path for many ambitious individuals during that period of American expansion.

In 1836, Deere made the momentous decision to leave Vermont, temporarily separating from his family, and journeyed to Grand Detour, Illinois. This small settlement along the Rock River had been founded by his friend and fellow Vermonter, Leonard Andrus, and crucially, it lacked a skilled blacksmith. Deere's arrival was met with immediate demand for his services, and within two days, his forge was operational, signifying a fresh start and a new chapter in his life.

Upon settling in Grand Detour, Deere quickly observed a significant problem plaguing the pioneer farmers of the region. The cast-iron and wooden plows they had brought from the East were ill-suited for the rich, heavy, and sticky prairie soil of the Midwest. Unlike the rocky, sandy soils of New England, the dense Midwestern earth clung stubbornly to the plow bottoms, forcing farmers to repeatedly stop and scrape away the accumulated soil every few feet. This laborious and time-consuming process severely hindered their productivity and made cultivating the fertile land a frustrating

endeavor.

Deere, drawing upon his expertise as a blacksmith and his keen observational skills, recognized the urgent need for a more effective plow. He recalled how, as a youth in his father's tailor shop in Rutland, he had seen needles polished by running them through sand, which gave him an idea. He theorized that a plow crafted from highly polished steel with a specially designed shape would allow the sticky soil to slide off cleanly, thus "scouring itself" as it moved through the field.

The prevailing wisdom of the time, however, presented a challenge. Many farmers held the belief that steel would "poison the soil" and prevent crops from growing, making the introduction of a steel plow a difficult proposition. Despite these reservations, Deere was convinced of his idea's merit. In 1837, driven by a desire to alleviate the farmers' plight and armed with his innovative concept, he set out to create such a plow.

Steel was a scarce commodity in the frontier town of Grand Detour. Resourcefully, Deere acquired a broken steel sawmill blade. From this discarded piece of metal, he fashioned the first commercially successful self-scouring steel plow. He cut the teeth off the blade and meticulously shaped it, bending it over a log to create the ideal moldboard. He also polished the surface to an exceptionally smooth finish, a crucial element for the plow's self-scouring capability.

The impact of this invention was immediate and profound. It is said that hundreds of people gathered at the farm of Lewis Crandall near Grand Detour to witness the young blacksmith test his new creation. The demonstration was a resounding success; the sticky prairie soil slid effortlessly off the polished steel moldboard, allowing for continuous plowing without the constant need for cleaning. This sleek and efficient tool was an instant game-changer, dramatically increasing the speed and ease of cultivating the rich Midwestern land.

In its inaugural year, 1837, Deere produced only one steel plow. The following year, he made two more. Word of his revolutionary plow spread quickly among the farming community, and demand soon began to outpace his ability to produce them in his small blacksmith shop. By 1841, Deere was manufacturing 75 plows annually, a testament to the urgent need for his innovation.

This early success marked a pivotal transition for John Deere. He was no longer just a blacksmith; he was becoming a plow manufacturer. Recognizing the growing demand and the limitations of his current setup, in 1843, Deere entered into a partnership with Leonard Andrus to expand production. They established a small factory in Grand Detour, which utilized water power from the Rock River to run machinery, significantly increasing their output. By 1846, his company was producing 1,000 plows annually.

However, the partnership with Andrus eventually faced strains due to differing business philosophies. Deere envisioned selling to a broader market beyond Grand Detour, while Andrus opposed a proposed railroad connection that would facilitate this expansion. Deere also harbored distrust regarding Andrus's accounting practices. These disagreements led Deere to dissolve the partnership in 1848.

Seeking better resources and transportation advantages, Deere made another strategic move in 1848, relocating his growing operation approximately 70 miles southwest to Moline, Illinois. Moline, situated on the east bank of the Mississippi River, offered crucial benefits, including water power for running a factory and riverboats for transporting raw materials and distributing finished plows to wider markets. This relocation marked the end of his pioneering work in Grand Detour but the true beginning of the industrial enterprise that would become Deere & Company. The small white house he built in Grand Detour in 1836 still stands today, a tangible link to the humble origins of a global company.

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