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# Deere & Co.

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Blacksmith and the Prairie: John Deere's Early Years
- **Chapter 2** The Invention of the Steel Plow
- **Chapter 3** From Grand Detour to Moline: Building a Business
- **Chapter 4** Incorporation and the Rise of a Family Legacy
- **Chapter 5** Overcoming Adversity: Recessions and Transformations
- **Chapter 6** Charles Deere and the Expansion Era
- **Chapter 7** Planters, Partnerships, and Growth
- **Chapter 8** Entering the Tractor Age: The Waterloo Boy
- **Chapter 9** Innovation in Harvesting: The Combine Harvester
- **Chapter 10** Surviving the Twentieth Century: Wars, Depressions, and Boom Times
- **Chapter 11** Industrial Equipment and Diversification
- **Chapter 12** Expansion into Consumer and Turf Markets
- **Chapter 13** A Global Footprint: Manufacturing Around the World
- **Chapter 14** Product Lines: From Tractors to Gators
- **Chapter 15** Digital Transformation: Precision Agriculture Emerges
- **Chapter 16** The Smart Industrial Strategy
- **Chapter 17** Autonomous Machinery: A New Frontier
- **Chapter 18** Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning at Deere
- **Chapter 19** Electric, Hybrid, and Sustainable Technologies
- **Chapter 20** Manufacturing Revolution: Digital Factories and 5G
- **Chapter 21** Environmental Leadership: Pursuing Sustainability
- **Chapter 22** Financial Health: Markets, Cycles, and Shareholders
- **Chapter 23** Challenges of the Modern Era: Tariffs, Inflation, and Supply Chains
- **Chapter 24** Competitors, Customers, and the Evolving Marketplace
- **Chapter 25** Looking Ahead: The Future of Deere & Co.

## Introduction

Deere & Company, better known across farms and fields by its iconic John Deere brand, is much more than a manufacturer of green and yellow tractors. It is the story of American ingenuity, resilience, and innovation—a narrative that begins with a single blacksmith working the Illinois prairie and evolves into the chronicle of a multinational corporation shaping the future of global agriculture. "Deere & Co.: The Story of An American Company" explores the deep roots and wide-reaching branches of one of the world's foremost machinery companies, tracing its journey from modest beginnings to market dominance.

At the heart of this narrative lies John Deere himself—a skilled blacksmith whose invention of the self-scouring steel plow in 1837 transformed the landscape, both literally and figuratively, of American farming. The steel plow not only solved a persistent challenge for Midwest farmers but also marked the start of an enterprise built on the principle of aiding those who feed and build the world. As you will discover in these pages, that ethos has endured across generations of Deere family leadership and a steadily evolving product line.

The evolution of Deere & Company has tracked—and often catalyzed—major shifts in American history: from westward expansion to industrialization, through world wars and Great Depressions, and into the modern technological age. Each decade brought transformative challenges and opportunities. With each, Deere & Company responded not only by building better machines but by revolutionizing the way those machines were conceived, manufactured, and deployed. This book will examine how strategic acquisitions, particularly in the early twentieth century, and bold ventures into new markets like tractors, harvesting equipment, and eventually the global construction, forestry, and consumer segments, reshaped the firm's future.

But the story of Deere & Co. is not solely one of machines or markets—it is a story of innovation and adaptation. The company's Smart Industrial Strategy, its investments in precision agriculture, artificial intelligence, and sustainable technologies signal a broader transformation: Deere is increasingly a technology company as much as a machinery company. From autonomous tractors to AI-driven spraying technology, and from digital data platforms to electrification, this book will investigate how innovation is core to Deere's ongoing relevance and success.

Yet every era brings its trials. Deere & Company has faced recessions, agricultural downcycles, volatile commodity markets, global competition, changing regulations, and, most recently, the twin pressures of rising costs and declining demand. Its story is also one of resilience: a lesson in how robust financial management, renewed focus

on shareholder value, and an unwavering commitment to customer success have carried the company through adversity. Today, Deere not only endures but seeks to lead as sustainability, digitalization, and the automation of agriculture redefine what it means to be a global player.

This book is for anyone interested in the intersection of technology, business, and agriculture; for readers who want to understand how one American company became a world leader; and for those curious about the future of farming itself. As you turn the pages, you will witness not only the history of Deere & Company but the story of transformation—of an industry, a company, and a set of values forged on the American prairie that continue to influence the world.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Blacksmith and the Prairie: John Deere's Early Years

The American Midwest, in the early 19th century, was a land of immense promise and daunting challenge. Settlers venturing westward encountered vast stretches of fertile prairie, a sea of grass that rippled under endless skies. While the soil itself was incredibly rich, a gift of centuries of decomposed plant and animal matter, it possessed a stubborn, sticky quality that proved to be an insurmountable obstacle for the traditional farming tools of the era. Iron and wooden plows, designed for the lighter, sandier soils of the eastern United States, simply couldn't contend with the thick, clay-heavy earth of the prairie. They would clog constantly, forcing farmers to halt their progress every few feet to scrape away the clinging mud. This wasn't just an inconvenience; it was a fundamental barrier to cultivating the land on any meaningful scale, severely limiting agricultural output and hindering westward expansion.

It was into this challenging environment that John Deere arrived. Born in Rutland, Vermont, on February 7, 1804, Deere was the third son of William Rinold Deere, a merchant tailor, and Sarah Yates. Life in New England proved difficult, especially after his father was presumed lost at sea when John was just four years old, leaving his mother to raise the family on a meager income. John's formal education was basic, limited to the common schools of Vermont. At the age of seventeen, in 1821, he began an apprenticeship with Captain Benjamin Lawrence, a well-regarded blacksmith in Middlebury, Vermont, a trade he would pursue for the next twelve years in various towns across his home state.

Deere quickly earned a reputation for his exceptional craftsmanship and ingenuity, a testament to his keen mind and skilled hands. However, the economic landscape of Vermont in the 1830s was bleak. Facing a deepening recession and with a growing family to support—he had married Demarius Lamb in 1827 and they would eventually have nine children—Deere made the momentous decision to seek new opportunities out west. In 1836, at 33 years old, he embarked on a journey that would change the course of American agriculture. He left his family behind temporarily, following a business associate, Leonard Andrus, to a small, burgeoning settlement in Illinois called Grand Detour.

Upon his arrival in Grand Detour, the need for a skilled blacksmith was immediately apparent. Within two days, Deere had set up his forge and commenced working, quickly establishing himself as a general repairman and manufacturer of essential tools like pitchforks and shovels. It was here, in the heart of the Illinois prairie, that Deere truly encountered the stubborn realities of the sticky soil firsthand. Farmers in

the area often brought him their broken cast-iron and wooden plows, lamenting their inability to effectively cultivate the rich but difficult land. They described the exasperating process of constantly having to stop and clear the soil that clung to their plowshares, an inefficiency that made large-scale farming nearly impossible.

Deere, ever the problem-solver, recognized this as more than just a repair job; it was a fundamental design flaw. He understood that the issue wasn't the strength of the plow, but its material and shape. He drew upon his knowledge of metals and his blacksmithing experience. One popular anecdote suggests he recalled how needles in his father's tailor shop were polished by running them through sand. Another theory points to his observation of how a polished steel pitchfork moved cleanly through hay and soil. Whatever the exact inspiration, Deere conceived a radical idea: a plow made from highly polished steel with a specially shaped moldboard that would "scour" itself as it moved through the soil, preventing the sticky prairie mud from adhering to it.

The concept was simple yet revolutionary. In 1837, John Deere put his theory to the test. He took a broken saw blade, a piece of discarded steel, and meticulously reshaped and polished it. He then attached this new steel share to a wrought-iron frame, creating his first commercially successful self-scouring steel plow. The contrast to the existing implements was stark. While traditional plows struggled, Deere's invention sliced through the thick prairie sod with remarkable ease, the soil shedding cleanly from its polished surface.

The immediate impact was profound. Farmers, who had toiled endlessly with less efficient tools, suddenly had a means to break new ground and cultivate their fields with unprecedented speed and effectiveness. The first plow was sold to a local farmer, Lewis Crandall, whose positive experience quickly spread by word of mouth among his neighbors. The demand for Deere's innovative plow grew rapidly. By early 1838, two more orders had been placed, and by 1841, Deere was producing between 75 and 100 plows annually. This wasn't just a product; it was a solution that unlocked the immense agricultural potential of the American Midwest. It was the beginning of a legacy forged in steel, deeply intertwined with the development of American agriculture and the story of an American company that would grow to span the globe.

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