



Tracking Down Deere

By **Monroe S. Miller**, Golf Course Superintendent, Blackhawk Country Club

The story of John Deere, founder of the company that is now one of the major manufacturers of grass machinery in the world, is a story that took place in the midwest. It is an interesting story and one that is easy to touch and investigate from Wisconsin; we are close enough to immerse ourselves in and really enjoy it. Let me tell you a little about his life.

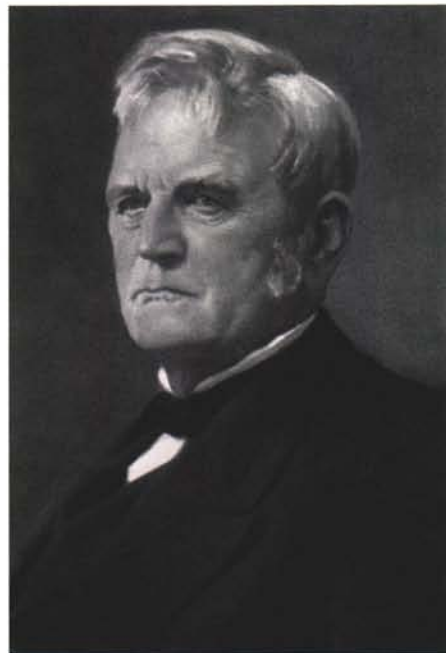
A few years ago Cheryl and I were touring the beautiful Middlebury, Vermont area in the autumn. Middlebury is located in west central Vermont, between the southern tip of Lake Champlain and the Green Mountain National Park. It is home to an excellent private college - Middlebury College - and it was also where John Deere learned the blacksmith trade and served a four-year apprenticeship.

John Deere was the son of William and Sarah Deere. William R. Deere was an immigrant to America from Wales; Sarah, it is believed, was born in Connecticut. They were married

in the 1790s and settled in Rutland, Vermont. John Deere was born in Rutland on February 7, 1804. He had two older brothers (William, Jr. and Francis) and two older sisters (Jane and Elizabeth) and a younger brother, George. William Deere was a tailor in Rutland. Middlebury was a thriving community of almost 1,500 people at John's birth. His father's business in Rutland was prosperous.

In 1808 William returned to England to settle an inheritance with family there. He arrived safely in England, but apparently perished in a sinking on the return trip to Boston. His widow assumed his tailoring business, eking out a meager living for her young family.

John Deere's education was minimal. Sometime during his early teenage years he worked for a tanner. But his mother must have recognized some special skill in her son and helped him acquire an apprenticeship with a well-known blacksmith, Benjamin Lawrence. John was 17 years old at the time and the year



Portrait of John Deere.



This building is an exact replica of John Deere's first blacksmith shop in Grand Detour.



Welcome sign at the John Deere historic site in Grand Detour, Illinois.

was 1821. An apprenticeship provided housing, some clothes, training and a small wage. It is possible he also received some instruction in arithmetic, writing and reading.

During his years as an apprentice blacksmith in the Lawrence shop on the river that runs through Middlebury, he learned well the trade that would carry him to great success in later years. The site of that blacksmith shop was an archaeological excavation and is noted today with a historical marker - a

bronze tablet on a boulder. It is right in the middle of the bustling and busy town. It is inspiring to imagine, nearly 200 years ago, that a man named John Deere learned the trade that would lead to one of the world's major corporations.

Deere was at the Lawrence shop for three years. While there he met and dated Demarius Lamb from Hancock, Vermont. Hancock is about 20 miles southeast of Middlebury. She attended school in Middlebury. After his apprenticeship ended in

1825, he became a journeyman blacksmith, a job he held for two years. In 1827 he married Demarius Lamb and was hired to do all the ironwork for a sawmill and a linseed oil mill. That contract launched him into business for himself.

Over the next nine years, Deere was involved in numerous business relationships. He had a partner in Salisbury, Vermont for a couple of years. From there he and another partner built a blacksmith shop in Leicester Four Corners, Vermont.



Primitive by today's standards, John Deere built the best equipment of his time.



This view of the back of Deere's home shows the well beneath the porch roof that he dug himself.

This shows the lawn and the back of the house that serves as the visitor center.



A bronze sculpture of John Deere at work on an anvil.



The actual site discovered during an archeological dig, is now under roof and part of the site tour.



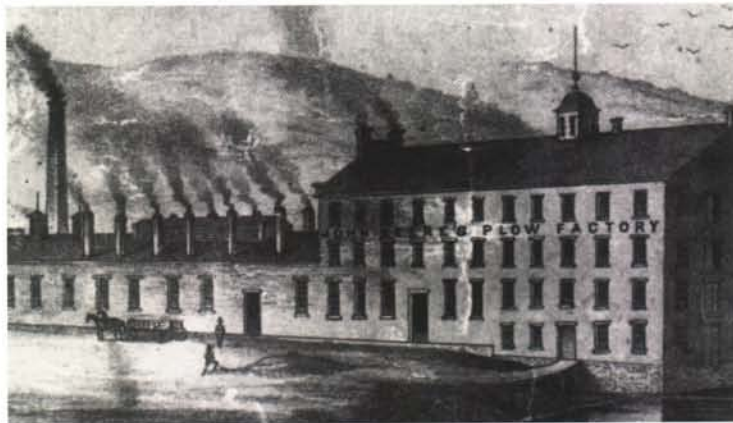
A bronze deer graces the small park at the John Deere historical site.

Two fires in that village forced him to move to Royalton, Vermont to work for another shop. After he accumulated some capital, he went into business for himself, this time in Hancock, his wife's home village.

In Hancock, Deere became well known for his highly polished fork tines and shovels and hoes. The shovels and hoes scoured themselves of soil and the pitchfork tines slipped through hay like needles. This bit of specialization gave Deere some early insight in the factory business that would help him later.

However, the agricultural economy and business conditions deteriorated in Vermont in the 1830s and John Deere was worried about the uncertainty of his future. Many New Englanders were being drawn to the midwest and words back to friends and families in the East were generally optimistic. Sometime in November of 1836 John Deere packed a few tools, a little money (\$73.73) and left Hancock for the great American prairie. He left Hancock without his pregnant wife and their four children and moved to Grand Detour, Illinois to start over in business. He was thirty-two years old.

The story of Deere gets really interesting at this point because it is



This was John Deere's first factory in Moline, Illinois. It is now the site of Moline's Civic Center, The Mark.

The Mark occupies the site of the first Deere plow factory in Moline.



John Deere's home at the corner of 11th Avenue and 12th Street in Moline. It is undergoing an overhaul.

so close to us. Grand Detour is about 50 miles south of the Wisconsin-Illinois border, almost due south of Monroe, Wisconsin. It was a perfect place as Deere's destination. It was a flourishing community that did not have a blacksmith and desperately needed one. When Deere arrived in the village, the sawmill was out of

operation because its pitman shaft had broken. There was no smith or forge, so immediately (the first two days after his arrival) he built a forge from the stone he found on a nearby hill and mortar from clay soil he removed from the bottom of the Rock River that made an arc around the village. Using his crude forge, he



The Charles Deere estate is beautiful. The home is the centerpiece.



Extensive gardens are part of the Deere estate.

had the pitman repaired and the mill back in operation in a few days.

The next year - 1837 - was a prosperous one for John Deere. He built a blacksmith shop - more on that in a bit - and his business boomed. He built a house near the shop in 1838, and during that year his wife and their five children arrived in Grand Detour from Hancock, Vermont. They made that long trip by wagon and were accompanied by her brother-in-law and his family.

Deere shoed oxen and horses, repaired equipment, manufactured forks and hoes and shovels, and built agricultural equipment needed by local farmers. He occasionally travelled to sell pieces he manufactured; it doesn't take much for me to consider he may even have made it to Wisconsin to sell to farmers in the south of our state.

The flat, rich prairie soils offered many advantages to farmer immigrants from elsewhere in America. They were flat, had no rocks and were fertile. But those soils present-

ed farmers with a formidable problem, one that nearly sent some of them elsewhere to farm. The prairie was covered with an enormous crop of grasses and that grass cover created huge trouble with the initial cultivation. The word prairie, after all, comes from the French word meaning "excessive meadow." The matting of the growth from previous seasons and the extensive root systems of the plants were the source of the plowing problems.

Huge plows were built for this "prairie breaking." They were made from cast iron, which we know from castings at our golf course facilities, is pitted and easily rusted and rough. It doesn't polish smooth, either, and this caused the sticky soil to build up on the moldboard. Farmers could go a few feet to a few yards before they had to stop and scrape the mud off the plowshare.

Deere watched this and saw the farmers' total frustration. He was sure something could be done to solve the problem. All that was need-



The Deere family plot in Moline.



The Deere family plot in Moline.

ed was a plow that was properly shaped so it would turn a clean furrow and one that would polish so soil wouldn't stick.

Deere remembered seeing a broken saw blade at the saw mill he had repaired days after his arrival in Grand Detour. Of course it had a smooth, shiny surface and he asked if he could have it. Here is how John recounted the event that was to make American history to a friend of his:

I cut the teeth off with a hand

John Deere's gravesite. His first wife is on the right. Her sister, his second wife rests to the left.



chisel, with the help of a striker and sledge, then laid them on the fire of the forge and heated what little I could at a time and shaped them as best I could with the hand hammer. After making the upright standard out of bar iron, I was ready for the wood parts. I went out to the timber, dug up a sapling and made the crooks of the roots for handles, shaped the beam out of a stick of timber with an ax and drawing-knife, and finally succeeded in constructing a very rough plow. I set it on a dry-goods box by the side of the shop-door. A few days after, a farmer from across the river drove up. Seeing the plow, he asked:

"Who made that plow?"

"I did, such as it is, wood work and all."

"Well," said the farmer, "that looks as though it would work. Let me take it home and try it, and if it works all right, I will keep it and pay you for it. If not I will return it."

"Take it," said I, "and give it a thorough trial."

About two weeks later, the farmer drove up to the shop, without the plow, and paid for it, and said: "Now get a move on you, and make me two more plows just like the other one."

The historical event was, of course, that Deere was the first to use a piece of polished steel for a plow and the plow worked in even the stickiest (gumbo suprema!) soil of Illinois.

Deere made that plow in 1837 and two more in 1838. In 1901, one of those first three original plows was found at a farm just south of Grand Detour. The farm had been continuously in the same family. The company bought it, kept it at its Moline headquarters until 1938 when it was given to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. where it has been ever since. I am going to see it the first chance I get.

The success of Deere's plow resulted in less and less blacksmithing for him and more manufacturing. He outgrew his original blacksmith shop and along with a new partner (the owner of the mill he had repaired upon arrival in Grand Detour from Vermont) he built a factory right on the Rock River. He called the company the Grand Detour Plough Company, but his name was on every plow. In 1843 he ordered some special rolled steel from England and made 400 steel plows. Production kept going up, but it was hard getting coal for the forges to Grand Detour and it had to be hauled overland by wagon. It was slow and expensive. The same was true for the metals he needed. Orders came up the Mississippi as far as St. Louis but had to also be hauled to his factory by horse and wagon.

In 1847, he made 1,000 plows and decided in 1848 that he had to move his operation to Moline, Illinois. Moline had barge service from the Mississippi and was located on the rail line. He could get his raw materials either way. Deere and Company

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headquarters are still in Moline.

It was a good move. In 1852, 4,000 plows were made there; 8,000 were built in 1855 and almost 15,000 in 1856. There were 68 John Deere employees in 1856.

Another highlight took place in 1853 when 16 year old Charles Deere, John's second son, joined the firm. He followed his father as president of the company and worked at John Deere for 54 years. By the way, the company was officially named John Deere and Company in 1857.



The John Deere Pavilion features some great old machinery like...



the John Deere 12A combine. My grandfather owned one just like it.



The J.D. Commons has a familiar landmark at its entrance.



The familiar bronze deer is on the lawn in front of the rusty Deere Administration Building.

John Deere's wife Demarius died in 1866. They had nine children. Interestingly, Deere married his deceased wife's maiden sister Lucenia. Neither John Deere or his son Charles lived to see a John Deere tractor. That happened when the third generation was running the company (Charles' son-in-law William Butterworth).

As you might expect from an aggressive person like John Deere, he was active in the Moline community. He was a leader in the Republican Party and was a strong abolitionist. Deere supported the Moline Property Protection Society, was active in the Moline Fire Engine Company and was a trustee in the Congregational Church there. In 1860 he was elected president of the Rock Island County Agricultural Society, and in the early 1860s he

purchased a lot of land east of Moline. He farmed it, raising crops and Jersey milk cows and Berkshire hogs. And in April 1873 John Deere was elected mayor of Moline for a one-year term. On May 17, 1886, John died at 82. Three thousand people attended the funeral and burial.

Working backwards, I will share some of the Deere sites you can visit in Moline. Moline, by the way of perspective, is almost as close to Madison as Green Bay. John Deere and many of his family members are buried in the Riverside Cemetery at about 29th Street and 6th Avenue. The graves, located on top of the hill in the cemetery, are easy to find and have a commanding view of the Mississippi River, and valley and the city.

The John Deere Commons are right downtown, well marked and

with adequate parking. The Commons is a redevelopment project initiated by the company. There is a great store full of JD products, and the John Deere Pavillion next to it is full of refurbished antique JD equipment. The site of the original Moline Plow factory is now the site of The Mark, Moline's beautiful civic center. The land was donated by Deere & Co. to the city.

On top of another hill, west of the cemetery back toward downtown, uphill and south and a little west of the Commons are John Deere's home (now undergoing refurbishing), Charles Deere's house (also later the home of the Wiman family, Charles Deere's grandson), and the Butterworth home (Charles' daughter Katherine and her husband William Butterworth. He succeeded Charles as president of the compa-

ny). The Charles Deere home is really an estate; it covers a number of acres on a promontory and is complete with gardens and huge lawns and beautiful trees. It was open for an art fair while I was there so I wandered around the place for quite a while last fall. It really is beautiful. The Butterworth home is across the street near the Charles Deere home. Both are within walking distance of John's mansion.

While you are in Moline, a visit to Deere headquarters is essential for two reasons: the Deere Administration Center building itself and the three-dimensional display of artifacts from Deere's rich history that is located inside. The building is an architectural masterpiece designed by Eero Saarinen. It is a rugged and rusty (literally!) building with a lot of exposed and weathered steel structure. It is not glossy or glamorous or sophisticated. Rather, it seems down to earth and in perfect

harmony with the wonderful site in East Moline (famous as the home of Dr. Steven M. Millett).

Go inside and enjoy the mural of antiques designed by Alexander Girard. Be sure to give yourself a couple of hours - you won't want to leave.

The building is at Illinois Route 5, past 70th street. Watch for the sign. You'll be there in ten minutes from the downtown sites.

Now back to Grand Detour. You can get there from Interstate 88. Exit at Dixon, go north on Illinois Route 2 to the village. If you come from the north on Illinois 26, also turn on Route 2 in Dixon. There is ample parking at the John Deere Historical Site. The tours are guided, but you can spend all the time you want after the tour. There is a charge of a few bucks to get in at the reception center. The tour begins at the indoor archaeology exhibit. In 1962, the University of Illinois researched the

site and found the exact location of J.D.'s original shop. The story of the dig is extremely interesting. From there you go to a replica of his shop, complete with a working blacksmith. From the shop the tour takes you to John Deere's home. He built it in 1836 and added to it as his family grew. Of special interest is the 40-foot deep well under the porch roof which he hand dug himself so they wouldn't have to walk to the village well. Also on the tour is a neighbor's house which serves as a visitor center. It is decorated with period furniture and very interesting. There is a family connection with it you will learn about.

From John Deere's walking plow of 1837 to the John Deere walking greensmower of today, this company has a fabulous history that touches us.

And it is right at our doorstep. Enjoy the trip! 🌿

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