



J. I. Case: Wisconsin Industrialist

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

Many times, on the pages of this journal, I have written of the pride we should feel in Wisconsin for our long history of manufacturing farm machinery and turf equipment. Well known are the stories of the Jacobsens of Racine, the Toro plant in Tomah, and John Deere's facility in Horicon. Other smaller companies make golf course equipment from Port Washington to Cameron and many towns in between.

To those of my generation and older, we also have felt pride in living in the home state of Allis Chalmers, Van Brundt and Case. Although Oliver tractors were made in Iowa, the company name-sake was an engineering graduate of the University of Wisconsin – Madison. All the histories are interesting, but none more so than the company started by Jerome Increase Case.

In my youth, I always loved Case tractors. A neighbor had a smooth running model SC, unique for its unusual steering assembly and classic grill. An uncle bought a Case 300 new and I envied him for it. I was still young when I drove it towing a load of hay from his farm to ours, a distance of probably seven miles. The trip included a run the full length of main street – Lincoln Avenue – in my hometown. Heady stuff for a kid! I wonder how many other kids of that era fell in love with a Case VAC or a Case 200 while mowing roughs with a set of Jacobsen Fairway Blitzers?

I credit Mike Handrich for inspiring me to learn something about the Case Company and its founder, Jerome Increase Case. The green committee chair at Racine Country Club is Edward J.

Campbell, retired president of Case Corporation. For an afternoon and evening last fall, Cheryl and I toured the Case historical sites in Racine with Mike and Karen, and spent some fascinating time with Mr. Campbell visiting about this great Wisconsin company with worldwide operations.

Like Cyrus McCormick and John Deere, Jerome Case was an immigrant to the Midwest. All three came from their places of birth in the east. Case left New York in 1842 – he was 23 years old then. He was a farm boy from Williamstown, New York, the youngest of four sons in the family that also included three sisters. As with so many leaders and inventors I have read about (John Muir and John Burroughs come immediately to mind), Jerome spent much time as a child reading. His education amounted to brief terms at a rural school at times of the year when the farm work load was lighter. He read what he could get his hands on – the Bible, almanacs and from western New York, the *Genesee Farmer*.

At that time in our history, grain (wheat, oats, barley, rye) was separated from the straw by manual flailing. Jerome saw an ad for a threshing machine in the *Genesee Farmer* called a "ground hog" thresher and talked his father into attending a demonstration of the machine. It was powered by a horse tread. Wheat was fed in one end and the whirling cylinders separated the grain from the straw. Both fell to the ground at the opposite end. The ground hog allowed for a production of 100 – 200 bushels a day, exponentially more than possible by hand flailing.



Jerome Increase Case, 1818-1891.

In 1937, the state of Wisconsin chose him as the outstanding Industrialist, joining Hamlin Garland in Literature, Robert M. LaFollette in Politics and Frederick Jackson Turner in History.



Retired Case IH president and Racine Country Club Green Committee Chairman Ed Campbell.



In 1904 Case built a new headquarters from a design similar to the Boston Public Library.

The elder Case bought one of the machines and Jerome spent six years custom threshing grain for farmers in that part of New York, as well as giving demonstrations and selling ground hogs to other farmers. Case knew the machine well and was able to adjust and repair them with considerable skill. Clearly, he had considerable mechanical ability.

Jerome must have seen, during those six years, the tremendous amount of exportable corn and wheat traveling the Great Lakes from the Midwest to the Erie Canal and foreign markets. No doubt he read about the opportunities for farming in the Midwest, including the Wisconsin Territory. It seemed the place for an experienced thresherman. Case made the decision to head west, but first enrolled in the Rensselaer Academy twenty miles west of his home and took a course (about six months) in engineering. Late in his life, Case reflected on how important those months of education were for him.



Jerome and Lydia Case built this large home on Main Street in Racine. It is privately owned today and divided into apartments.

Jerome traveled from New York on the Great Lakes – Erie, Huron and Michigan – with six ground hog threshing machines. His plan was to sell five of them to pay his way and use the sixth to support himself by custom threshing for farmers on the way to his destination of Rochester, Wisconsin.

History has it that Case was unimpressed by Chicago. He bought a team of horses and a wagon there, loaded the ground hogs and headed north. Things went according to his plan; Jerome sold five ground hogs in the eighty miles from Chicago to Rochester. The profits and his custom work left him with a tidy profit to get through that first winter in Racine County. He rented a room at a pioneer tavern in Rochester and became acquainted with a carpenter who also rented a room there.

Although the ground hog saved backbreaking mundane labor, it nevertheless dropped the grain, chaff and straw into one pile at the end of the machine. Case thought of improvements that would thresh and winnow – separate the

grain and chaff/straw with a fan. He wanted to design a machine that would do the entire task of threshing and separating in one operation.

The carpenter he roomed with at the tavern rented Jerome a workbench in his shop. Jerome had lucked out by moving to Wisconsin in the year of its first great wheat harvest. Luck was also with him because for the three years before his arrival Rochester was the home of Richard Ela, a manufacturer of fanning mills. He was making a hundred a year when Case arrived. The fanning mills were used to winnow the grain from the straw and chaff with forced air.

Case approached Ela, and Ela encouraged him to develop his idea of one machine to process grain. All that winter, spring and summer Case worked on a threshing machine, and he was frustrated by many problems. By the spring of 1844, he had built a machine he felt would thresh grain the way he wanted. The first trial set in a barn in Rochester was successful. He was invited to a farm



Case IH was at the GCSAA Conference this year. Their booth included this golf course size tractor/loader/backhoe and a skid steer.



I spent some time answering questions of their staff. It seemed to me they are contemplating building some turf equipment. My suggestion was a line of large area rotaries.



In 1976 Case manufactured a 1570 AgriKing to note America's bicentennial.



A display across the street from the stately 1904 headquarters is this display of tractors that speaks to today — New Holland, 1976 Case AgriKing and Case IH. CNH Global now owns Case.

less than two miles from Rochester and on a windy May day, powered by a two-horse tread, J. I. Case's threshing machine really worked. The grain came out a spout ready to be bagged, and the straw was blown into a pile.

All that summer Jerome worked to make the grain even cleaner, and in the fall he threshed much of the crop in western Racine County. Farmers asked him to build them similar machines and he knew he would rather build the machines than operate them as a custom thresherman.

Case needed a shop and water power if he was going to build threshing machines. The water rights on the Fox River in Rochester were tied up, so Case

loaded his tools and headed to the Root River in Racine. He was able to rent a small shop on the riverbank and was in business. He worked from there for three years, filling local orders for threshers.

In 1847, J. I. Case built a three story brick building was 80' by 30'. Although it was also on the Root River, he also installed a steam boiler engine for power so that he wasn't dependent on water levels for power. He added employees and by 1848 he was Racine's largest industry.

Jerome married Lydia Ann Bull in 1847 and for at least two years after that the frugal Case traveled by stage, boat or on foot, not yet able to afford his own horse and carriage! He traveled Wisconsin and most of the Midwest in those early years not selling machines — they were so good they sold them-

selves — but rather trying to collect money owed him!

From the first, one thing Case did was back his machine's quality. Frequently he went to the unhappy farmer himself to fix a balky thresher. He would not put up with what he called "murdering the reputation of a Case machine." My reading tells me that although Jerome likely wasn't a warm and gracious fellow — many said he was gruff and abrupt — he was as absolutely honest as a man could be and had enormous pride in anything that carried his name.

I wrote about my favorite J. I. Case story a number of years ago in *The Grass Roots*. Here it is again.

A farmer near Faribault, Minnesota was anticipating an excellent harvest of wheat in the early autumn of 1884. The reaper



J. I. Case's brother-in-law and business partner, Stephen Bull, is also pillowed in the Mound Cemetery. Other family members rest there as well.



Jerome Increase Case Mausoleum, located in Racine's Mound Cemetery

had done a good job, the bundles had ripened in the shocks and all appeared ready for a successful threshing. The only problem was the threshing machine itself. It was belted to a big traction steam engine, which was working well. But the new J. I. Case threshing machine was not. The grain wasn't coming out clean, and it was using way too much steam power.

The farmer had called the dealer. The dealer had come out to the farm, made adjustments, but couldn't get it to work like it should.

So the dealer telegraphed the J. I. Case office in Racine and they sent their best field mechanic out to the farm. He had no luck either, despite considerable swearing. He telegraphed the home office and recommended replacing the machine with a new one or refunding the farmer his money.

The reply came back from Racine: AM TAKING NEXT TRAIN. MEET ME FARIBAULT. J. I. CASE. The man himself was heading west.

News traveled through the

neighborhoods around there like wild fire. Case arrived at the farm to a considerable crowd of farmers who wanted to see the great man.

Case was 65 years old at that time, white beard and white hair, ruddy face and coal black eyebrows. He stood tall and peered at the machine with his name on it with steel blue eyes.

Case removed his coat and hat, rolled up his sleeves and went to work. An hour passed and he order the thresher started. He pitched bundles into it himself; it didn't work right.

He worked another four hours, straight through, starting and stopping the threshing machine many times. It still didn't work.

He turned to the farmer. "Have you," he asked, "a sizeable can of kerosene handy?"

The farmer returned with the kerosene, which Jerome used to douse the machine from one end to the other. Then he struck a match and lit the threshing machine on fire. Legend has it the fire could be seen for miles and Case stayed until it burned to the ground. The farmer received a new machine.

During his lifetime Jerome saw his company design and build

many farm implements and steam engines. He invested in Great Lakes cargo ships, was involved with banking and real estate, ranches and cattle operations, and was successful as a horse breeder. His trotter Jay Eye See was so successful and well known in America that Currier and Ives painted it.

Jerome Case died in 1891 when he was 73 years old. This past fall I attended, as I always do, the Rock River Threshere. Case equipment was featured and it gave those of us there the chance to see one each of most of the early agricultural implements Case manufactured.

There have been formidable changes in the company since J. I. Case passed away. But Case to this day still produces some of the best tractors and equipment in the world, still in Racine.

Books have been written about the history of Case and make for fascinating reading. From the story of how Wisconsin's Old Abe became the company trademark to the success of those many lines of equipment, the story continues today.

And if you are Mike Handrich, you merely have to sit back and listen, spellbound, to Mr. Campbell. ✨