

# A Better Handle

SARAH DEERE sat at her work table in the tailoring shop. For once her hands were not busy with a needle and thread. She sat quietly reading over an old letter. She was waiting for John to come in and say good-by to her.

Soon she heard him coining down the stairs. She smiled at the heavy, fast footsteps. They were heavy because John was a tall, strong young man of seventeen. They were fast because he was anxious to start his new job.

John put the bundles and clothes he was carrying on a chair. For the next four years he would be living in the Lawrence home at the

top of the hill above the blacksmith shop. John knew his leaving made his mother sad, so he tried to cheer her up.

"At last I'm really going to be a blacksmith!" he said joyfully, as he put his arm around his mother's shoulders.

"I'm happy for you, son," she replied, reaching up and patting his hand. "I know it's what you've always wanted, and I'm sure you'll be an excellent smith. Captain Lawrence is one of the best and he will teach you all he knows."

Mrs. Deere pointed to a chair. "Sit down a moment before you go, John. When William became an apprentice, your father wrote this letter to him, and I'd like to have you read it. It has good advice for you, too."

John sat down and took the letter from his mother. In the years since their father had died, Sarah Deere had often opened the box of old letters and read them to the children.



John remembered hearing his mother read this one. But now his father's words seemed to have been meant for him instead of William.

“'Be faithful to your master and to his interest,' .. John read aloud. " 'Be obedient to him; be friendly and kind to all his family. Let truth and honesty be your guide.' ”

John looked up at his mother. “I'll remember father's words," he promised. "I'll be a good apprentice to Captain Lawrence."

He was a good apprentice, too. He listened and remembered what the smith told him. He watched carefully. He kept his mind on what he was doing. No matter how small a task he was given, he did it the very best he knew how. John's happiest moments were when the Captain praised him for a job well done.

One day Seth brought in his mother's iron skillet when John was alone in the shop.

"John, this was Mother's favorite spider,"

Seth said. "I dropped it on the stone steps and broke off the handle. Do you think you can put the handle back on?"

"I'll sure try," John replied. He pumped the bellows until the forge fire burned just right. Then he put the broken side of the skillet, the broken handle, and a pair of tongs into the fire. He covered them with the hot coke.

"I'll work the bellows," Seth offered.

"Thanks, Seth. But don't pump too hard. I've got to heat the iron slowly. Too much air will make flakes or scale on the iron."

John watched the fire closely. When sharp sparks flew out of the fire, he knew that the metal was ready to join, or weld together.

He handed Seth a pair of tongs. "You'll have to hold the skillet steady on the anvil," he informed his friend.

John's hammer rang out loud and clear as he carefully joined the two broken ends.

"You know, John, I think grinding all that bark at the tannery must have helped you develop those big arm muscles," Seth reasoned.

"Yes, I guess it did," John agreed. "At least my arms never get tired now, no matter how long I work at the anvil."

Seth looked at the skillet. The handle was all in one piece again. John had heated it once more and was smoothing and shaping it.

"Mother will be glad to have her favorite spider again," Seth grinned. "She claims it fries meat better than any other one, but sometimes she burns her hand on that short handle."

"Would you like a longer handle?" John asked. "I could draw this one out and curve it up so it wouldn't be so close to the fire."

"Gol-lee!" Seth exclaimed. "Can you really do that? If you can make that handle longer, Mother will be so glad that she'll forget I ever broke it!"

John laughed. Seth sounded just as he used to when they played together.

A few days later as John and Captain Lawrence were walking up the hill to supper, the blacksmith remarked, "I saw Mrs. Miller in Dickinson's store this morning. She told me what a good helper I've got. Said you'd fixed her broken spider and made it better than new."

John felt pleased, but he said modestly, "Oh, I only welded the broken handle."

"No, she said you made the handle longer and better shaped. That's a good lesson to remember, lad. Always try to think of how something can be improved."

John nodded his head. Then he chuckled as he told the smith, "You know, Captain, I think I got that idea when I was ten years old. That spring I just couldn't rest until I had finally made a willow whistle that would blow two sounds from the same end."