

# The Precious Plow

CLANG! CLANG! The new sound rang out loud and clear on the early morning air around Grand Detour, Illinois.

The forest creatures were afraid. Never before had they heard a sound like that! Birds flew off across the river. Squirrels raced up tree trunks and chattered excitedly. A deer, drinking from Rock River, jerked up its head in alarm, then bounded into the forest.

Clang! Clang! The settlers of Grand Detour smiled as the first blows of John Deere's hammer on the anvil awakened them.

"Hear that, Martha?" one man asked his wife.

"That young blacksmith from Vermont is up and working with the sun!"

"Next to church bells, that's the sweetest ringing sound I ever did hear!" his wife exclaimed. "Now you won't have to make the forty-mile trip to get the horses shod."

"I can get some new bolts for the wagon, too. But first off, Martha, he can **fix** that broken leg on your big soap kettle!"

Across the river a farmer stopped milking his cow and turned to listen. "By cracky, Tom!" he called to his son, "as I live and breathe, that's a smith's hammer!"

"In Grand Detour, Pa?"

"I'd stake my life on it!" his father replied. "Now you hurry and finish this milking. I'm going to load the plow in the wagon. Maybe it would work better if that smith put some new iron strips over the wood."

Later that day, Amos Bosworth and Leonard

Andrus stood near the new forge, watching John work. Although the forge stood in the open, sweat glistened on the smith's forehead. The muscles in his big arms bulged as he brought his hammer down on the red-hot iron.

"Didn't I tell you, Leonard, that this young fellow was a wonder?" Amos spoke proudly. "Only been here two days, but before nightfall he'll have that shaft fixed and your sawmill will be running again!"

"Mighty lucky thing for us that he got here when he did," Major Andrus nodded. "Lots of folks were depending on lumber from the mill to get their homes built before snow flies."

"Well, you won't have to worry about that shaft breaking again. When John Deere welds something, it's as good as new!"

"He doesn't waste any time, either, does he?" Major Andrus said admiringly. "Why yesterday, soon as he heard how badly we needed that

mill shaft repaired, he started carrying rocks up from the river to build this forge!"

"Yep, that's John Deere for you!" Amos chuckled. "Why, my wife couldn't even get him to stop for supper last night! He was set on getting those rocks bonded together with clay before night. And he did, too!"

All through that fall and winter of **1836**, John was kept busy shoeing horses and oxen and repairing or making new iron tools for the settlers around Grand Detour. Inside the shop which he had built around his forge, farmers gathered to talk while they waited for a chain to be welded or an iron ring to be made.

As spring approached, the farmers brought in their plows to be sharpened or to have new strips of iron bolted to the wood.

"Don't know why I bother to get this fool plow fixed!" one farmer remarked bitterly as he dumped his plow on the floor of the shop.

"I know what you mean," another said gloomily. "I sure dread plowing time."

"If it's no better than last year, I'll sell my land and go back East!" said Lewis Crandall.

John let his hammer rest on the anvil and stared at Mr. Crandall. He could hardly believe his ears! He had seen Lewis's fine big farm lands just across Rock River.

"Why on earth would you leave your farm, with its rich black soil, Lewis?" he asked.

"I can't plow it!" Lewis Crandall's voice was loud. He slammed his fist on John's workbench. "Sure it's rich land. It would grow anything—if I could get a plow through it."

"A breaking plow can turn the sod the first time, but after that the soil sticks to our plows like glue!" another farmer explained.

"Why last spring, John," Mr. Crandall went on, "I hitched two teams of oxen to my plow. Those poor beasts nearly pulled their hearts



out, and mine, too! That prairie soil balls up and sticks to the moldboard like wet snow on your boots! You have to jerk the plow out of the furrows every few yards and clean it off with a wooden paddle! I tell you, John, it's more than a man can stand!"

"That it is!" another man agreed sadly. "I don't reckon I can plough more than twenty of my three hundred acres—even with a paddle and changing teams three or four times a day."

Another farmer spoke up. "I wrote and told my brother in New York State not to come here. Told him I guessed the good Lord never meant these prairie lands to grow our bread."

John's shoulders sagged as he looked out the door of his shop, off toward the river. Could it be possible that the farmers here in Illinois were going to fail, too? With all that rich farm land stretching away to the west, were these men going to have to take their families back

to the small, rocky fields of the East? Just because they didn't have a plow that would turn the clinging earth and scour itself clean as it turned the soil?

As John went back to his forge, his heart was heavy for all the farmers who had so hopefully made the long journey to the new West. But his mind was busy, too. Here was a problem, a task: bigger and far more important than any he had ever had before. Could a plow be made that would solve this problem? Could he, John Deere, make a plow that would scour?

In the days that followed, although he went about his work as always, his thoughts were constantly on the plow. He studied the iron ones that were brought to his shop. Would a different curve help the gummy earth slide off the moldboard? What other material besides iron could a plow be made of?

John was thinking about these things as he

walked over to the sawmill one bright April morning in that year of 1837. He carried a letter he had written to Demarius. Major Andrus was going to the neighboring town of Dixon for supplies and would take the mail.

John had written some good news to Demarius. He had told her about their new home he was building on the street just west of his shop. It would be ready for her by summer. He was lonesome for his wife and children. Especially he wanted to see the new baby that must be nearly a month old now. John wondered if he had another pretty daughter, or if Francis now had a baby brother. He smiled as he thought how he would like another son.

As he entered the sawmill, sunlight flashed from something on the farther wall. A broken steel saw blade! John stopped and stared at the bright shining metal! His blue eyes began to sparkle with excitement. Steel! Here was

the answer. A steel plow would polish as brightly as his mother's needles! Moist earth couldn't cling to that smooth surface!

"Major Andrus! Major Andrus!" he shouted.

The Major came running. "What's wrong, John? What is it?" he asked in alarm. Then he saw how happy the smith looked.

"It's steel, Major! That's the answer! I'll make a steel plow that will scour, if you'll sell me this broken saw blade."

"It's yours, John. Take it." Leonard Andrus laughed. "From the way you shouted, I thought your shop must be on fire!"

Word was soon carried through the little village of Grand Detour that the blacksmith was not shoeing any horses or repairing any tools. He was busy making a plow, a steel plow! Long after dark John worked by the light of his forge and a lantern. In the morning the settlers were awakened, not by the crowing of roosters, but



by the ring of John Deere's hammer on the anvil. They shook their heads.

"He's just wasting his time," scoffed some. "No plow is ever going to make a clean cut through this Illinois ground!"

"Well, I'll try anything," others said hopefully. "Maybe our blacksmith has a good idea."

"If Deere's plow doesn't work, we might as well give these prairies back to the Indians and buffaloes!" declared Lewis Crandall.

"How long before we'll know, Lewis?"

"Tomorrow, John says. I told him to bring his plow over to my place. If it will scour in that soil, it will work anywhere!"

The next morning was bright and clear. An air of excitement filled the little town. The main street had many more wagons than usual. Whole families had driven in early to watch the testing of the blacksmith's plow.

"By jove, it does shine!" someone exclaimed

when John finally came out the door of the smithy, carrying the new plow on his shoulder.

"But it's so small and light!" a man groaned.

"Say, John," one man called jokingly as the crowd followed the smith down to the river, "are you going to hitch two teams of oxen to that silver spoon you call a plow?"

"No. I told Lewis one horse would be enough," John answered good-naturedly. He put his plow into one of the rowboats.

"John is plumb daft!" exclaimed a tall farmer. "When two teams of oxen can't plow that ground, how in tarnation can one horse?"

"If John Deere says one horse will pull his plow, one horse will do it! I've never known him to be wrong yet!" Amos declared.

"I'll eat my Sunday hat if that little toy works," a tall farmer promised.

"If it does work, I'll have you eat it with my 'silver spoon' here!" John laughed.

The men rowed across the river. Then John carried the plow on his shoulder to the field where Lewis Crandall was waiting.

Soon the plow was hitched behind the horse. The joking stopped. Everyone was quiet as John set the cutting edge firmly into the rich moist ground. "You drive the horse, Lewis," he said. "I'll handle the plow."

"Giddap!" Lewis called, slapping the reins.

John's hands were firm on the smooth polished handles that he had made from sapling roots. The plowshare dug into the black earth. Three feet—six feet—twelve feet of straight furrow, and still the bright surface of the moldboard was clean!

The crowd of people following almost held their breath. On went the horse and plow. The earth fell away in a smooth, neat roll behind the easily moving plow.

"She scours! By thunder, she scours!" Lewis



Crandall shouted. He stopped the horse. John lifted the plow from the furrow. The sun gleamed from the bright, clean moldboard.

"It's clean! It's clean as a silver dollar!" the excited onlookers cried joyfully.

"Throw away your paddles, men! John Deere has made a plow that polishes itself!"

Lewis Crandall looked up from the plow and out across his beautiful valley farm land. Then he put his hand on the blacksmith's shoulder. In a husky voice he said, "Thanks, John. I can stay now. We can all stay and farm these lands, thanks to you!"

John felt happy and proud as he looked down at his precious plow, but he only answered, "Think I can make the next one better, Lewis, if I curve that moldboard a bit more."

Then everyone laughed as the tall farmer called out, "Give me your spoon, John. I'm ready and glad to eat my hat!"