

States of the Union

THE STAR AND THE PLOW

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

JOHN DEERE beat his saws into plowshares, and a great corporation was born. That is the tale Wayne G. Broehl Jr. tells in *John Deere's Company* (Doubleday, 870 pp., \$24.95), an opulent, affectionate tribute to the world's largest manufacturer of agricultural machinery. Broehl, who holds a chair at Dartmouth College's Amos Tuck School of Business Administration, spent the better part of a decade assembling his huge chronicle. Yet much of what he teaches us concerning the arc of American agriculture must be read between the lines.

He is virtually silent on such seminal matters as the decline of small farms and the changing role of farmworkers, although each is intimately connected with Deere's ascendant fortunes. These social tragedies form a shadowy presence amid the thousands of details Broehl has marshaled.

As a commentator the author is a comfortable capitalist; as a technician he is a compulsive pointillist. Fortunately for his talents, he has chosen a company whose own sense of history is unusually strong and whose archives are both massive and in good order. Archeologists have dug up the founder's original forge and even preserved some of his receipts and bills of lading. Appar-

ently no shard or document bearing on company history has ever been discarded.

While Broehl early on declares his objectivity, his actual relationship to all this material seems blurred at best. From the outset, he explains, Deere & Company wanted "an outside scholar" who would produce "an objective study" that viewed the enterprise "at arm's length." The company's way of accomplishing this was to donate money to Dartmouth College. Broehl does not name the sum, nor does he tell us which corner of the symbiotic triangle made the first solicitation.

Given the murky auspices, a reader may well question the near-angelic corporate portrait that Broehl presents. In a final chapter we are told, among other things, that the company "has followed a straightforward policy of equal respect for salaried and hourly paid employees alike"; that it "has always been known for well-engineered products and superb service"; that it enjoys "a superb marketing organization" and its personnel is "attuned to the farmers' beliefs and ways...."

Broehl concedes that the latest farm recession, which began three years ago and seems far from finished, has eroded Deere's profits, but the book was al-

ready done when the company last October reacted to a "very, very difficult" year by announcing a planned reduction of 1,000 white-collar workers. A European tribunal's levying a \$1.5 million fine for price finagling also occurred too late for inclusion, though there is tolerant allusion to several earlier company run-ins with justice.

If Broehl does not linger over periods of moral ambiguity, it may be because neither did Deere. The company's history abounds with the customary excesses of industrial struggle: Pinkerton scabs, government boondoggles and questionable mergers that on occasion aroused even the complaisant U.S. Justice Department. Deere's long suit was not conscience, it was commerce, and Broehl obligingly sticks to the bottom line. He is content to give us a dazzling industrial success story without ever confronting its darker implications. What we have here is a capitalist Garden of Eden minus the Serpent.

Broehl's Creation story goes something like this: In 1837 a young blacksmith named John Deere, having recently forsaken creditors in Vermont for fresh opportunities in Illinois, converted a broken saw blade into a makeshift plow, and then—as he later recollected—"set it on a dry-good box by the side of the shop door."

Despite its ricketiness, the homemade implement represented something of a breakthrough in agricultural mechanics, boasting as it did one of the first steel plowshares ever forged. In time a farmer spotted the plow in Deere's shop and offered to carry it home and test its metal.

"Take it," said the blacksmith, "and give it a thorough trial." Two weeks later the farmer returned without the plow, paid Deere and said, "Now get a move on you, and make me two more plows just like the other one."

What had most pleased the farmer was the plow's ability to "scour"—that is, to keep the prairie soil from clinging to the blade. As Broehl notes, farmers using wooden or cast-iron shares "had to carry paddles with them and stop every few yards to scrape off the sticky soil," because it was so incredibly rich.

He cites the “rumor” that anyone “could stick a crowbar down into it at night and it would sprout ten-penny nails before morning.”

As it happened, Deere’s scouring plow was only one of many such contraptions bound to revolutionize American agriculture. John Lane, another Illinois blacksmith, started marketing a steel plow in 1833, when Deere was still a debtor in Vermont; two tinkers from Kalamazoo, Hiram Moore and J. Haskell, invented a combine—for cutting and threshing grain—in 1836; and in 1845 Cyrus McCormick would take out a patent on his mechanical reaper.

Shaky contrivances all, they nevertheless promised to increase production and to give farmers an upper hand in their struggles with the tough prairie sod. Here was the start of “scientific farming,” whereby farmers turned into “agriculturists.” In typical American fashion, people assumed that progress and technology were more or less synonymous. Technical education for farmers became the rage.

Congress established the land-grant university system in 1862—in the midst of the Civil War!—and although classicists like Harvard’s Charles Eliot saw in this a symptom of a “deep-seated disease,” agricultural schools soon sprang up as far west as Iowa. That same busy year the lawmakers created the forerunner of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, an agency dedicated to teaching the most up-to-date farming methods.

The many advances symbolized by the commercialization of John Deere’s steel plow were to make American agriculture the wonder and envy of the world, but for most ordinary farmers they would spell eventual catastrophe. The constant need for new, more efficient machinery would plunge farmers ever-deeper into debt. They could escape only by increasing their yields. This usually entailed buying additional tillable acreage, thus setting in motion another cycle of capitalization, debt and expansion.

By the turn of the century the pattern was already well-established: Small farmers were going broke and selling out to larger enterprises, including absentee

speculators and trusts. Deere, meanwhile, both benefited and suffered from these trends. The larger farms required more and bigger machinery, but the frequent farm recessions were painful all around. During the difficult 1930s, writes Broehl, “the company made a key policy decision to allow a great many company receivables to stay in place, held in abeyance when the customers could not pay. This belief in the farmers’ integrity succeeded in heightening an already fabled farmer loyalty to Deere.”

THE FARM laborer felt the lash of progress along with the farmer. In John Deere’s day the task of manual threshing and bundling may have been arduous, yet the farmwork-



er’s status was at least respectable—just a shade lower, in fact, than that of the farmer. Moving up the class ladder seemed relatively easy, less an American Dream than an everyday occurrence.

Abraham Lincoln, himself a farmworker in his youth, described as well as anyone the golden staircase that sod-busting Americans thought they were climbing: “Many independent men everywhere in these states, a few years back in their lives, were hired laborers. The prudent, penniless beginner in the world labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself, then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him.”

But as agriculture entered the industrial age—as it ramified, consolidated

and became an instrument of corporate ambition—workers lost their status even more quickly than farmers lost their farms. In the Midwest, farm labor became dispensable, thanks chiefly to the blessings of combines and combustion; in California, however, where both the holdings and the harvests were enormous, cheap farm labor became essential. There emerged an underclass of alien “hands,” whose stoop-labor accomplished for agribusiness what assembly-line labor was accomplishing for heavy industry.

By 1886 the Chinese were said to be contributing seven-eighths of the state’s farm labor force. As Carey McWilliams pointed out in his brilliant history of California’s farmworkers, *Factories in the Fields* (1935), they had been “literally driven into agricultural districts” by Know-Nothing sentiment, which had banned them from work in the mines and on the railroads.

There followed a veritable Babel of importations from Japan, the Philippines, Hawaii, Hindustan, Armenia—each group a despised minority of its time, each providing essential labor in the orchards and wheat fields of California. Today’s *braceros* are simply the latest in a long, miserable line of succession.

These anonymous toilers, along with the many sharecroppers and small farmers removed by technology into urban slums, make up the underside of Broehl’s triumphant history. They are victims of an agricultural system grown too big and too centralized to accommodate the hopes of ordinary farmers and workers. Having been turned away from the feast of efficiency, they have little to celebrate.

In Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois an estimated 50,000 farmers are on the verge of bankruptcy. If few historians are likely to mark their passing, much less their achievements, perhaps that is because few small-farm dollars are likely to find their way into academic coffers. In scholarship as in nearly everything else, we seem to get what we pay for—in this case, a classy serenade to the agricultural winners, the stars of the plow.