Book Reviews


The plow that broke the plains, we have been told, was the self-polishing steel moldboard plow, and John Deere invented it. Wayne G. Broehl, Jr., demolishes this myth without ceremony in the first few pages of this superb history of the company that Deere founded in 1838 in Grand Detour, Illinois, to make his version of a steel plow. Several other blacksmiths had the same idea at about the same time, but Deere & Company grew to be the second largest and most vigorous agricultural implement manufacturer in the United States.

This is business history at its finest. While the author wisely lets events spin their own narrative web, he provides a running analysis of the significance of an endless stream of corporate matters to the larger story of American agriculture and industry. His story fits the modern view of big business history as largely the story of a firm's growth, diversification, integration (especially forward into marketing through a superb branch-house and dealer organization), attainment of modern administrative methods, and emergence on the multinational scene. The general historian will learn a lot from Broehl's story of a group of high-minded, stubborn, midwestern American businessmen plodding from one problem to another, practicing the painful art of trial-and-error, and often arriving at what seems in retrospect an obvious solution only after repeated mistakes.

This monumental, beautifully illustrated study teems with rich detail, from the most prosaic problems of product planning to delicate questions of leadership in a family-controlled firm that was being less and less well served by nepotism. Deere & Company faced such major problems as whether to add harvesters to their line; whether to go into tractors, and if so, how; and whether to establish their own subsidiaries in Europe and elsewhere. It is hard to imagine a future book or article on the evolution of American agriculture that will not benefit from a close reading of John Deere's Company or that will fail to quote from it.

Broehl, historians should note, had the rare good fortune to work with well-preserved and relatively complete corporate records. Many American business historians have not been so lucky, for few corporate executives see the preservation of their past as an important corporate goal. Perhaps it is not surprising that Deere & Company should be an exception. Indeed, the American
West seems far more alive to the importance of its history than the American East, where the here-today-gone-tomorrow philosophy of the "professional" manager holds sway. Enterprises that bear some of the oldest names in New England history, for example, destroy even their most routine administrative records when they have been around five years. But few of these enterprises have spent 150 years as close to the heart of the American story as Deere & Company, and that is probably what has made the difference.

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"My God! Come and see them run!" Tom Jackson shouted to his buddies of the Sixth Indiana Volunteers (p. 202) at the climax of the unplanned and dramatic assault by the Union Army of the Cumberland that routed the Confederate army from its strong position on the crest of Missionary Ridge, east of Chattanooga. This action ended the siege of the Federal army in Chattanooga during the autumn of 1863 and gave the Union a secure base for General William T. Sherman's Atlanta Campaign and March to the Sea the following year. Thus, the capture of Missionary Ridge could be called the beginning of the end of the Confederacy.

As McDonough says in the preface, no full, documented history of the siege and important battles around Chattanooga had been published, and he has corrected this omission with a very readable account. In it he has included much previously unpublished material including officers' after-action reports and soldiers' diaries and letters. He has combined this material with reports in the Official Records and other published sources to write an excellent story about the siege and fighting at Chattanooga including the so-called Battle above the Clouds on Lookout Mountain.

The story includes interesting details about the indecisiveness of Confederate General Braxton Bragg and the bickering and backbiting of the Confederate high command that contributed to the ultimate Rebel defeat. McDonough did not tell of some important Union decisions that aided the victorious outcome. For example, on page 58 he tells of General Joseph Hooker's command marching from Bridgeport, Alabama, to help open