

# THE PALIMPSEST

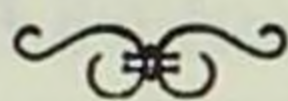
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## Of Plows and Plowing

Of the many implements used by mankind through the ages, none is more prominently and consistently mentioned than the humble plow. Crude plows were used in Egypt when the pyramids were still young, Greek and Roman writers frequently refer to plows and plowing, and numerous references are made to the plow in the Old Testament.

Although the oldest of civilization's many tools, early plows did little more than scratch the surface. Actually, the first plows were nothing more than forked sticks drawn by slaves. For centuries there was little change in their design, and some backward nations till their soil in this manner today.

The first real improvement in plows was noted in the early 1600's when Dutch farmers and other Europeans devised moldboard type wooden plows drawn by a yoke of oxen. The Pilgrim Fathers used similar huge clumsy plows requiring as many as eight oxen to pull them through the



stony stump-cleared soil of New England. Unfortunately, wooden plows could not stand up under hard or lengthy use.

In 1720, Joseph Foljamke of Britain put iron strips on his plow landside. Another Englishman, Robert Ransome, introduced a cast-iron share in 1785. This was a great improvement over the wooden type, but it remained for a pioneer American farmer, Charles Newbold of New Jersey, to develop and patent a cast-iron moldboard. It was a costly improvement, one that eventually revolutionized soil tillage, but it was not readily accepted because farmers claimed the metal moldboard would poison their soil.

In time early prejudices against iron plows were overcome, and other improvements gradually were made both in design and construction. Among those contributing to the evolution of our modern plow was the illustrious Thomas Jefferson. The great American statesman firmly believed that agricultural progress was a means to independence for the average man, as well as to the nation. Jefferson accordingly devoted considerable time as a Virginia farmer and scientist to the problem of designing a more efficient plow. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Daniel Webster, and other noted early Americans also gave this matter much attention. The conquest of the tough prairie sod of the Mississippi Valley was made possible by these improvements.



Soon after 1800 names now famous in modern farm equipment also became associated with plowing progress. John Lane is credited with making the first steel covered moldboard. John Deere vastly improved plows in his plant at Grand Detour, Illinois. James Oliver, also widely known in the implement world, added his inventive genius to the task.

So advanced were Deere and Oliver in their thinking that steel plows patterned closely after their early design are still in common use today. Meanwhile, the size and type of plows, and the power required to pull them, has changed greatly. Old sod-buster single share walking plows drawn by plodding oxen a century ago had to give way to two-bottom gang plows pulled by horses. By the late 1800's riding plows and six and eight horse hitches were common. Steam power entered the picture too, with as many as ten bottoms used to break the western prairie.

In the early twenties huge gasoline and kerosene powered tractors appeared, to be soon replaced by smaller, more efficient, rubber tired tractors. More recently, diesel engined wheel and crawler type tractors have been helping turn four or five furrows at a time as plows continued to be a mainstay in mechanized American and world agriculture.

The role of the plow in man's march to a more abundant, fuller life is perhaps best summarized



by a Canadian, J. MacGregor Smith, Agricultural Engineer at the University of Alberta. Professor Smith declares:

Dazzled by the mechanical achievements of the past century, we are prone to overlook the debt we owe to the humble plow. Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that without the plow there could be no civilization as we know it today. If it is true that agriculture is the foundation for all social and industrial life, and it is true, then the plow must be given the credit for making agriculture possible. It is the one basic tool that made possible the transition from the wildest savagery to the beginnings of barbarism, one of the most momentous eras of human history; it changed the tent of the Indian into the hut of the settled dweller upon the soil. It broke the sod on the prairies where for untold centuries the buffalo had held limitless sway, and brought the whistle of the locomotive into solitudes whose silences were broken only by the whoop of the savage; it built cities and populated commonwealths, in short, all our modern complex life has followed in the furrow of the plow.

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