

# THE PLOWSHARE

## News for John Deere Collectors



*Reflections.* Fred Ertl, Jr. at the National Farm Toy Museum pointing out the detail on his father's first John Deere toy.

## Working for scale

The Ertl Company — from basement business to die-cast-replica dynamo

Our story begins in early 20th-century sandboxes where British kids played with Dinky Toys and Yankee tykes with their TootsieToys. Early models were quite crude, but that was to change in 1947 after a couple of British war buddies began pouring their own die-cast models under the name Lesney Products. This company launched its most famous line with a construction toy — Road Roller, Matchbox Series No 1.

In 1945, a metal toy breakthrough was also underway stateside when journeyman molder Fred Ertl was on temporary unpaid furlough due to a strike he refused to participate in. Not one to sit idle, he made sandcast molds of an Allis Chalmers WC Farm Tractor and set up shop in the family's basement at 398 North Algona Street in Dubuque, Iowa. Smelting aircraft pistons in the home's furnace and pouring the liquefied metal into the simple sand molds, Ertl cast a number of toy tractors — including a John Deere Model "A" — right in his home.

## Up from the underground

Assembly of the first toys was conducted upstairs in the family's kitchen with the assistance of Mrs. Gertrude Ertl and their children, including 15-year-old Fred Ertl, Jr. "For painting, Mom would attach a wire to the bodies, dip them into a bucket, and hang them up to dry," he recalls.

A month into the new company, Ertl took two of his sons, Fred Jr. and Robert — and a number of toy tractors — on a pheasant-hunting trip in the family's '41 Olds, selling their product along the way in every Iowa town between Dubuque and Waterloo.

At each stop, the boys would make their pitch, and their sales, and would always leave a phone number behind for reorders. "Mom would answer the phone in our kitchen and say, 'Just a minute, let me step into the office,' then put her hand over the receiver for a second, then proceed with the order. She wanted us to look like a big operation." And within a year, they were just that.



*Fred Ertl, Jr. poses in front of his Dubuque childhood home, where his father cast the first Ertl toys.*

### **An immediate hit**

Within a year, The Ertl Company had moved out of the basement and started working closely with Deere & Company designing, manufacturing, and marketing farm toys. A year after that, an 18-year-old Fred Ertl, Jr. took over the reigns of the company from his ailing father.

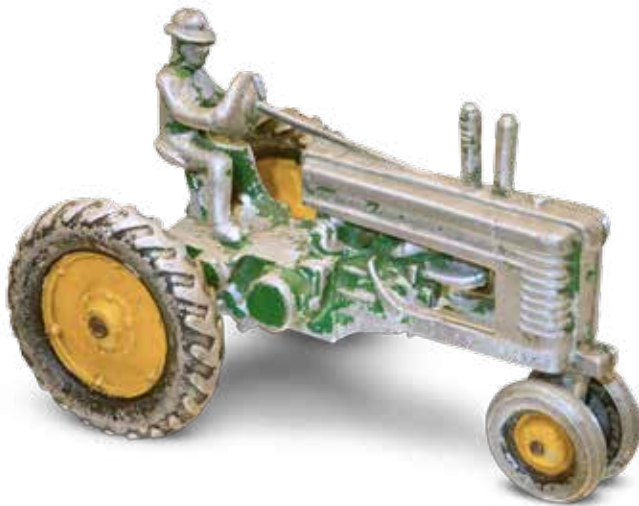
### **Welcome to the “Farm Toy Capital of the World”**

It turned out the younger Fred did The Ertl Company proud, presiding over a move to nearby Dyersville in 1959 and the worldwide expansion of a toy company that would make products for fun and collecting, ranging from tractors to motor graders, and from pedal cars to the Duke boys’ General Lee.

The customer base would also grow from farm kids to adults bitten by the collectible die-cast-replica bug that started ramping up in the 1970s and turned into a worldwide phenomenon. Ertl changed from a toy company to a corporation building products for people to enjoy from cradle to grave.

Also enjoying growth is Dyersville, a town known for the “Field of Dreams” and as the Farm Toy Capital of the World. Not only is Ertl located there but also two of the largest annual farm-toy shows and the National Farm Toy Museum, which offers thousands of visitors a year a glimpse of scale-model Olivers, Fordsons, and every Deere tractor imaginable.

And it all started with a big idea in a tiny basement.



*Ertl #2. This John Deere Model “A” Tractor, circa 1946, was cast either in his family’s basement or at the first Ertl plant in Dubuque.*



### **One year to make a lifelong memory**

We spoke with John Deere Construction & Forestry Manager of Events and Promotions David Althaus about how long it takes to get a construction equipment replica to Deere dealers and retail outlets. The short answer is one year. The longer answer is:



## A John Deere employee with a link to Deere's 1837 plow



*Duane Crandall, service delivery manager at the John Deere North America Parts Distribution Center, has a connection to John Deere's first plow.*

Duane Crandall was just a kid romping around his grandpa's farm when he first heard the story of how John Deere came to test out his first plow on Crandall family land. The story has been part of family lore for more than 175 years.

"It's hard to believe my family was part of that history," he said as he drove a golf cart down the long aisles of the John Deere North America Parts Distribution Center in Milan, Illinois, where he works as a service delivery manager.

His ancestors lived near pioneering blacksmith John Deere in 1837, across the river from his Grand Detour, Illinois, shop where he built his first self-scouring plow. The family's connection to Deere was especially important to Crandall's grandpa, Charles Crandall, who was a part-time farmer and full-time machinist at John Deere Harvester Works. He retired in the early 1970s and died in 2005 at age 100.

### A new approach to farming in the Old West

Like other settlers of the early 1800s, the Crandall's had no trouble with the initial breaking of the prairie sod. It was the subsequent plowing seasons that turned the soil black and gummy. It got so a man had to rein in his team every few feet, scrape the sticky soil off the plowshare, then get his team moving again.

Many settlers were discouraged from this seemingly insurmountable problem, and some even considered heading back East. But when Deere was visiting the Grand Detour Hydraulic Mill and spied the glint from a broken and discarded steel saw blade that was polished by thousands of strokes cutting through heavy timbers, he had one of the most brilliant ideas of the century.

Deere fashioned a plowshare out of the blade and polished it even further so even the stickiest soil would slide off. So he had the idea and the prototype; now all he needed was a test farm. Enter the Crandall's.

**12**

MONTHS OUT

Product marketing managers meet to decide which models to replicate.

**11**

MONTHS OUT

TOMY/Ertl starts receiving Pro/E files of prototype machines from Deere.

**9**

MONTHS OUT

Deere C&F receives white styrene tooling model from TOMY/Ertl.

**7**

MONTHS OUT

The "first shot" — an unpainted version of the replica is ready for Deere's review.

## A 176-year-old mystery is...solved?

It seems clear Deere tested his new-style plow on Crandall family land, but no one knows for sure exactly where the plot was located or which Crandall owned it. Duane Crandall agrees with the research uncovered by self-described "hobby genealogist" Susan Littlefield Haines, also a Crandall descendant.

Haines studied the family line for more than two years, tracing the land back to Luke and Deborah Crandall. Her research shows the couple owned 200 acres of land and a ferryboat that crossed the Rock River to Grand Detour near Mr. Deere's fledgling blacksmith shop. Haines said she believes Deere loaded his plow on that ferry and tested his plow on the couple's property.

To add even more credence to Haine's theory, the Crandall's were former neighbors of Deere in Rutland, Vermont, and immigrated to the Grand Detour area in 1835, less than two years before Deere moved west to the area.

## Grandpa Crandall's homecoming

Duane Crandall said he wishes he could tell his grandpa what he's learned about the family legend. He said his grandfather stayed connected to Grand Detour and even built a subdivision on some of his farmland in the area. He stayed loyal to John Deere, too.

"I remember my grandpa had a John Deere Model 'B' built in 1936," Crandall said. "It was a 2-cylinder and had a hand crank to get it started. My grandpa was really proud of our family's John Deere connection, and it meant a lot to him that I was also working for the company."

When Charles Crandall was 95, Duane took his grandpa on a tour of Harvester Works. It was his first visit back since his retirement. "The tour guides treated him like royalty — it's a great memory of mine. My family was connected at the very beginning, and look at the company now. John Deere is everywhere."



*Duane Crandall enjoyed time with his grandpa, Charles Crandall. Both have deep roots in John Deere dating back to 1837.*



*A vintage Crandall family photo.*

3

MONTHS OUT

The updated first shot is painted and decaled.

2

MONTHS OUT

Upon approval of deco model, the replica goes into production.



COMPLETION

Replicas arrive in John Deere dealerships and other retailers.



**CHECK OUT THE VIDEO AT:**  
[www.JohnDeere.com/ertl](http://www.JohnDeere.com/ertl)



**GARDEN PLOT FOR RENT, perfect for the 2014 growing season:** *Well-fertilized plot of rich, well-draining soil (should it ever rain again). Grows a tremendous crop of weeds of all varieties — even in drought conditions. Reason for rental: Owner failed to produce a crop...yet again.*

This is the ad I'd like to put in our local paper. As you may recall, I wrote in our last *Plowshare* issue how I wanted to grow a record-breaking plot of huge pumpkins this summer. Instead, it was a failure for the record books. I carefully planted the seeds, and the plants did seem to grow quickly — I figured all they needed was a little weeding and watering, and they'd grow into the biggest pumpkins ever.

But Mother Nature just didn't cooperate. She dispatched a bug infestation in June, and I didn't catch it quickly enough. That cost me a few plants, but it wasn't a total loss. Then she decided to turn off the water supply, and that was the beginning to the end of the crop. I just couldn't haul enough water to keep them alive. What a cruel and painful end to my "great pumpkin" adventure.

I must confess: I could have done more watering and crop inspections. All I remember from my childhood is my folks dropping the pumpkin seeds in the ground in the spring, and harvesting the bounty in the fall. Maybe they weeded once or twice, but that's it...wait... maybe now that I think back, Mom often spoke about the hard work involved in tending a crop. Maybe she was trying to teach me about gardening. Maybe about life. Maybe I should have listened to her, huh?

Despite all my best intentions, we have no giant pumpkins to scare anyone on Halloween, no pumpkins for pie, and no pumpkins for the table centerpiece. We'll have to trek down to the local farmers' market to buy pumpkins again this year.

If you're one of the successful gardeners or farmers in this world, I commend you on your talents. Innovations in machinery and technology help a lot, but it still takes time, patience, and skill to produce a crop. In this season of thanks, I'm hoping you're enjoying your bounty, and praying every reader can be thankful for another great year. Until next time...

Keep your hand on the throttle and your plow in the ground.

Brian Holst  
Manager, John Deere Heritage Marketing



# THE PLOWSHARE

## JOHN DEERE

One John Deere Place  
Moline, Illinois 61265

HeritageMarketing@JohnDeere.com  
www.JohnDeere.com

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## Founder John Deere inducted into Vermont Ag Hall of Fame



More than 175 years after leaving Vermont, the founder of Deere & Company has been inducted into the Vermont Agricultural Hall of Fame. John Deere and five other Vermont natives were honored

this summer in Essex Junction, Vermont, for their special contributions to agriculture.

Vermont Secretary of Agriculture Chuck Ross presented Deere's award to Brian Holst, heritage marketing and branded properties manager for Deere & Company. "This award is truly an honor for all of us," Holst said. "For John Deere to still be receiving awards for his innovation, which helped make this company

what it is today, says a lot about him and his commitment to those linked to the land."

Deere was born in Rutland, Vermont, in 1804. As a young man, he worked as an apprentice and proprietor in blacksmith shops in several towns before moving to Illinois and eventually founding Deere & Company. Deere will join about 60 others honored in the 11-year-old hall of fame for their lifelong commitment to agriculture, said Jackie Folsom, committee chair.

Winners must also have displayed integrity and character, overcame adversity, inspired enthusiasm, and shared their experience with future generations, she said. "After reading multiple bios about Mr. Deere, it was very clear he had those characteristics, even if he displayed them mostly in the Midwest," she said. "He showed real perseverance."



*This spot in Hancock, Vermont, is thought to be the site of John Deere's last blacksmith shop in Vermont before leaving the state in the winter of 1836.*