

## John Deere: From Purpose to Prosperity

- **Compelling Question**
  - How can being purposeful help you to promote life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for yourself and others?
- **Virtue:** Purpose
- **Definition –** Purpose is my answer to the question "why do I exist?" It is the reason for which I exist; it is my goal, that thing to which my actions are directed. It is our answer to the question "what are you for?"
- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will learn about how John Deere worked with purpose to invent a new plow that made farm work much more efficient. They will use this example to be purposeful in their own lives.
- **Objectives**
  - Students will analyze John Deere's purposeful behavior in developing a more efficient plow.
  - Students will evaluate the value in acting with purpose.
  - Students will apply their knowledge of the virtue purpose to their own lives.
- **Background**
  - John Deere was born in Vermont in 1804. He worked as a blacksmith and moved to Illinois to find additional work. It was in Grand Decatur, Illinois where Deere developed a new idea for a self-scouring plow that would be more efficient than a traditional plow. Deere continued growing his business and moved to Moline, Illinois. The company began making other tools including buggies, drills, and cultivators.

In 1858, John Deere turned over management of the company to his son and decided to become involved in politics. Deere served as mayor of Moline for two years and he was a president of the National Bank of Moline before his death in 1886.
- **Vocabulary**
  - Blacksmith
  - Buggies
  - Cultivator
  - Fertile
  - Prairies
  - Stagecoach
  - Generation
  - Oxen
  - Implements
  - Ingenuity
  - Indomitable
  - Prosperity
  - Maddeningly
  - Skeptical
  - Essence
  - Recruited
  - Foundry
  - Franchise
  - Unwavering
  - Self-scouring
  - Smithy
- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the "Walk-In-The-Shoes" question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**
  - What was Deere's purpose in developing the self-polishing plow?
  - Why was Deere's development of the self-polishing plow significant?
  - John Deere had many different identities in his life. What identities or roles do you have? Which is most significant to you? Why? Which is most significant to others? Why?
- **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
  - Broehl, Wayne G., Jr. *John Deere's Company: A History of Deere and Company and Its Times*. New York: Doubleday. 1984.
  - Dahlstrom, Neil and Jeremy Dahlstrom. *The John Deere Story: A Biography of Plowmakers John and Charles Deere*. Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005.
  - Stillwell, Lewis D. *Migration from Vermont*. Vermont Historical Society, 1948.
  - "The Story of John Deere." *John Deere & Co.* 2002. [http://www.deere.com/en\\_US/corporate/our\\_company/about\\_us/history/history.page](http://www.deere.com/en_US/corporate/our_company/about_us/history/history.page)

## **Handout A: John Deere: From Purpose to Prosperity**

### **Background**

John Deere was born in Vermont in 1804. He worked as a blacksmith and moved to Illinois to find additional work. It was in Grand Decatur, Illinois where Deere developed a new idea for a self-polishing plow that would be more efficient than a traditional plow. Deere continued growing his business and moved to Moline, Illinois. The company began making other tools including buggies, drills, and cultivators.

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### **Narrative**

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the fertile expanse of the western prairies beckoned them. By boat and stagecoach, on horseback and foot, thousands left the rocky highlands of Vermont and settled on the plains of the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys. One generation removed from the Founders, they had heard rumors of a Promised Land. They were hopeful and purposeful, setting out and settling with family and friends on the vast, treeless tracts of open prairie. Among those lured by the possibility of economic prosperity was 32-year-old John Deere.

When a friend returned to Vermont in 1835 with stories of the American west, John Deere saw an opportunity. A highly regarded blacksmith but a not-so-successful businessman, Deere decided to leave a year later. He left behind his pregnant wife and four children and made his way to Grand Detour, Illinois. Within two days of his arrival, he set up a smithy and got to work. Within a year, his family joined him in their new home.

Like blacksmiths had for generations before him, Deere played a key role in his small community. Before his arrival, there had been no one locally who could shoe the oxen needed for plowing the rich soil of the prairies. There had been no easy way to acquire new farming tools, horseshoes, knives, or silverware. At the time, goods like these were made by request. They were not sold in a hardware store or manufactured in advance. Broken saw blades, pitchforks, and other implements had to be thrown away or taken forty miles to the nearest blacksmith to be fixed. As a result, when area settlements grew and farmlands expanded, so did Deere's business.

Boundless energy and flashes of ingenuity fueled Deere's labors, and he worked purposefully to meet the needs of the growing community. According to a clerk in the store across the street from Deere's shop, "I have heard [Deere's] hammering in the morning, when I was in the store in bed at four o'clock, and at ten o'clock at night; he had such an indomitable determination to do and work what he had in his mind." Deere was determined to find the solution to a problem that plagued the pioneer farmers and threatened to drive many back east.

Accustomed to the drier, pebbly soil of New England, they were frustrated by their inability to till their new land effectively. Daily, farmers hitched up their oxen or horses, and pushed and pulled their plows through the wide-open fields. Every few feet, however, they were forced to stop. Clumps of rich soil clogged the cast iron blades and they had to apply the "paddle" to scrape it off. The amount of work a single farmer and his team could accomplish in a day was extremely limited.

As a result, the wealth and prosperity the pioneers sought remained maddeningly beyond their reach.

In 1837, Deere hit upon a solution. He salvaged a broken steel saw blade, cut and molded it, and created the self-polishing plow. Due to his design of the moldboard, the blade cleaned itself as it cut through the soil. The day he decided to try the plow, skeptical local farmers turned out to watch. They stood in silence as Deere walked the plow up and down a friend's field—without stopping. According to one account, a farmer looked at the blade afterward and exclaimed, "By cracky! She's clean!" Not entirely satisfied, however, Deere gave the plow to his friend, and reportedly said, "Maybe ways of improving it will occur to me." Over the course of his life, that, in essence, is what he did.

Some would say Deere was a man who was in the right place at the right time. After all, he did not invent the plow (the plow, in one form or another, had existed since the fourth millennium B.C.), nor did he invent the first American plow (that recognition most often goes to a man named Jethro Wood). Deere, however, applied his purposeful work ethic to improving and perfecting the plow. In the process, he built a business that would help to bring about a major agricultural revolution in America.

In the years immediately following his invention, Deere maintained his blacksmith shop and worked on the plow on the side. In 1838, he built and sold only three plows. In 1839, he filled orders for ten. By 1842, he produced more than one hundred plows a year, and exhibited a model with the sign "Self-Polisher" in front of his shop. Breaking with the business practices of the day, he began to manufacture his plows in advance, not to order. He also recruited farmers to help advertise his product, later calling them "travelers" who would go from town to town to sell the plows.

In order to expand his industry, Deere brought on a partner, and together they built a plow factory. Continuing to use innovative business practices, they succeeded in importing rolled, polished steel from England for the first time. It was an unheard of risk that paid off for the men. They constructed the first foundry in the area, and by 1846, the business was producing one thousand plows per year.

In 1847, Deere established his own plow factory in Moline, Illinois, on the banks of the Mississippi River. The location made it easy to import steel from Pittsburgh, as well as increase his distribution range. He set up shop at local fairs, advertised in *Prairie Farmer*, expanded his use of franchise dealers, and gradually became a wealthy man. By 1856, Deere's Moline Plow Works was the largest plow factory in the west, producing thirteen thousand plows per year, many of which were taken by covered wagon even farther west.

Over time, Deere's industrious work ethic became the hallmark of what would become one of the most productive and successful agricultural companies in America. He was known to have said, "I will never put my name on a plow that does not have in it the best that is in me." Through his unwavering purpose to meet the needs of his customers, and to perfect and market his product, John Deere found not only the economic prosperity he sought, but forever strengthened the prosperity of a nation.