

“Lockport, Home of the First Steel Plow.” *Graphic Newspapers*. (March 14, 1968): 14.

## Lockport, Home of the First Steel Plow

### John Lamb

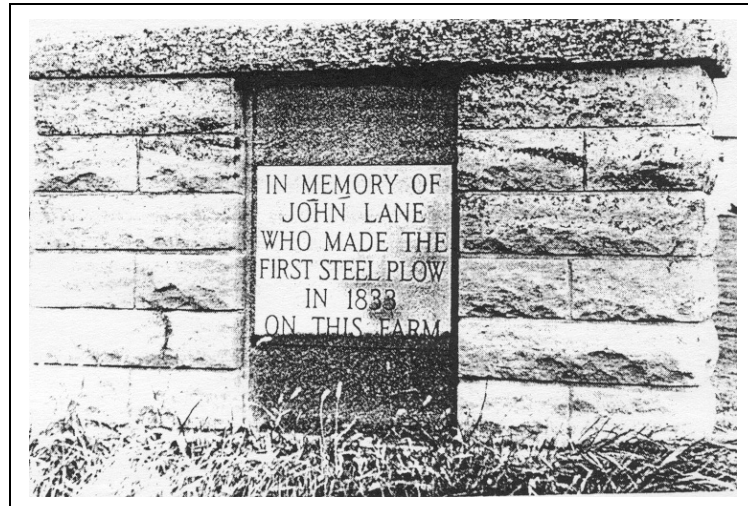
*[The] First steel plow was built in 1833 in what is now known as Homer Township. John Lane Sr., a village blacksmith, built the first steel plow in a little pioneer blacksmith shop on a farm three miles east of Lockport in a “Yankee Settlement.”*

A weather-worn monument still stands today at the site of the blacksmith shop on the corner of East 7<sup>th</sup> Street and Gougar Rd. [The] Monument reads, “In memory of John Lane Sr. who made the first steel plow in 1833 on this farm.”

Born in Pittsford, N.Y., in 1793, where he had just completed his apprenticeship as a blacksmith before coming to Illinois, Lane hung up his bellows on a tree and went to work at his forge in the pioneer settlement until his shop was built out of logs.

Lane conceived the first steel plow out of necessity since he found cleaning his old wooden and cast iron moldboard plows with wooden paddles an unceasing, arduous task. At best, cutting through the stocky, sticky prairie soil with a plow was a slow process. It became even more time consuming when the heavy soil continuously clogged the moldboard.

Lane was motivated to forge a steel plow which he was certain would slide the prairie soil easily off the moldboard as the steel part became polished



with use. This necessity mothered a new innovation which gave the pioneer planter a fresh, new concept of agriculture.

However, his inception of the steel plow came at a time when no steel was manufactured in the United States.

He obtained an old, worn out saw blade from Colonel Sayre’s sawmill, west of Lockport. Lane cut the blade into strips about three inches wide. Edges were forged together to obtain the required width of the moldboard. Pieces were then hammered into the proper shape and polished to a working condition. After making several trials, Lane succeeded in manufacturing a plow which proved to be a major improvement over those then in use.

Levi Hartwell assisted Lane in the manufacture of plows. All plows sold were tested in Lane’s farm fields to determine the best

working shape.

John Griswold of Lockport made the woodwork and tongue for the first plow. He also made the woodwork for many other of Lane’s plows.

One of the first plows made was sold to Comstock Hanford of Lockport and the last known plow made was sold to John D. Frazer.

Plows continued to be made by Lane for more than a year before steel was manufactured wide enough to fit the plow moldboards.

Old sawmill blades costing \$1 a foot were used by Lane in making the first 200 plows. The first steel plows made with a plate large enough to fit the moldboard were made of cast steel coming from Pittsburgh, Pa.

Demand for the steel plow soon became greater than Lane and Hartwell could supply, and

markets reached around the world. Factories had been established and shipments were made to many distant points. About 100 plows were shipped to the Pacific Coast by way of New York and the Cape of California in 1854. These were the first steel plows ever to be used on the Pacific Coast.

Lane formed a partnership with Jasper D. Loomer, and the company known as Lane and Loomer was widely known and enjoyed a thriving business. In much of the early newspaper and periodical advertising Lane's plows were listed as "Lockport Clippers," "Lane's Cast Steel Plows" and the "Sod Breakers."

Historical records show that much of the steel used in the manufacture of the plows came from Germany. The German steel was distributed by a Chicago hardware dealer and it

was hauled to Lockport and other manufacturing locations by ox cart.

Lane was advised many times to record his plow with the patent office, but he declined to do so. He explained that his only desire was to benefit others with his ideas and asked for no special recognition or remuneration.

John Lane Sr. became the famous blacksmith. He was especially known as the maker of the prairie and the breaking plows. Historians claim that settlers from miles around made pilgrimages to this smith since nobody in all the land could shape or temper a plow like him.

Drawn by from four to eight yoke of oxen and steers, Lane's plows upturned the sod on many an acre of virgin prairie. Over the prairie swells with steady but ruthless trend moved the long

"breaking team" and on came the giant plow, cutting the turf with its sharp colter and turning over the rich earth in long, black ribbons with its mirror steel moldboard. Before it, the blooming grass, fragrant herb and flowers; behind it, a dreary waste of black, fat humus, inviting the steps and stimulating the hopes of the sturdy planter.

Lane died Oct. 5, 1857, at the age of 65. Hartwell continued to manufacture the plow and John Lane Jr., who had learned the trade in his father's shop, carried on the manufacture in Lockport for many years. He became an inventor and patented a number of important improvements in the manufacture of plate steel for plows. The younger Lane gained some reputation with the perfection of a mole trap which trapped and killed the burrowing animal underground.