

McCormick's Reaper *at* 100

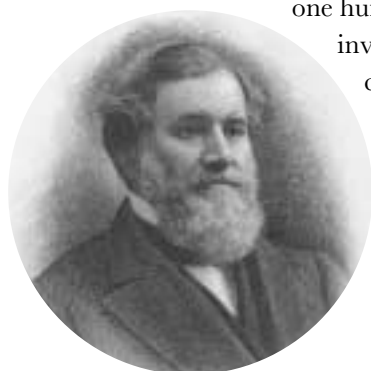
*Marketing the machines that
revolutionized world agriculture*

By Lee Grady

IN 1931, the International Harvester Company threw a year-long party to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of Cyrus Hall McCormick's invention of the mechanical reaper. At first glance, it would be easy for us to judge the ongoing memorials to Cyrus McCormick (1809–1884) solely as a commercial campaign, like so many other corporate marketing plans. What occurred during the

one hundred years since the reaper's invention, however, reflects chapters of a family history that is told in the posters and lithographs the company used as commercial advertising, creating a heritage for both itself and the McCormick family.

This combined heritage first came to life in 1902, when McCormick's business—the McCormick Har-



McCormick Collection

Cyrus Hall McCormick, c. 1882.

vesting Machine Company—had merged with its competitors to form the International Harvester Company. Cyrus McCormick, Jr., became the first president of the Chicago-based company. The merger united several companies whose

years of fierce competition had created deep hostility. To support a unified business during the initial years after the merger, individual companies had of necessity focused on the overall needs of International Harvester rather than the concerns of their respective groups. By 1928, the year International Harvester began planning its centennial celebration, old resentments had faded, and the McCormick family's ascendancy at International Harvester was nearly complete.

Cyrus McCormick, Jr., was now chairman of the board, and his family played a huge role in the company. There was no question that the International Harvester Company would want to plan a McCormick reaper centennial celebration for 1931. The only question centered on the respective roles of the company and the family members, who wanted primarily “to do honor to Grandfather.”

The company produced commemorative coins, a feature-



COURSE OF EMPIRE TAKES ITS WAY" WITH M^C CORMICK REAPERS IN THE VAN.



WHI(X3)52608

The themes of progress and empire dominated American advertising in the late nineteenth century, and the McCormick Company was no exception. This 1880s advertising poster is based on a fresco painting by Emanuel Leutze in the House Wing of the Federal Capitol, c. 1861–1863.

length film, and models of the original reaper for traveling exhibitions. Local dealerships organized parades, lectures, demonstrations, film presentations, and similar events. The legacy of Cyrus Hall McCormick became the central focus of the company's advertising literature. The company used the reaper's centennial to energize its work force, sell its products,

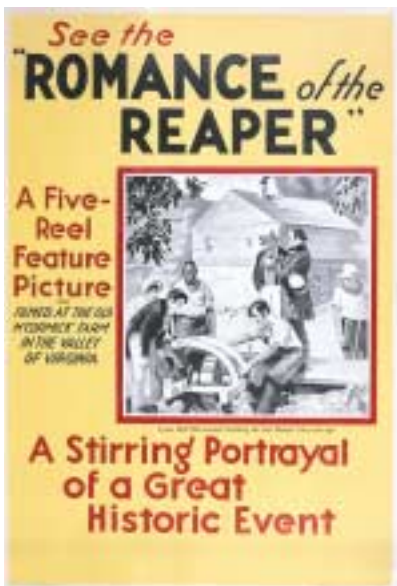
and create a feeling of goodwill throughout its far-flung sales territory. The message was simple: The qualities that had made Cyrus McCormick and his invention great were still alive at International Harvester. Advertising copy hailed McCormick as "the inventor of the machine that ushered in a new era of agriculture, of progress, and of freedom from



McCormick Collection

Above: This photograph, a recreation of the 1831 field test, served as the model for artist N. C. Wyeth's image for the commemorative poster.

Left: International Harvester dealers around the world exhibited this 1931 film in conjunction with demonstrations, lectures, and other centennial events.



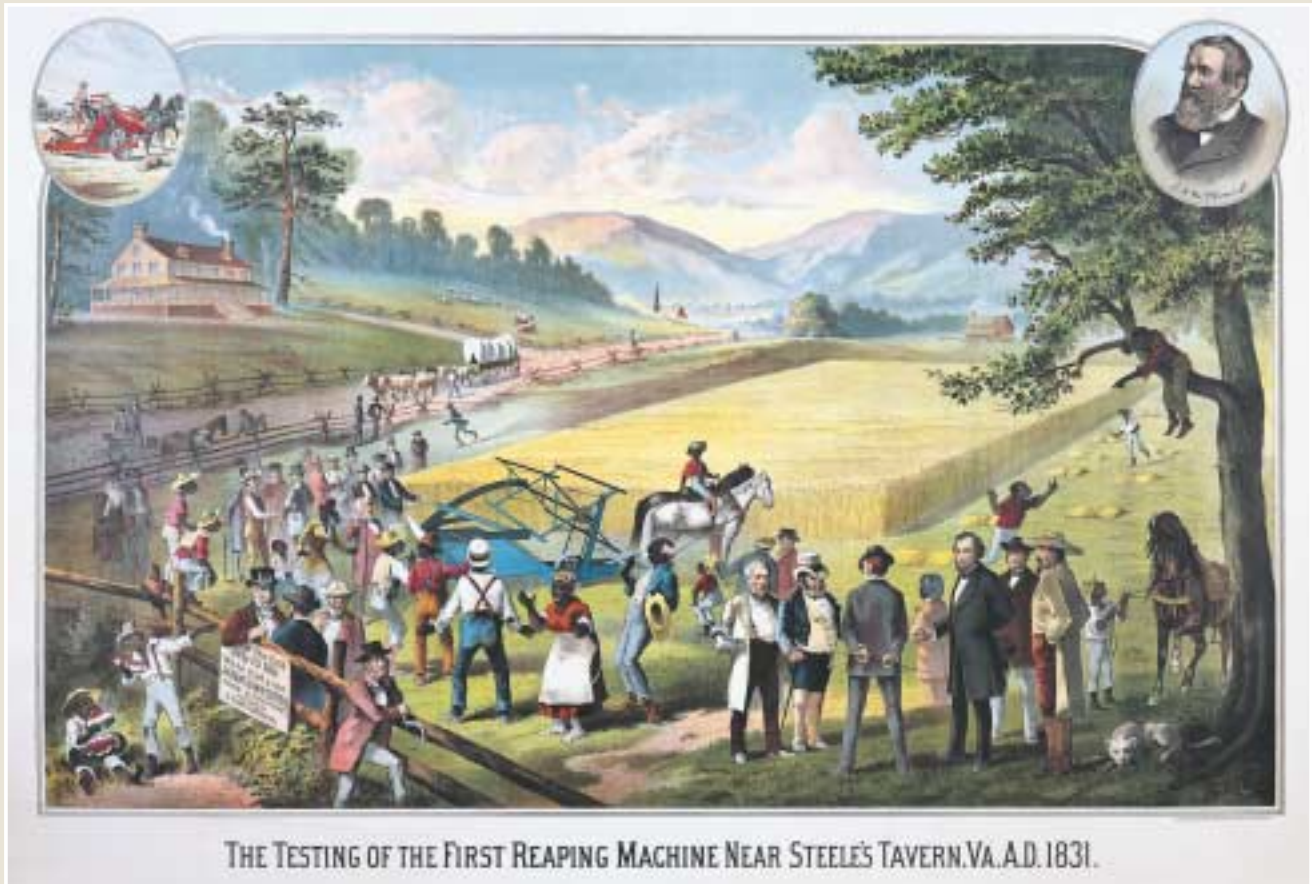
WHI(X3)52612

humanity's age-long enslavement to the soil." The reaper had launched "the long line of machines . . . that have conquered wilderness and desert, built new empires, founded new civilizations, set millions of men free to create new industries, [and] converted yesterday's luxury into today's common com-

fort." International Harvester wished to show its commitment to the same tradition of progress and service to humanity. Brochures and short films with titles like *Saving the World*

from Starvation traced the evolution of agriculture from McCormick's reaper to a full line of modern farm machinery.

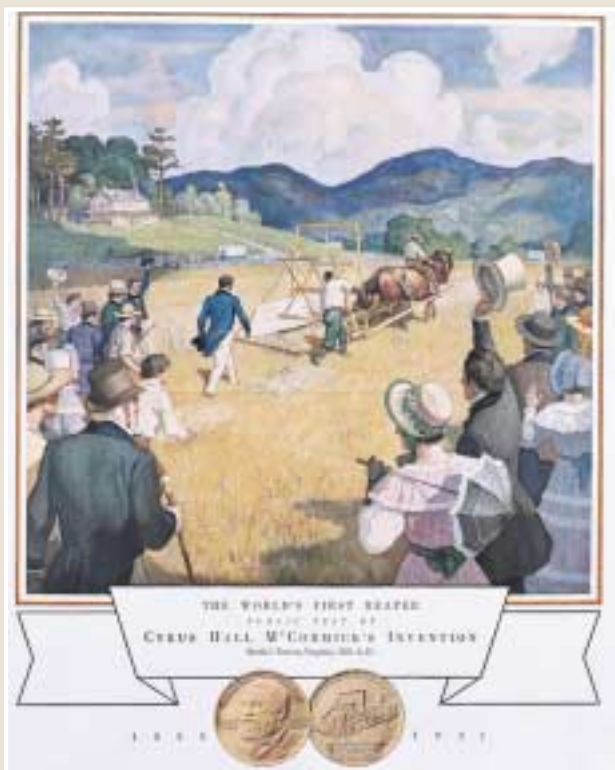
The event that secured Cyrus McCormick's place in history was a field trial in the rural community of Steele's Tavern, Virginia, in the summer of 1831. After weeks of intense labor preparing the machine, he demonstrated a horse-drawn mechanical reaper in a neighbor's oat field in front of a small group of family and friends. The test was not an unqualified success. The reaper sank in soft ground, uprooted and flattened the tangled oat straw, was prone to clogging, and needed frequent adjustments and repairs while in the field. Nevertheless, the field trial of 1831 was of critical importance to McCormick. By the time he filed his first reaper patent in 1834, several competitors had emerged with their own machines. The most serious challenge came from Obed Hussey, who patented a working reaper in 1833. Consequently, the date of the field trial was used in later years to



THE TESTING OF THE FIRST REAPING MACHINE NEAR STEELE'S TAVERN, VA. A.D. 1831.

WHi(X3)52610

Two interpretations of the original field trial of 1831. Above: Before Cyrus McCormick's death. Below: The N. C. Wyeth centennial image of 1931.



In 1883, the company produced the earliest graphic depiction of the field trial to appear in company advertising; the most interesting feature of this image is that the onlookers have been stirred to conversation, perhaps debate, but no sense of immediate triumph. After McCormick's death in 1884, the tone of the company's advertising changed. It hailed the demonstration at Steele's Tavern as the culmination of the "master-stroke of the century."



McCormick Collection

William McCormick



McCormick Collection

Leander McCormick

but the poster conveys no sense of immediate triumph. The event is simply presented as a historical fact: Cyrus McCormick introduced his reaper to the world on July 25, 1831.

After McCormick's death in 1884, the tone of the company's advertising changed. It magnified the importance of the field trial and hailed 1831 as the beginning of a new era of progress. The demonstration at Steele's Tavern "before a number of leading Virginia farmers" was now the culmination of the "master-stroke of the century," rather than an important addition to the field of agricultural science. The McCormick reaper emerged as the foundation of scientific progress, responsible for a golden age of abundance and material comfort:

Before McCormick invented the reaper, invention
slept, man toiled with might,
No joy, no sweetness his,
Then genius woke, the gloom of night took on the
glow of morn,
And lo! McCormick,
To the world remembered well as friend and
benefactor.

The most obvious reason for the change in tone is the death of Cyrus McCormick on May 13, 1884. While the inventor was alive, such rhetoric might have seemed arrogant. But after McCormick's death it made sense to celebrate the achievements of the company's founder. The company was now in the hands of the inventor's son, and for Cyrus Jr. the historical importance of the reaper and its inventor was a matter of fam-

ily honor. His father's reputation had actually been under attack for many years. The first attack had come in the late 1830s when rival inventor Obed Hussey claimed to be the true inventor of the first reaper. A long line of competitors followed Hussey, arguing that McCormick's reaper was *not* the first, that he had stolen his ideas from other inventors, or that his invention had become irrelevant in light of later developments.

Such attacks became particularly forceful during the 1880s and 1890s. This was a period of intense competition and was referred to in the industry as the "reaper wars." An overabundance of suppliers combined with a saturated market forced agricultural machinery manufacturers to cut prices and increase their marketing budgets. Company agents organized field trials,

sponsored local parades, distributed colorful advertising literature, and generally tried anything they could think of to stand out from their competitors.

The most serious challenge to the McCormick legend, however, came not from competitors in the industry, but from the inventor's own brother, Leander.

Leander McCormick was thirteen years old at the time of the field trial in 1831. In 1848, he joined his older brother in Chicago to become supervisor of all manufacturing, and in 1859 Cyrus made him a full partner in the company. The partnership, unfortunately, was not a harmonious one. Cyrus's dictatorial business style and his long absences from Chicago further irritated a lifelong tension between the two brothers. His refusal to promote Leander's son within the company led to the dissolution of the partnership in 1879, and Leander eventually pulled out of the business altogether. By the 1880s he was openly asserting that his brother did not deserve credit for the reaper or any of its subsequent improvements. According to Leander, Cyrus had used his position as the family's business manager to steal the invention. The true inventor of the reaper, he claimed, was their father, Robert McCormick. Leander spent the last two decades of his life collecting evidence to support his claims, and his descendants continued the fight by publishing versions of his story well into the twentieth century.

It was in this climate of accusation and intense competition that the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company began to memorialize its founder. After his death, advertisements invited readers to compare the world of 1831 with that of the



WHI(X3)52617



WHI(X3)52619

Above: This 1899 catalog design accentuates the domestic and international achievements of both McCormick the man and the machines. Left: In this 1889 catalog illustration featuring McCormick mowers and binders, the lone buffalo may have drawn sympathy, but the domination of the machine seemed inevitable.

“present age.” Scientific progress had transformed America into a land with “fifty-five millions of the happiest, most prosperous and progressive people on the face of the earth.” Men like Thomas Edison, Charles Goodyear, Samuel F. B. Morse, Alexander Graham Bell, and Cyrus McCormick were responsible for this progress. McCormick and his reaper,

however, deserved the highest honors, for “[i]n the grand march of human progress which distinguishes the present age above all others . . . agricultural machinery . . . [is] second to none in its important bearing on the well-being of society.”

In fact, according to an 1884 catalog, nearly all of the great achievements of the nineteenth century could be traced to a “trinity of forces . . . the Reaping Machine, the Railroad and the Telegraph.” The text concludes that “no doubt the most important factor of the three was the . . . reaper produced by the inventive genius of Cyrus H. McCormick.”

The company first touted his domestic achievements, and the advertisements called him the “conqueror of American prairies,” because the advent of the reaper had coincided with the settlement of the American frontier. The reaper was particularly well suited to the flat, wheat-growing lands of the

Trans-Mississippi. Company ads focused on this theme, pointing out that before the reaper “the slow prairie schooners of the pioneers were entering the verge of the pathless West, [and] farther than the Missouri all was

Conquering the American West proved to be only part of the story.

deemed a desert.” In 1889 the company’s catalog noted with satisfaction that “what was only a few years ago the grazing ground of the buffalo is now the home of the McCormick.”

What is likely the most famous advertising poster of the McCormick Company dramatically illustrates this theme. In “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way with McCormick Reapers in the Van,” a modified version of a popular painting by Emanuel Leutze, pioneers stand high above the “promised land” of the American frontier, looking ahead to fields under cultivation with McCormick harvesting machinery.

Conquering the American West proved to be only part of the story. McCormick was barely established in the United States when he began looking to expand overseas. Against the wishes of his more conservative brother, William, Cyrus sought world markets and recognition. Beginning with the Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations in London in 1851, McCormick had spent much of the 1850s and 1860s traveling around the world demonstrating his machines, collecting honors, and attempting to set up a system of distribution in Europe. By the 1880s, the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company had sold



WHi(X3)52614

As the Wild West of North America began to grow more sedate, foreign lands—with intriguing characters and locations—began to feel the “civilizing” outreach of the McCormick company’s equipment.

machines in England, Germany, France, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, and Russia. It was no wonder that as Leander, and to a lesser degree William, met the daily management needs of the Chicago-based business, they came to resent their globetrotting brother.

In truth, foreign sales accounted for a relatively small percentage of its total revenue at the time, but the company gave



WHI(X3)52609

One of the McCormick Company's most popular advertising posters, c. 1883–1886, based on a cyclorama painting by French artist Paul Philippoteaux and reprinted several times by the Milwaukee Lithograph and Engraving Company.

prominent advertising space to its foreign endeavors. From 1851 forward, handbills and catalogs featured detailed accounts of the reaper's victories at international exhibitions. Advertisements proclaimed that McCormick was "triumphant throughout all nations, the standard of the world." A calendar in the 1888 catalog reminded readers that McCormick machines were in use somewhere in the world during every month of the year: "It is always harvest time with McCormick! While the American Farmer reads his Favorite Paper by his Winter's Fire the McCormick is Clicking away in the Summer Sun of the Antipodes."

As an advertising theme, the growth of McCormick's foreign business was often translated into the rhetoric of imperialism. McCormick machines were the "avant couriers of civilization," in demand in "every portion of the earth where the summer sun ripens the gold grain." "The ever conquering McCormick" had been the "victor in British fields" and "win-

ner in the champaigns of France." By 1884, it could "be truthfully said, the Sun never sets on the work of the McCormick reaper." To underscore this point, the company changed the name of its reaper from the "Advance" to the "Imperial."

The lofty tone of McCormick advertising was not unique in the industry. Other companies hailed the dawn of plenty, celebrated progress, and marketed implements under brand names like "Empire" and "Imperial." Prosperity, scientific progress, the frontier, and manifest destiny were popular themes at the end of the nineteenth century, and they appeared in literature and commercial lithography. Indeed, McCormick advertising employed other popular themes that had little to do with the reaper and its inventor. For example, the Civil War continued to have a huge cultural impact upon the nation. In an 1883 advertisement, a McCormick binder appears in a depiction of the Battle of Gettysburg. The intention of this poster was not to make a historical connection



McCormick machinery's ability to conquer new worlds finds a spokesperson in Christopher Columbus in this 1893 ad.

WHI(X3)52622

between the reaper and the Civil War. (In fact, McCormick had been something of a Southern sympathizer, and the binder featured in the poster was not invented until fifteen years after the war.) Rather, because lithographers were doing a brisk business in Civil War battle scenes at the time, the company simply wanted an attractive advertisement that people would display.

Very practical messages also lay behind the themes. For

instance, agricultural machinery companies had long since discovered that honors bestowed by scientists and kings abroad helped to sell implements at home. Victories overseas fostered more than national pride: They demonstrated the superiority of McCormick machines. Some farmers believed that judges at international trials were less likely to be in the pockets of American companies and more likely to be impartial. In any event, a machine able to surmount barriers of culture and language far and wide earned a level of merit if for no other reason than the “bandwagon” effect: If everyone else is using it, it must be good!

Similarly, if the reaper was a symbol of the great progress of the century, it served as an admonishment to farmers who still relied on older harvesting methods. Modern farm machinery has always been a substantial and often prohibitive investment for most farmers. Well into the twentieth century, when some farmers still had horses and walking plows, International Harvester used brochures and films to contrast the “old” methods of farming with the new, exhorting farmers to keep pace with scientific progress.

Nevertheless, few companies went to such great lengths to celebrate the achievements of a corporate founder. In

The State Historical Society of Wisconsin

Director: George L. Vogt

Officers

President: Gerald D. Viste
 First Vice-President: Patricia A. Boge
 Second Vice-President: Mary A. Sather
 Treasurer: Mark L. Gajewski
 Secretary: George L. Vogt

Board of Curators

Ruth Barker, *Ephraim*
 Thomas H. Barland, *Eau Claire*
 Murray D. “Chip” Beckford, *Cascade*
 Jane B. Bernhardt, *Cassville*
 Patricia A. Boge, *La Crosse*
 Mary F. Buestrin, *Mequon*
 Glenn R. Coates, *Racine*
 John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Madison*
 William J. Cronon, *Madison*
 Ness Flores, *Waukesha*
 Stephen J. Freese, *Dodgeville*
 Mark L. Gajewski, *Madison*
 Paul C. Gartzke, *Madison*
 Charles E. Haas, *La Crosse*
 Beverly A. Harrington, *Oshkosh*

Bette M. Hayes, *De Pere*
 Fannie E. Hicklin, *Madison*
 Gregory B. Huber, *Wausau*
 Margaret B. Humleker, *Fond du Lac*
 Thomas Mouat Jeffris II, *Janesville*
 Ellen D. Langill, *Waukesha*
 Virginia R. MacNeil, *Bayside*
 Genevieve G. McBride, *Milwaukee*
 Douglas A. Ogilvie, *Hortonville*
 Janice M. Rice, *Madison*
 Fred A. Risser, *Madison*
 Peggy Rosenzweig, *Wauwatosa*
 John M. Russell, *Menomonie*
 Mary A. Sather, *New Richmond*
 Gerald D. Viste, *Wausau*
 Anne M. West, *Milwaukee*
 Carlyle H. “Hank” Whipple, *Madison*

Ex-officio Board of Curators

Donna M. Kalnes, *President, FRIENDS of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*
 Roy C. LaBudde, *President, Wisconsin History Foundation*
 David W. Oliien, *Senior Vice-President, University of Wisconsin System*
 Nijole Etwiler, *President, Wisconsin Council for Local History*

The Wisconsin History Foundation

President: Roy C. LaBudde, *Milwaukee*
 Vice-President: Bruce T. Block, *Milwaukee*
 Vice-President: Margaret B. Humleker, *Fond du Lac*
 Vice-President: Edwin P. Wiley, *Milwaukee*
 Treasurer: Rhona E. Vogel, *Brookfield*
 Secretary: George L. Vogt, *Madison*
 Asst. Treasurer & Asst. Secretary: W. Pharis Horton, *Madison*

Daniel W. Erdman, *Madison*
 Rockne G. Flowers, *Madison*
 John J. Frautschi, *Madison*
 Mark L. Gajewski, *Madison*
 Miles Gerstein, *Madison*
 Gary P. Grunau, *Milwaukee*
 Richard H. Holscher, *Lake Tomahawk*
 Ralph C. Toussaint, Jr., *Fox Point*
 Paul Meissner, *Milwaukee*
 George H. Miller, *Ripon*
 Robert B.L. Murphy, *Madison*
 Carol T. Toussaint, *Madison*
 Gerald D. Viste, *Wausau*
 Robert S. Zigman, *Milwaukee*

the years following Cyrus McCormick's death in 1884, the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company rarely published an advertisement without some reference to the inventor. Indeed, when the U.S. Treasury Department considered putting McCormick's image on a ten-dollar note in 1897, an exasperated competitor, John F. Steward of the Deering Harvester Company, remarked that "placing the portrait of Mr. McCormick on the currency was practically lending the currency of the country to a gratuitous advertising scheme."

The rhetoric was toned down substantially after the formation of International Harvester in 1902. The merger that had created the company required cooperation among former competitors, and the two biggest partners, the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company and the Deering Harvester Company, had also been the fiercest of rivals for many years. To preserve harmony among all the new partners, and to keep the focus of the company in the present, the McCormick legend receded into the shadows. During its first few years the new firm adopted a totally new corporate logo and began to expand its product lines, marketing machinery under dozens of different brand names, including McCormick, Deering, Champion, Milwaukee, Plano, Keystone, and Weber. It would seem that the name "McCormick" had become just one of many.

The legacy of Cyrus Hall McCormick was a powerful one, however. In 1909, on the one hundredth anniversary of McCormick's birth, rural newspapers throughout the country still hailed the inventor as the "emancipator of hunger" and the "prophet of the prairies." By 1931, most of the original Deering company members were no longer in high-level decision-making positions, but the McCormick family members were ascendant once again. It is not surprising, then, that International Harvester decided to take full advantage of the one hundredth anniversary of Cyrus McCormick's invention. The 1931 centennial events sponsored by International Harvester drew large crowds in small towns across America.

The legacy of Cyrus Hall McCormick was a powerful one, however. In 1909, on the one hundredth anniversary of McCormick's birth, rural newspapers throughout the country still hailed the inventor as the "emancipator of hunger" and the "prophet of the prairies." By 1931, most of the original Deering company members were no longer in high-level decision-making positions, but the McCormick family members were ascendant once again. It is not surprising, then, that International Harvester decided to take full advantage of the one hundredth anniversary of Cyrus McCormick's invention. The 1931 centennial events sponsored by International Harvester drew large crowds in small towns across America.



In an 1896 catalog illustration, men of many nations cheer on Uncle Sam at the helm of a McCormick binder, and U.S. domination of the agricultural world seems complete.

WHI(X3)52618

The Author



LEE GRADY is the McCormick-International Harvester Collection Archivist for the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. He was born and raised in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and earned master's degrees in American history (1989) and library and information studies (1993) from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He currently lives in the Madison area with his wife and son.

And other centennial celebrations would follow, most notably the one in 1947, in which the company celebrated 100 years of success in Chicago. Over the years the story of Cyrus Hall McCormick might have been challenged, threatened, even silenced for a time. But it remained, and it had found its way into the collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, where it is now safely preserved for generations to come. ❧

The History of the Collection

AFTER Cyrus Hall McCormick's death in 1884, his widow and children hired secretaries to collect manuscripts and memorabilia relating to the inventor and to the history of the agricultural implement industry. In 1915, the McCormick family hired historian Herbert Kellar to manage the collection and direct an organization called the "McCormick Historical Association." A few years later, the association moved out of its headquarters in the McCormick mansion at 675 Rush Street in Chicago and into a large stone carriage house at the rear of the property. The carriage house was remodeled to include a library, museum, offices, and facilities for research. Kellar collected papers, photographs, and artifacts at this location for the next thirty years. During this time the collection grew from ten thousand to over one million items, including the papers of Cyrus Hall McCormick, records of the various McCormick companies in Chicago prior to 1902, and a number of collections relating to agriculture and to McCormick's native state of Virginia.

In 1949, the land and buildings of the McCormick Historical Association were sold in an estate settlement, and the collection was placed in storage. Cyrus's daughter Anita McCormick Blaine assigned Herbert Kellar the task of finding a permanent home for it. At the time, the McCormick Collection was considered one of the most important collections of manuscripts in private hands and was highly coveted. Over the next two years Kellar traveled over fifteen thousand miles and investigated thirty institutions, including the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

The Society was a prime candidate to receive the collection. It was located in the Midwest, close to the McCormicks' Chicago home. In addition, the Society had over one hundred years of archival experience, the necessary storage and research facilities, and a national reputation for its outstanding collections. Finally, it was affiliated with the University of Wisconsin, which had a world-class history department and agricultural school.

In 1951, based on Kellar's recommendation, Mrs. Blaine donated the McCormick Collection to the Society. The Society hired Kellar and his wife Lucile to continue to manage the collection. Kellar died in 1955, but Lucile continued as the McCormick curator well into the 1960s. In the meantime, the McCormick family continued to donate material. By the time Lucile Kellar retired, the collection

had grown to include the business and personal papers of Nettie Fowler and the McCormick children: Mary Virginia, Stanley, Harold, Anita, and Cyrus McCormick, Jr. The International Harvester Company also made large donations of material to the Society. In 1959 the company shipped several truckloads of farm implements and models to Stonefield, the Society's farm and craft museum at Cassville. In addition, when the old McCormick Works at Chicago was closed, the company donated nineteen tons of financial ledgers dating back to the first McCormick companies.

After Lucile Kellar's retirement in the 1960s, a succession of archivists served as experts on the McCormick Collection. Much work was done to preserve the collection and make it more accessible to the public. In addition to creating numerous indexes and descriptive lists, the Society published an extensive *Guide to the McCormick Collection* and completed a grant-funded project to preserve and describe over twelve thousand glass plate negatives of the International Harvester Company. During this period the papers of Fowler McCormick and the records of the McCormick Estates were added to the collection.

Then, in the late 1980s, Navistar International Transportation Foundation contacted the State Historical Society of Wisconsin about material still in its corporate archives. International Harvester had recently sold its agricultural equipment line and changed its name to Navistar. Now it wanted to donate a portion of its old International Harvester records. The Society, already home to the McCormick Collection, was the natural destination for this material. After some negotiation, Navistar donated over one thousand cubic feet of advertising literature, operator's manuals, company publications, press releases, photographs, films, and other public relations and marketing materials. Brooks McCormick, a great grandson of William, Cyrus's older brother, made a substantial gift of money to help preserve and manage the collection.

Today the McCormick-International Harvester Collection consists of over six million manuscript pages, 150,000 photographs, and 300 films. In addition, the Society's museum, library, and historic sites hold thousands of books, agricultural newspapers, machines, models, toys, and pieces of clothing that were donated by the McCormick family and International Harvester.



Lot 5072
Society director Clifford Lord (left) and Herbert Kellar (right) inspect the McCormick collection in December of 1951.