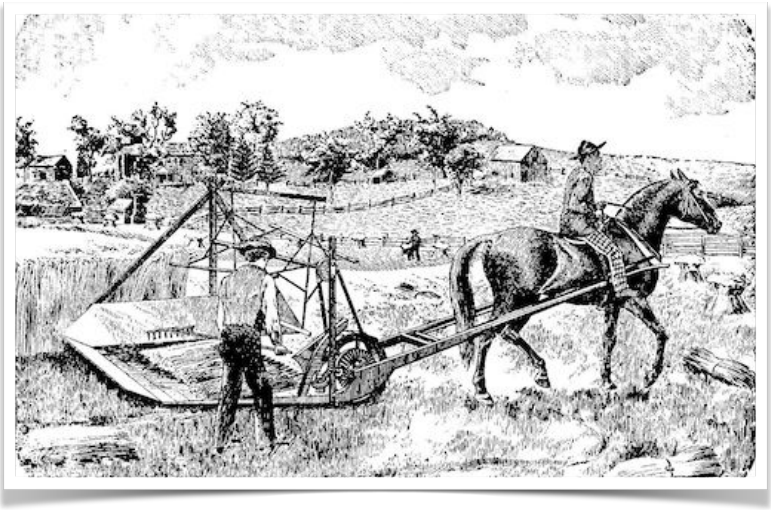
INVENTIONS

AND HOW THEY MADE HISTORY



The Reaper

Harvest time is an important time. You spend all season planting, watering, protecting, doing everything you can to grow something valuable; however, the biggest and most stressful job of them all is harvest time. This determined how much work you put in beforehand, how much land you could handle, how many people you hired and, if you didn't have a good harvest, whether it was all for nothing.

Scythe

The most important tool for a large harvest was the scythe. It was single tool that could be operated by one person, one stick, one long blade, and needed constant care and cleaning. It took a lot of strength to hold, swing from side to side along the base of the crop, maybe wheat, then to collect everything and bring it in. For a large field, you needed to hire a lot of guys for the job.

Cyrus McCormick

In the 1800's, with the expansion of steam power and invention, as well as an expansion westward, there was a strong desire to build something better for harvesting. In 1831, 22-year old Cyrus McCormick, a son of a farmer, blacksmith, and inventor who already tried, tried his own hand at building a reaper. He build it like a chariot with two wheels, horse-drawn, and had a vibrating cutting blade that could cut as it was pulled along. Not only that, but it had a platform that would collect the cuttings and could be brought in immediately, solving a lot of issues.

Impact

The impact was enormous. How many harvests were ruined in the past because they couldn't be collected in time? How many people needed to be hired, money spent on labor? How many slaves were being used for the job in the past? And now, there was a reliable machine that could do a 1-2 week job in a single day. The desire for the machine was very strong. American famers started planting more and more grain, both utilizing and acquiring even more land than ever before.

Now it wasn't until 1847 that McCormick was able to build a factory for it in Chicago, but then 800 machines were sold in the first year alone and by 1856, 4,000 reapers were being sold annually. The reaper went worldwide, changing the landscape in the United Kingdom as well.

However, it also led to some labor market shifts. Less and less people were needed for working on farms, leading also to populations movements more towards cities where jobs could be found.