

Emerson Brantingham

Rockford, IL 1917



The Emerson-Brantingham Company as a "name" began in 1909, but its roots are firmly entrenched back to the 1850s. The J.H. Manny & Co. was founded in 1852. This was the beginning of the mechanized revolution that forever changed farming in America. One of the hardest chores around the farm in those days was harvesting wheat. John H. Manny was what many would refer to as an ambitious tinkerer. As a child, he was obsessed with helping his father make farming easier. Manny, along with several other inventors, including Cyrus McCormick, were racing to see who could build a better machine to greatly reduce the manual labor involved in the mowing, gathering, tying, and stacking of the wheat from the fields. Manny, along with his father, had developed a horse-drawn machine that did just that. In 1852, a reaper built by Manny won the coveted Gold Medal for Achievement at a contest in Geneva, New York, soundly beating a machine entered by none other than Cyrus McCormick.



In 1854, Manny took on several partners, including Ralph Emerson, cousin to the famous poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. He relocated the business to Rockford, Illinois, because of both the availability

of natural resources and proximity to the growing agricultural heartland. In 1854, Cyrus McCormick sued Manny for patent infringement. When the suit finally came to trial, Manny's defense attorneys included Edwin M. Stanton and Abraham Lincoln. (Stanton later became Lincoln's Secretary of War.) The soon-to-be-famous lawyers successfully defended Manny against McCormick's allegations. According to legend, Manny paid Lincoln a fee of \$1,000, which he used to finance his participation in the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates. In contrast, Stanton's fee was the then-enormous sum of \$10,000.

Unfortunately, Manny took ill and passed away of consumption in 1856 at the tender age of 30. After Manny's death, the company changed its name to Talcott, Emerson, and Co., and continued to build on the 28-plus patents Manny had left. The company grew quickly and several years later became the Emerson Manufacturing Company.

Emerson, always eager to expand, went out and sought associates, both technical and financial, who could take his company to the next level of performance. One of those individuals was Charles S. Brantingham, who brought a very broad business approach to the Emerson Company. He had a reputation as a ruthless competitor, fair employer, and model citizen, and he possessed visions of a global business that would supply the world with agricultural equipment. Part of

Brantingham's vision was to expand rapidly. One way to do that was to "not reinvent the wheel." He needed a company that produced high-quality steam engines, so he acquired the Geiser Mfg. Co. in Pennsylvania. He needed to expand the tillage business, so he jumped at the opportunity to acquire the Osborne Co. He saw a need for carrying and hauling, so he purchased the Pontiac Buggy Co. and the Newton Wagon Works. There was a demand for more auxiliary gas engines, so he obtained the Rockford Gas Engine Co. The Emerson Brantingham Co. was, for a few years, one of the biggest agricultural manufacturers on the planet.

With the demise of the steam engine and the rising popularity of smaller tractors, Emerson Brantingham found their two biggest moneymakers, the Geiser Manufacturing Company and Big Four Tractor Company, had become unprofitable.

Finally, in November 1928, the Emerson Brantingham Co. fell to the hands of J.I. Case, who had a particularly keen interest in the plant and facilities and the 28 vital patents held by the company. The post-World War I agricultural depression and the transition from steam to gasoline engines and larger to smaller tractors made the 1920s an especially challenging environment for agricultural products manufacturers. For what it's worth, Emerson Brantingham was one of the last of over 800 implement companies to fall prey to the times.