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Ellwood hay rake
Manufactured in Sycamore, Ill.
Girl, daughter Eleanor married Guy Singer.

Farm Implements & Family Ties: The Story of Eleanor & the Ellwood Hay Rake (Part I)

By EvaAnne Johnson

At this year's Sycamore Steam Power Show, I was browsing the flea market when an old photo caught my eye. A Post-It note on the front of the old photo stated, "Ellwood's Hay Rake, Sycamore, IL." The photo was from the 1890s and depicted an old horse-drawn hay rake and a young girl. Someone had written on the back, "Ellwood hay rake, Manufactured in Sycamore, Ill., Girl - daughter Eleanor married Guy Singer." I recognized the Ellwood name as a prominent family from DeKalb and Sycamore, and I realized that this photo likely had a very interesting story. I purchased the photograph, and dug into the story of Eleanor Ellwood and her family's hay rake.

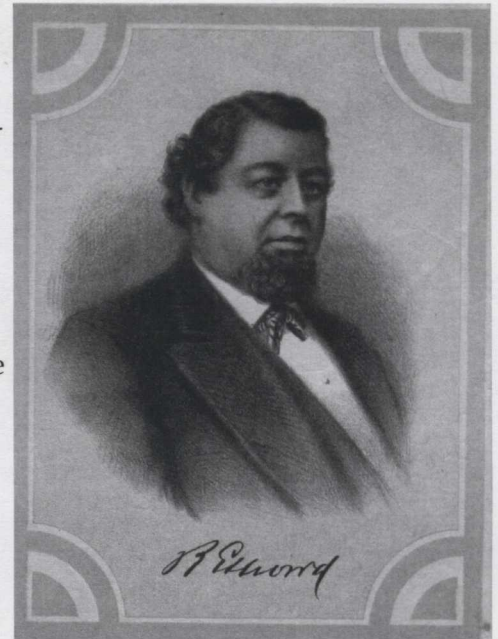
What was Ellwood's Hay Rake?

The hay rake was manufactured by the R. Ellwood Manufacturing Co. in Sycamore, Illinois. It was likely produced between 1881 and 1892.

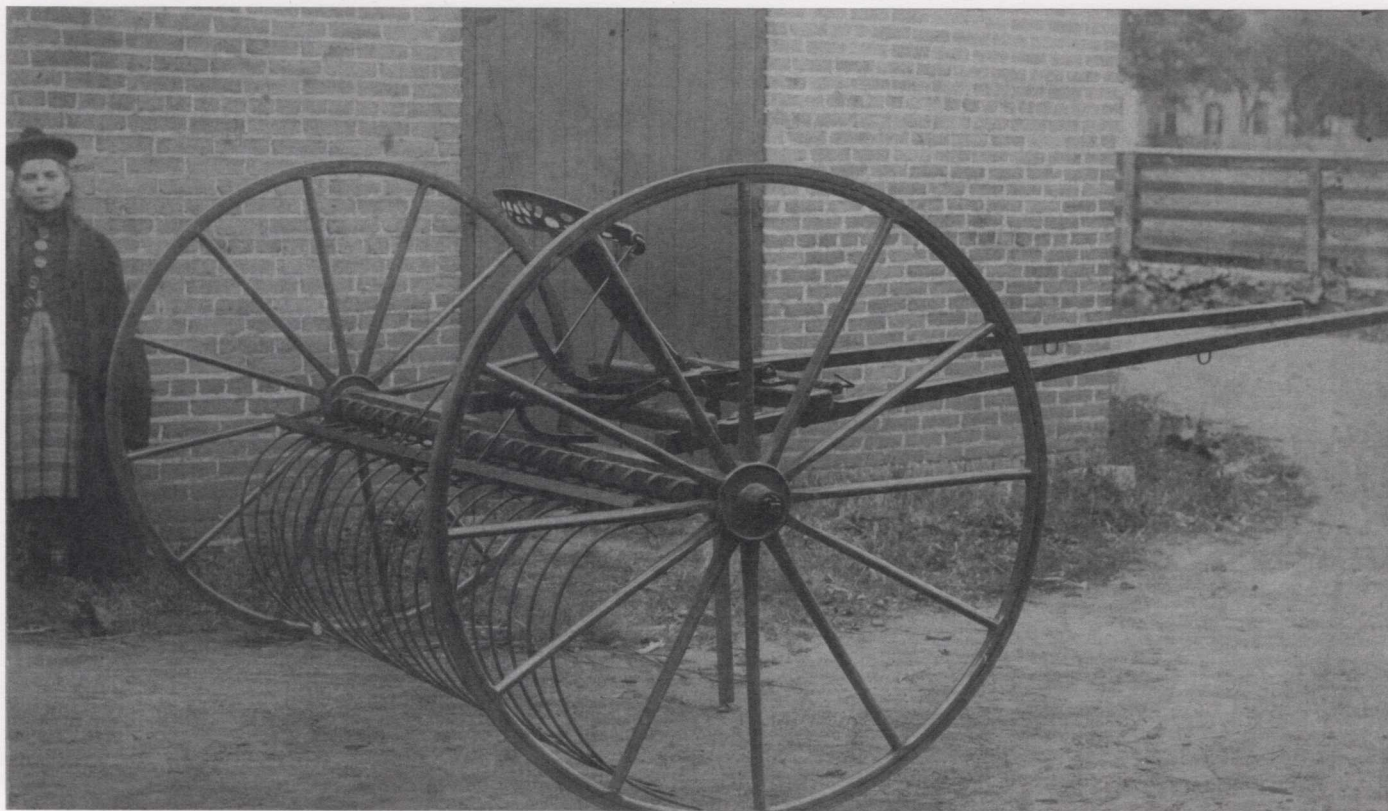
Before the wide use of horse-drawn hay rakes, farmers would cut their grains by hand with a scythe, and then rake the grains into piles to dry and gather it later. In one day, a farmer could cut and rake about two acres of hay. Although horse-drawn hay rakes were invented and used sparingly in the early 1800s, this style of sulky rake was first patented in 1849 and gradually gained popularity throughout the Northeast and Midwest. A dump hay rake would have a row of large curved metal teeth that would drag along the ground and gather up the grain, and when it was full, the farmer would stop the horse and use a lever to dump the grains into a pile or windrow. These rakes were nearly perfected by the 1870s and substantially reduced the labor needed to rake a field of grain. A single farmer and sulky rake could rake twenty to thirty acres in a day.

Reuben Ellwood, the manufacturer of this hay rake, spent his formative years in New York. He was born on February 17, 1821, in Minden, New York, and

was one of eleven children of Abraham and Sarah (Delong) Ellwood. He first came to DeKalb County at the age of 16 in the summer of 1837, and entered a claim of 160 acres of land near Sycamore.



more. About four years later, he returned to New York due to poor health. While in New York, he attended Cherry Valley Academy, established a broom manufacturing business, and in 1849 married Eleanor Vedder. They had six children together. His parents and most of his siblings made their way one by one to DeKalb County. Several of his siblings became prominent citizens of DeKalb County, including his brother Isaac of barbed wire fame, and his oldest brother Chauncey who was an attorney and mayor of Sycamore. The family remained close-knit and were often involved in each others' business affairs. Reuben's obituary in the *Farm Implement News* noted that the brothers were "strong in physique and strong in purpose, with big hearts and big brains, they have stood by each other and have pulled together for common good." Each of the brothers established their own businesses shortly after settling in DeKalb and



Sycamore. One of the brothers, Alonzo, founded a hardware store in Sycamore in 1854 with Willis Lott.

In 1857, Reuben gave up his broom manufacturing business and returned to Sycamore to run the hardware business with his brother Alonzo. They were called "A. & R. Ellwood Hardware," and were located at the corner of State and Maple Streets in the George's Block building. A tin shop operated by Gay Wiseman was located on the second floor of the building. An ad from 1859 stated that they were "dealers in all kinds of hardware, cutlery, building materials, joiners' tools, etc. also dealers in all kinds of agricultural implements." Later advertisements announced, "hardware, cutlery, iron and steel, fence wire, doors, sash, putty, glass, tin-ware, stoves, etc." and that they had "the largest assortment of hardware and building materials west of Chicago." They were also the exclusive local dealer for John Deere plows and

other machinery. They advertised low prices and a large variety of products and farm implements. In 1867, Alonzo sold his portion of the hardware business to pursue other interests, leaving Reuben to carry on the business.

In the spring of 1871, Reuben expanded the footprint of his hardware store to make room for agricultural implements and carriage supplies, making his shop the largest of its kind in the area. At that time, he decided to start manufacturing some farm implements himself. By 1874, he was producing the "Ellwood & Pitcher Sulky Corn Plow and the Ellwood & Pitcher Rolling Coulter," as well as cheese and butter factory supplies.

In 1875, he officially founded the R. Ellwood Manufacturing Company, constructed a new manufacturing plant in Sycamore, and invested \$50,000 into the new company. The building was located at the southwest corner of West High Street and Railroad Street (now Park Avenue), in the present

-day location of Star Incorporated. Two other well-known manufacturers were located next door, the Sycamore Preserve Works and the Marsh Harvester Manufacturing Co. At its peak, the factory consisted of a large two-story building that housed the machine shop, wood shop, blacksmith shop, and storage on the upper floors. The foundry and warehouse were in separate buildings, and other small buildings included an office and dipping house. The railroad ran close to the west side of the building. The new plant initially produced the Ellwood Riding Cultivator, making 600 cultivators its first year and quickly expanded to produce other farm implements.

According to his obituary in the *DeKalb Chronicle*, Reuben's investment in the manufacturing company "has proved most valuable for the growth and prosperity of Sycamore. The excellent quality of the products and the judicious administration of the business relations of the incorporated company, have established its reputé in point of importance and value to DeKalb County, and as second to none of similar scope in Northern Illinois. The machinery produced acquired speedy popularity from its adaptability to the needs of the farmers and the period in which it was introduced, agricultural industries, being at the acme of their success." The company's motto was "Whatever is worth making at all, is worth making well," and quickly established a reputation for quality products.

In the early years of R. Ellwood Manufacturing, Reuben managed both the hardware store and the manufacturing business, but by early 1877 he decided to dedicate his efforts to the manufacturing. The hardware business was turned over to the Syme brothers, who continued to sell farm implements produced by R. Ellwood Manufacturing. John Syme was also a manager of the manufacturing company for many years.

Meanwhile, business had really taken off. The plant became one of Sycamore's largest employers, at one time employing over 125 workers. Within the first few years, Reuben had enlarged the manufacturing buildings and increased the capital stock of the company to \$111,000. Newspaper reports noted that the factory was often running at full capacity and could barely keep up with all the orders coming in. They produced large agricultural equipment such as riding cultivators, sulky plows, hay rakes, and smaller pieces such as hinges, rollers, churns, and barbed wire stretchers. Reuben hired agents who traveled around the Midwest selling his farm implements beyond the local region, and he demonstrated his wares at local and state fairs. In 1877, the R. Ellwood Manufacturing Company won first place at the DeKalb County Farmers' Fair for best sulky horse rake, best one-horse-power for all purposes, best dog power, and best garbage cart. That same year, it was reported that they manufactured 3,000 corn plows and the company's manufactures would reach \$250,000 in value that year. (STR, 14 Feb 1877, p. 4)

For the next several years, Reuben's products continued to be in high demand. In June 1879, the *True Republican* reported that "The R. Ellwood Mfg. Co. have a tremendous demand for their corn cultivators. Every one made this season and a large number which were carried over have been sold and the orders which must be refused, now reach nearly a car-load a day. The factory has lately started on a fresh thousand cultivators." Just two months later, they reported that "the manufacture of sulky plows keeps the R. Ellwood Mfg. Co., running at full power while many of the manufactories are closed. They cannot fill all their orders for these goods. The number of cultivators sent out this spring is 3600." (STR, 6 Aug 1879, p. 1) During the following spring, "Sixty tons of steel was received last week by the R. Ellwood Mfg. Co. for harrow teeth. Light teeth of Bessemer steel

are now the popular thing among farmers. The Ellwood Factory is running two hours at night to catch up with its orders. The spring opens so early that plows are in demand a month sooner than was expected." (STR, 3 Mar 1880, p. 1) In one year, the company would produce and sell 3,500 riding cultivators, 1,600 sulky plows, 1,500 harrows, and 1,000 self-dumping hay rakes.

In those years, Reuben also dedicated his time to innovation and improving the farm implements that he produced. Between the years 1873 and 1885, his name was listed on 16 patents, with his name being the primary inventor for 14 of them. His patents ranged from cultivators and sulky plows to barbed wire stretchers and barn door hangers. The R. Ellwood Mfg. Co. started manufacturing sulky hay rakes in 1877, and made some major improvements over the next five years. Reuben held three patents related to horse hay-rakes from 1879, 1881, and 1882. His self-discharging sulky rake was patented in April 1879, and was described as "simple, strong and durable." (Portrait and Biographical Album, p. 802) In 1882, a newspaper brief remarked, "The Ellwood hay rake is acquiring a remarkable popularity; it is the best on the market. They expect to make 3,000 of these for next year's market." (STR, 23 Sep 1882, p. 1)

The hay rake in this photograph was likely manufactured by Reuben Ellwood between the years 1881, when Reuben made his final major improvements to the rake, and 1892, when the company moved to DeKalb. It appears to be the "Veteran

THE DE KALB COUNTY MANUFACTURER.

29


weight of any in use. The Bed is in one piece and of cast iron. The Gears are fitted up with great care, the boxes and gudgeons are cast in and make part of the bed. Strengthened and greatly improved for 1882—capable of running a two hole sheller. For pumping water, churning, grinding tools, shelling corn, cutting feed, and all light work it has no superior.

We also manufacture Iron Fence Posts, Iron Fence Caps, Iron Post Mails, and Sleigh Shoes of various patterns.

THE ELLWOOD BARREL CART.

One of the most convenient things about the farm is the Barrel Cart. It was invented by a practical farmer to supply a necessity long felt, to lighten the labor of carrying slops and milk from the house and dairy. By its use that nuisance (when near the house) the pig-pen, can be so far removed as to avoid the odors inseparably connected therewith. The Cart can be wheeled up to the place most convenient to the house and filled, and when filled, or as often as desired, be removed and completely emptied as easily as two pails can be carried.

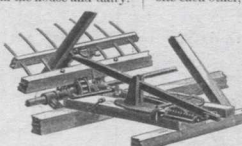
The wheels being so large, it can be moved very easily, and tipped so as to pour out the contents into troughs or pails. It will be found convenient for gathering apples. It is made in a durable manner, and with proper care will last many years. No one having used it for a month or two would go back to carrying slops in the old way. Special attention is directed to the attachment for sprinkling lawns and flower pots, which can be attached at very little additional cost.



THE VETERAN SELF DUMPING RAKE.

IRON FENCE PICKET

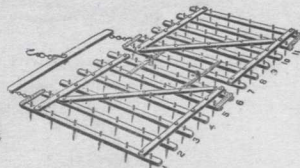
Makes a double border at the top and is very beautiful, costs but little to put up and paint. It is cheaper than wood and better in every respect. Three and one-half pickets to the foot. The top rail must be bored—holes opposite each other.



THE ELLWOOD HARROW.

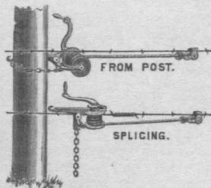
and one inch apart from center to center. Picket 2 feet and 7 inches long, or any length ordered.

The Company also manufacture a line of hardware and other goods, as follows: Churns, from sixteen to sixty gallons; barn door hinges and track, iron mauls of all weights. Also the celebrated Ellwood



THE LITTLE GIANT STRETCHER.

For special rates apply to
ABRAM ELLWOOD,
Manufacturer, Sycamore, Ill.



THE ELLWOOD HORSE POWER.

Self-Dump" model of their hay rake, which was one of their best sellers and was produced for many years. Their self-discharging sulky rakes were "perfect [...] in simplicity, strength and durability without a rival." and that "any boy or girl that can drive a horse can rake with it as well as the strongest man." "The twenty steel teeth are fastened on the top of the rake head with a new device, superior to anything heretofore invented, preventing all side movements and absolutely all breaking of teeth." (STR, 26 Mar 1879, p. 3)

The DeKalb County Manufacturer describes Reuben's process for developing this particular model in great detail: "After success crowning Mr. Ellwood's labor in perfecting his Cultivator, he began work upon a Rake. He took out a number of patents and made no less

than six different rakes in as many years, each possessing valuable points, and all what might be called fair rakes, but not up to the idea of the inventor as a first class implement. In the summer of 1880 he threw aside all old ideas and started out on a new track. Whether from happy accident or the experience of former disappointments, bought at an expense of thousands of dollars we know not, but in less than three weeks he produced and put in the field a new Rake, since named the Veteran. Ten were built the same fall and tested thoroughly and to the complete satisfaction of everybody, yet not daring to trust a victory so easily won, only three hundred were made in 1881, and if ever a rake was tested thoroughly, it was this."

The "improved for 1883" version of the rake was described as such: "The working parts of this rake consists of the centre loose ratchet, operated by both wheels; a lock-lever, which relieves the rake in passing over rough ground, by bearing on the spring-ratchet in front, and cam adjustable lock



THE VETERAN SELF DUMPING RAKE.

bar, tip for raising and lowering the teeth. When in operation, the relief afforded by the spring enables the rake to pass over rough or uneven ground, and gather the hay without any strain on either teeth or rake. The great difficulty manufacturers have found with sulky rakes, is the liability to sag or drop in the center; to obviate this difficulty, and keep our rake always in line, we have put under our wooden axle a strong iron truss, which, by the action of set-screws, holds the rake in position and prevents sagging." (STR, 6 Jun 1883, p. 4) These sturdy and efficient hay rakes made the jobs of many local farmers a little easier during hay season.

What happened to Reuben and the R. Ellwood Manufacturing Company? Who was the little girl standing next to the hay rake in the photograph? Stay tuned for part two, which will be published in the next issue of *Cornsilk*!