

The Stewart Sheaf Loader Story

After publication of the Manitoba Agricultural Museum press release "Steward Sheaf Loader", further information on these machines came forward from Mrs. Bray, a relative of the Stewart family. Mrs. Bray indicates the Museum misspelt the name in the original press release as the family name is properly spelt Stewart not Steward. Mrs. Bray also passed along more information on the Stewart Sheaf Loader story. The Museum would like to thank Mrs. Bray for providing this information as there is a direct connection to the Neepawa area and it is an interesting part of Manitoba's agricultural history.

The idea for the Stewart Sheaf Loader originated with the Stewart Family of Molesworth, Ontario where the family was involved in farming. The eldest brother, Peter "M" Stewart, moved west in 1879, a common story with Ontario farming families as land was easier and cheaper to obtain in the West. He pioneered a farm in the Neepawa, Manitoba area. Dave Albert, Robert C. and John F. Stewart, all of whom were very fond of "tinkering" with machinery, remained in Molesworth, Ontario. According to Stewart Family history, Dave Albert and Robert C., were the inventive ones, while John F. did the farm-work and was an excellent blacksmith that brought the ideas to reality. Jennie Stewart, a sister, should also get credit in the Stewart Sheaf Loader story as she was very good with numbers and aided in the calculations that helped produce the loader.

The Stewart brothers remaining in Ontario came up with the idea of a sheaf loader from their experience in threshing grain and thinking about how machinery could cut down the amount of manual labor involved. Patents on the machine were taken out in 1902 and 1905. A prototype sheaf loader was built in their workshop in Molesworth then crated and shipped by rail in 1905 to Neepawa for trial on the farm of their brother, Peter "M". The first trial, however, was not a success, owing to the heaviness of the oat crop being harvested. Family history also indicates there were problems stemming from the fact the stooks of oat sheaves had stood in the field for a long time. Perhaps the oat had started re-growing from the root and a heavy growth of new oats was impeding the pickup? But whatever the cause the Stewart brothers decided the loader was not heavy enough to do the job. So, the loader was re-crated and shipped back to Molesworth. Here, the brothers set about rebuilding it, adding larger gears & a larger "bull wheel". With these improvements, the machine was successful. The machine was then shown at the Winnipeg Industrial Exhibition, about 1910. The Stewart Sheaf Loader went into production at 470 Martin Avenue, Elmwood, a suburb of Winnipeg, where the Stewart Brothers had obtained a manufacturing facility.

The sheaf loaders were excellent machines, well-built and did a good job. While late model Stewarts could be tractor drawn and PTO driven, initially the machines were drawn by four horses with a large bull wheel on the machine powering the pickup and elevator. The machines were driven beside the rows of stooks with the stooks then being picked up and elevated into sheaf wagons, taken to the thresher & threshed. The loader cut in half the number of men and teams needed by the outfit which was a big saving to the farmer and more than likely a welcome relief to the farmer's wife and daughters who had to prepare meals for a hungry crew.

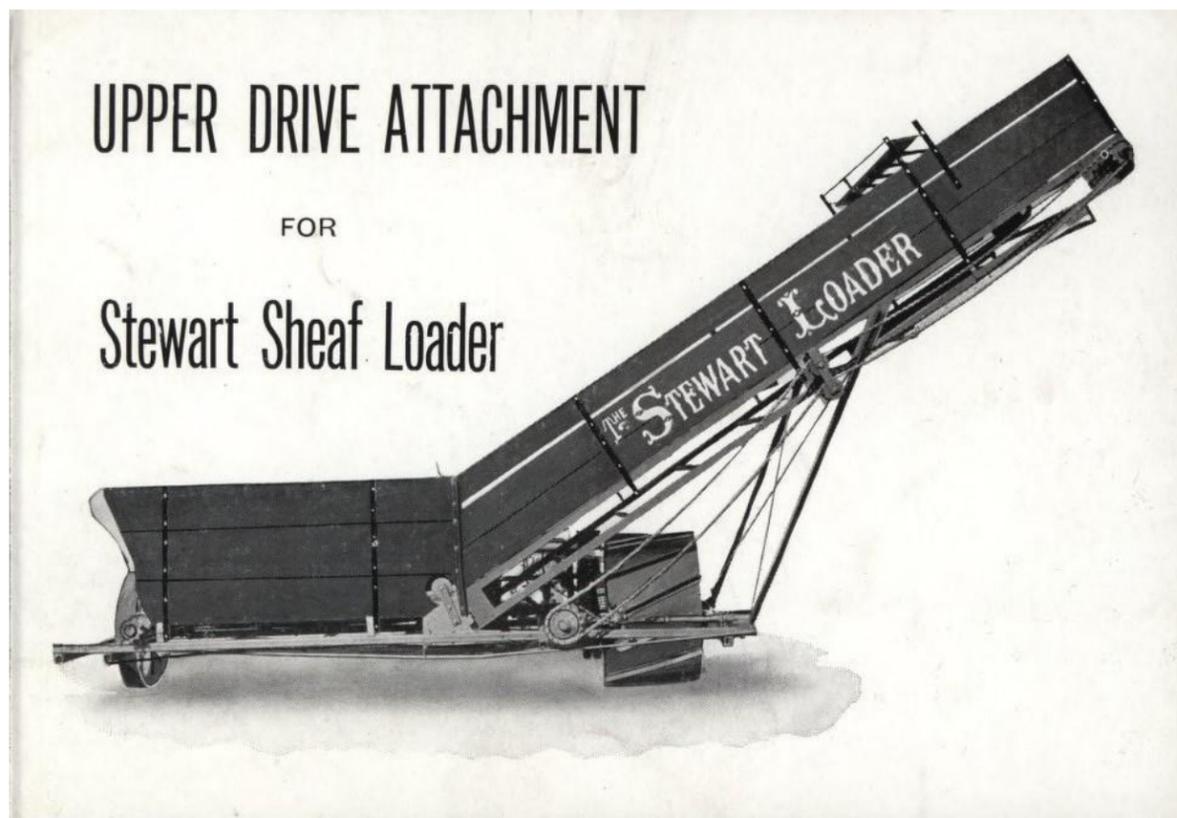
The Stewart Sheaf loader or Harvester was used all over the western prairies and cost about \$400.00 to buy. David A. Stewart took out another patent on improvements to the sheaf loader in Winnipeg in 1912 and John F. Stewart took out a duplicate one in Ontario in 1912. These patents concerned a change in how the elevator was driven. Originally, the elevator's slatted chain was driven by sprockets at the bottom of the elevator on the right side of the machine (when you are standing at the back of the machine). The Stewarts determined that it was better that the slatted chain be powered by sprockets at the top of the elevator as the slatted chain, sheaves and all, was then being pulled to the top of the elevator. The old arrangement saw the chain being pulled all the way around the elevator which required more power and also resulted in slats being broken on the chain for some reason. Testimonials from farmers who converted Stewart Sheaf loaders to the new drive arrangement indicate one less horse was required with the remaining horses remaining in better physical shape through the fall which indicates the remaining horses were not being worked so hard. The problem with broken slats disappeared as well.

A fellow by the name of Nelson Jackson used a Stewart Sheaf Loader on a Neepawa area farm in 1913 and decided he could improve on the machine by combining the rack and sheaf loader into one machine. He moved to Brandon and began manufacturing his machine there. The Jackson Sheaf Loader featured an elevator that directly picked up the sheaves, elevated them and dumped them into a carrier at the back of the machine. When the carrier was full the machine was taken over to the thresher and the sheaf dumped beside the feeder. While these sheaves were being forked into the thresher, the Jackson loader returned to the field for another load of sheaves. The downfall of the Jackson appears to have been the weight of the machine, particularly when loaded with sheaves. Another problem would be breakdowns. With the Stewart if the loader broke down, the farmer could revert to forking sheaves into the sheaf wagons and so limp along until repairs were made. If a Jackson broke down, then everything came to a halt until repairs were made. Sometime around the end of World War One, Jackson moved his company to Saskatoon and resumed manufacturing the loaders there. However business soon dried up and the company pursued other ideas.

The Sheaf Loader was only one of many machines the Stewart family designed and patented over the years. The rights to one of their ideas, a straw cutter on the threshing machine, was later sold to the George White Company which built threshers. David Albert Stewart who operated the Stewart operation in Winnipeg eventually returned to Molesworth and three of the brothers are buried there.

On Sunday July 31, 2016 the Canadian Foodgrains Bank and the Manitoba Agricultural Museum will host Harvesting Hope: a World Record to Help the Hungry. To help end global hunger, over 500 volunteers from 100 communities across Canada will operate 125 early 20th century threshing machines to harvest a 100 acre crop of wheat. When in operation, the equipment will require over four football fields of space. For more information on attending or how to participate please visit <http://www.harvestinghope.ca/> or follow us on twitter @harvesthope2016

The Manitoba Agricultural Museum is open year round and operates a website at <http://ag-museum.mb.ca/> which can provide visitors with information on Museum including location and hours of operation.



An advertising image of upper drive attachment of the Stewart Sheaf Loader.