



Our Old Bookcase, April 13, 2017, Mercer County Inventors; where are they?

---

**Photo caption: Martin O. Ronning, (1894 – 1970) Inventor of Uni System, received the Cyrus Hall McCormick Gold Medal, one of the highest awards of the American Society of Agricultural Engineers.**

### **OUR OLD BOOK CASE**

***By Joyce L. Alig, President, Mercer County Historical Society***

Creative individuals are thinkers and dreamers; they are the ones who come up with the light bulb moment when they invent a product which changes history. Too many times, individuals who create ideas and are leaders in their field are often forgotten by the very individuals who use their inventions or their services to their own economic advantage. Who are inventors? Many school students know that Benjamin Franklin invented the lightning rod in 1752, and they know that Thomas A. Edison invented the phonograph in 1876 and the practical incandescent bulb in 1879. Most adults are aware that Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876, the year of our Nation's Centennial Celebration.

Most farmers know that Cyrus H. McCormick invented the reaper in 1831, and that John Deere introduced the steel plow in 1837. A generation ago, when children were playing spy games, they were using the Morse Code influenced by Samuel F.B. Morse's invention of the practical telegraph in 1832.

Many Mercer Countians give credit to Joseph Oppenheim for inventing the manure spreader; however, Oppenheim made the contribution of placing the paddles at an angle at the back of the spreader, of which idea changed agricultural implements as of 1899. Two decades earlier, Joseph Kemp had filed patents on manure spreaders as early as 1877, and continued with more patents for another three decades. In 1925, John Powell, Kokomo, Indiana invented the first successful mechanical Two-Row P.T.O. Corn Picker and approached New Idea Company about producing it; by 1928 New Idea produced that machine commercially. How many people remember John Powell's name in light of the fact that his invention contributed to the success of the New Idea Company's producing Corn Pickers?

How many farmers know the name of Martin O. Ronning? Ronning's name should rank right up there with Oppenheim and Powell's names, for the inventions which resulted in the jobs of hundreds of New Idea employees this past century.

In the 1920's, Ronning began his successful career with Minneapolis Moline Co., a manufacturer of farm equipment/implements. Ronning gained experience as he was Chief Mechanical Engineer of the MM Co.'s Power Machinery Division from 1934-1956, and Chief Engineer of the Product Research Division from 1956-1960. Ronning invented the Minneapolis Moline Company's "Uni-Farmor System," a tractor on which numerous farm machines could be interchangeable mounted. This line of equipment had been introduced in 1951, through Ronning's efforts. Ronning was granted over 30 patents by the U.S. Patent Office for inventions of farm implement equipment; including Uni-Combines and Corn Pickers.

New Idea Company purchased the patent for the Uni-System power unit from the Minneapolis Moline Company in 1963, and improved its design. In 1965, New Idea revolutionized the small farm industry by marketing the Uni-System power unit, a single power source to which may be attached interchangeable special harvesting implements for a variety of crops.

How many Mercer County Farmers are inventing new agricultural products today? Many farmers have created improvements without filing for any patents. How are county industries, county schools, county offices related to agriculture, and county entrepreneurs working to encourage and support new ideas for agribusiness inventions today? The LIA was initiated to create solutions for Lake Improvement. Is there an Agricultural Inventors and Ideas Association? Has anyone taken the time to seek these Ag Thinkers and Creators and meet with them today? You are always welcome to email me with your suggestions.

*Mercer County Historical Society President Joyce Alig, may be contacted at 3054 Burk-St. Henry Road, Saint Henry, OH 45883, or [histalig@bright.net](mailto:histalig@bright.net) or 419-678-2614.]*