



*James F. Lardner*

# JAMES F. LARDNER

1924–2012

Elected in 1985

*“For a major influence on the advancement of manufacturing technology through both engineering concepts and engineering applications.”*

BY RON LEONARD

The news of JIM LARDNER’s death on December 17, 2012, marked the passing of a talented engineer who left a broad trail of accomplishments during his 88 years of life. From his birth in 1924 until his passing, his life was filled with achievement. His inquisitive mind and cherubic manner magnified his influence in every activity, as he could glibly verbalize his thoughts in crisp, salty language—a skill likely developed during his service in the Navy.

As a bright young student from Moline, Illinois, Jim’s thirst for knowledge propelled him to accept different responsibilities and undertake new, challenging assignments throughout his life. He graduated from Cornell in 1945 as a mechanical engineer via the US Navy V-12 program. Following his military service as an ensign and later lieutenant, he served on ships in both World War II and Korea. At Deere & Co. he distinguished himself by championing and implementing new manufacturing technology during his 44-year career.

He was elected to the NAE in 1985, with a citation for advancing manufacturing technology in concept and application. Outside of Deere & Co., he continued to develop his interest in the industrial application of new manufacturing technology across the spectrum of education, industry, and

governmental agencies. In 1993 he was elected a fellow of the Society of Manufacturing Engineers.

Jim's diverse business experience began at an early stage of his career with Deere & Co. After his return from Navy duty in Korea in 1953 he resumed his work at Deere, concentrating on manufacturing. Deere soon began an expansion of its successful North American agricultural business into countries with a significant need for modern agricultural tractors. Jim's initial major international assignment was to oversee the construction and startup of the company's first Latin American factory, in Monterrey, Mexico, in 1956. Then he was assigned to explore the possibility of starting a tractor factory in Brazil, but because of instability in the Brazilian economy Deere decided against that. Next Jim was asked to move his family to Spain, where Deere had purchased a tractor factory in Getafe, near Madrid. This was his first management assignment that included the responsibility of converting a factory to production of John Deere designed tractors and marketing them in Spain, which was then a restricted market with high import taxes. Within six years tractor production at this factory production tripled the Deere market share in Spain.

Jim returned stateside in 1968 to the Deere & Co. World Headquarters in Moline, Illinois, as director of manufacturing and plant engineering for all of the company's factories and facilities. This position provided a challenge and opportunity to implement modern manufacturing technology in Deere factories that then included agricultural and industrial machines. The work included the largest manufacturing facility expansion undertaken in the history of the company and was completed in 1981 at the Waterloo Works tractor factory. Jim championed the installation of computer-aided design and manufacture at all Deere factories, and in 1980 was elected vice president for manufacturing systems.

From 1982 to 1988 the US agricultural and industrial business was in a severe recession. Deere & Company survived a period of dramatic lower sales and financial losses while some of its North American counterparts went bankrupt or consolidated with others. When Deere needed someone to take on a difficult

new assignment, senior management often turned to Jim. He was appointed vice president of government products and component sales enabling Deere to reach a larger market by selling its manufactured products and components to others, thus helping to stabilize the company during the recession.

In 1986, with the transition to new leadership in the company, Jim was appointed vice president of Deere's North American tractor and component operations. His job was to rationalize the high degree of vertical integration at the company's tractor manufacturing operations worldwide and restructure manufacturing operations for significantly lower production schedules. This responsibility also included the design of worldwide agricultural tractors, which would affect all Deere tractor factories—in the United States, Germany, France, Mexico, Argentina, and Spain. He also reestablished the connection with the company in Brazil that he had visited in his early career and that now manufactures the modern design of John Deere tractors.

The international consolidation for tractors was the greatest challenge of Jim's career with Deere. Since 1961 the company had twice attempted—and failed—to accomplish a worldwide tractor design, which caused significant duplication of parts and higher fixed costs by producing similar designs in different economic regions of the world. Under Jim's direction a new tractor design and restructured manufacturing facilities provided tractors for each power range that were manufactured at one location but supplied to all open markets around the world. The successful rationalization of the diverse manufacturing and engineering design of agricultural tractors was well under way when Jim retired in 1990.

His oversight of design and manufacture of tractors and their components established the foundation for successful growth in sales and profits for Deere from a business that was faltering in 1982–1986. The new designs and rationalized production locations enabled successful growth and profitable sales in major agricultural markets of the world.

Jim's talents were not limited to Deere & Co. He served as a director of Trane Company, American Standard Company,

and Potash Company of Saskatchewan. He was also a member of the advisory committee for the Air Force integrated computer-aided manufacturing (ICAM) program, chair of the industry review board to oversee the product definition data interface of the ICAM program, and, from 1983 to 1985, director of Computer-Aided Manufacturing International, Inc. in Arlington, Texas.

Over his long and distinguished career Jim's sharp, penetrating mind and broad experience in the implementation of new design and manufacturing technology were unmatched. After his retirement from Deere he served on numerous community boards and organizations. During 20 years on the Saint Luke's Hospital Board of Trustees in Davenport, Iowa, he was board chair for four years. He was a trustee of the Putnam Museum of Regional History and Natural Science for 16 years and president of its board from 1989 to 1991. Other community activities included membership in the Rock Island Arsenal Golf Club and the Outing Club. During the challenging years in the startup of manufacture of John Deere tractors in Madrid, Jim was a founding member of the American School of Madrid and served on its board for four years.

Jim was a generous mentor to talented people throughout his lifetime—at Deere, in the many organizations he served, in the community, in his neighborhood, among his friends and within his extended family. He took a sincere interest in helping others navigate professional development choices, and was highly supportive of his mentees' success.

His daughters remember their father as committed to Deere, passionate about manufacturing, and engaged in his community. But he also relished his life. He and his beloved Barbara enjoyed their expatriate assignments, entertaining, traveling, and collecting together. They loved the house they built overlooking the Mississippi River upon their return to the Midwest. Friends still mention their Christmas parties. He always had projects in process at home and counted bird shooting, wood carving, photography, and wildflower gardening among his hobbies. As a father, Jim shared his love of words with his daughters. They recall many poems

memorized and books read aloud together. Jim loved his brothers and their families and spending time with them at home and in the field. His letters to the editor were published even in his last years as he kept up with current events. He enjoyed spending time with his grandchildren as they grew up. Jim loved his wife, his family, his Gordon Setters, his company, his community and his profession. Reflecting back toward the end of his life, he considered himself a happy man.

Jim married Barbara Keepers in Rock Island, Illinois, in 1949. He is survived by daughters Lucy (Jay) Romans, Katy (Kerry) Kearney, and Amy Lardner; grandchildren Annie and Jim Kearney.

Vaya con Dios, Señor Jim.