

Tomorrow's man

By David Brownridge



HE WAS a tinkerer from day one. As a child he rebuilt clocks and watches. As a young man he constructed a propeller-driven snowmobile. In later years he helped revolutionize agriculture.

Jerome Bechard was a man of tomorrow who lived in the present.

He was a husband, a father, a farmer.

"When it was time for seeding or harvest, that's what he did. In all his spare time and during the winter, he was in the shop, night after night," recalled his wife Germaine Bechard.

"He'd come home cold and he'd

have a good cup of coffee, a good lunch and go to bed. One time I could tell by the look on his face he had a little problem. I said, 'Something wrong?' And he said, 'Some little thing.'

"The next morning he looked at me and I said, 'Did you have a good night's sleep?' He said, 'I've got it. I've found it.' I said, 'Good for you honey.' And he went to the shop."

The shop. It's where Jerome, like many farmers, spent a lot of time. Germaine didn't mind. She knew it was his pride and joy.

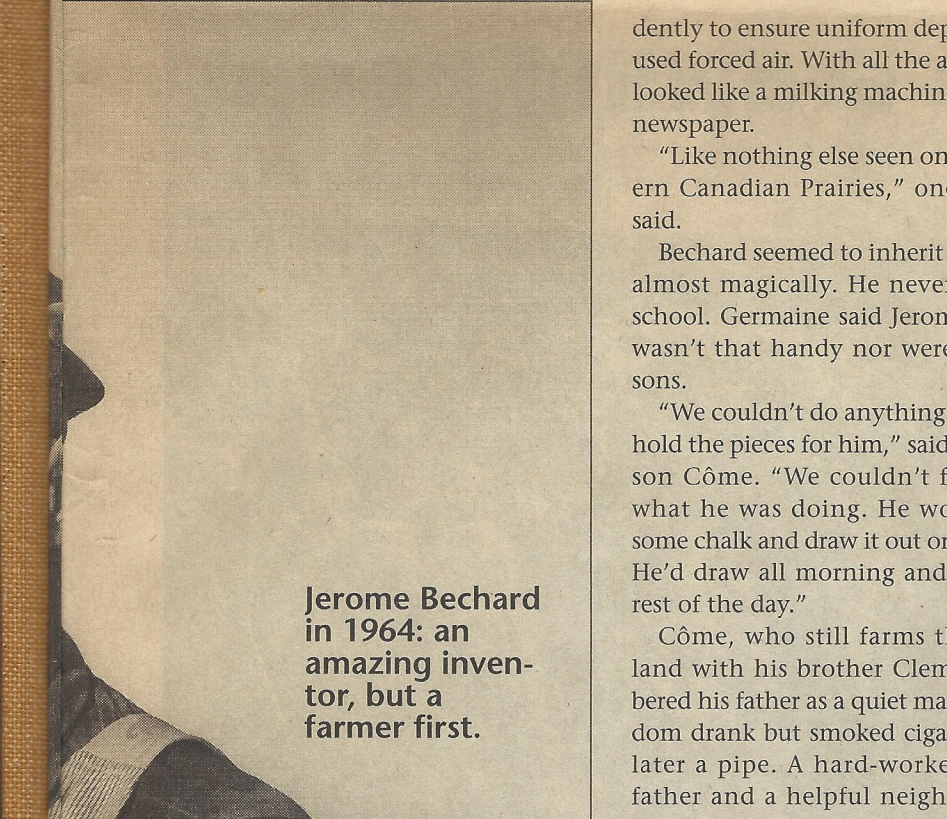
Jerome must have felt much pride in seeing the first Bourgault air-seeder in

1981 carrying the Bechard Seeding System emblem on it, then and even now.

It was his crowning achievement. A metering system he conceived in the 1960s is now standard equipment on air-seeders three decades later. And for that, and his many other inventive contributions, Bechard was inducted into the Saskatchewan Agricultural Hall of Fame in 1997.

Bechard was also active in his church and community and in 1988 received the Air Canada Heart of Gold award.

Bechard, born and raised on a farm near Lajord in south-central Saskatchewan, died in 1991 at the age of 80.



**Jerome Bechard
in 1964: an
amazing inven-
tor, but a
farmer first.**

He farmed the family homestead, which eventually grew to a six-section grain farm, seeding and combining until he was 75.

The Bechards, including three sons and a daughter, were a typical rural family in most respects. All except one son, Jerome. He put dual wheels on a tractor. He used rubber tires on tillage machinery, a leveling hitch on a cultivator and a drill fill with distribution augers on his grain truck.

He experimented with cultivator seeding. His tenth prototype in 1969 was 32 feet long and had 32 seed boots in three units that moved indepen-

dently to ensure uniform depth. And it used forced air. With all the air hoses, it looked like a milking machine, said one newspaper.

"Like nothing else seen on the Western Canadian Prairies," one reporter said.

Bechard seemed to inherit his genius almost magically. He never finished school. Germaine said Jerome's father wasn't that handy nor were Jerome's sons.

"We couldn't do anything right, just hold the pieces for him," said Bechard's son Côme. "We couldn't figure out what he was doing. He would have some chalk and draw it out on the floor. He'd draw all morning and work the rest of the day."

Côme, who still farms the family land with his brother Clem, remembered his father as a quiet man who seldom drank but smoked cigarettes and later a pipe. A hard-worker, a good father and a helpful neighbor — an accommodating person overall.

It started with the curious coming to visit the Bechard farm. Then it was the curious and conniving. With all these incredible inventions around, implement manufacturers thought they had struck gold.

"They'd come and they'd take all his ideas and go away with them, that's why all these companies have got all these things," Germaine said.

"I didn't like that but then he was so good to everybody, it didn't matter who came. He'd just take them in and let them see everything."

Côme remembered it clearly. "It was just all a big game in those days. They were always over here, they'd steal your ideas and give you nothing. But Dad would never give anyone trouble."

Bechard did patent and sell a number of his ideas but often the company would fold or just kick him out, Côme said. Bourgault was one of the good companies and the Bechards did collect royalties for 17 years.

"Unfortunately, back in the early days it was the oddball guy who had an air-seeder and now it's the oddball who doesn't have one," Côme said.

The Bechards never got rich, but they lived comfortably in the home Jerome invented.

"One night we woke up with snow on the blankets, and in 1960 he said to my mother he was going to build her a new house where she'd never feel the wind," Côme recalled.

Cool in the summer and warm in the winter, it was obvious what was needed: a home in a hill. Buried almost completely except for front and back patio doors, the 133-foot concrete structure had a large charcoal pit for heating, cooling and air purification, electric curtains, and a plug-in on top of the chimney for mowing the roof.

Larry Schneider, president of PIMA (Prairie Implement Manufacturer's Association), visited the house several times in the mid-'60s and admitted being amazed by Bechard.

"He wasn't arrogant at all, but neither was he an introvert. Just an average type of guy capable of being a few years ahead of his time."

Schneider said implement manufacturers owe a debt of gratitude to the many farmer inventors.

"They had an immense resource of imagination [and] resolved a lot of R and D problems [manufacturers] could have had."

As for manufacturers stealing ideas, Schneider said there is little doubt it exists now as it did then but he added it is not common practice.

Even when the manufacturers weren't visiting, the Bechards still had to contend with the bus tours from France and Germany, visits from government officials, government ministers, even premiers. Even the agriculture minister of Russia came.

Ten guest books are filled with the 3,000 signatures of visitors to the Bechard farm.

Germaine is glad it's all over. There are no more tours, and she lives in the house Jerome built only during the summer. Even the media have largely left her alone, she said.

She looks back fondly on her life with Jerome, a wonderful husband. "We got along really well. Nowadays, nobody gets along, but we did.

"Oh, even if he was out a lot of the time in the winter, which he could've spent with me, it was his joy and pride. And that's what he liked and that was okay." &

Canadian Government photo

Bechard: Revolutionary farmer

By DAVID BROWNRIDGE
for The Leader-Post

SWIFT CURRENT — As a child, he rebuilt clocks and watches. As a young man he constructed a propellered snowmobile. In later years, he helped revolutionize agriculture.

Jerome Bechard was recently inducted into the Saskatchewan Agriculture Hall of Fame in memory of his inventive legacy.

Born and raised on a farm near Lajord, about 36 kilometres southeast of Regina, Bechard died in 1991 at the age

Frontline

TODAY: Jerome Bechard was an inventor who was ahead of his time when it came to agricultural innovations.

of 80. He was a man of tomorrow who lived in the present, a tinkerer turned inventor.

“When it was time for seeding or harvest, that’s what he did. But in all his spare time and during the winter, he was in the shop, night after night,” recalls his wife Germaine. “He’d come home cold and he’d have a good cup of coffee, a good lunch and go to bed.

“One time I could tell by the look on his face he had a little problem. I said, ‘Something wrong?’ And he said, ‘Some little thing,’” she recalls.

Please see Frontline/A2

“The next morning he looked at me and I said, ‘Did you have a good night’s sleep?’ He said, ‘I’ve got it. I’ve found it.’ I said, ‘Good for you honey.’”

And then he would go to the shop.

The shop — it’s where Bechard spent an extraordinary amount of time, Germaine didn’t mind. She knew it was his pride and joy.

And what pride, what joy, Jerome must have felt when he saw the first Bourgault air-seeder in 1981 carrying the Bechard Seeding System, his emblem right on it, then and even now.

It was his crowning achievement: a metering system he conceived in the ‘60s is now standard equipment on air-seeders three decades later.

Bechard farmed six sections until age 75. His family, including three sons and a daughter, were a typical rural family in most respects. All except Jerome.

He put dual wheels on a tractor. He used rubber tires on tillage machinery, a leveling hitch on a cultivator, a drill-fill with distribution augers on his grain truck. He experimented with cultivator seeding. His 10th prototype in 1969 was 32 feet and had 32 seed boots in three

units which moved independently to ensure uniform depth. And it used compressed air.

And, because of all the air hoses, it looked like a milking machine, said one newspaper. “Like nothing else seen on the Western Canadian Prairies,” one reporter said.

Come, who still farms the family land, recalls his father as a quiet man who seldom drank, but smoked cigarettes then later a pipe. A hard-worker, good father, helpful neighbor, an accommodating person overall.

And that’s when rural life went from not so typical to completely different.

First it was the curious who came to visit. Then it was the curious and conniving. With all these incredible inventions laying around loose, implement manufacturers thought they’d struck gold.

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them see everything.”

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So the Bechards never got rich, but they lived comfortably in the home Jerome invented.

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Larry Schneider, president of the Prairie Implement Manufacturer’s Association (PIMA), is certain implement manufacturers owe a debt of gratitude to the many farmer inventors.