

Foreword

The Honorable Doug Burgum

Former Governor of North Dakota (2016-24)

Entrepreneur & Lifelong North Dakotan

Growing up in North Dakota, you don't have to look far to find stories of people who saw possibility where others saw barriers—people who believed that with enough ingenuity, hard work and neighbor-to-neighbor trust, you could build something that changed the world. Long before I led Great Plains Software or stepped into public service, those were the stories that shaped my understanding of what's possible.

Few families embody that spirit more than the Melroes, the Dahls and the remarkable innovators behind Bobcat and Steiger. Their work didn't just create machines; it created momentum—economic, cultural and generational. Bobcat grew into a globally recognized brand—one tough animal—synonymous with durability, versatility and the kind of practical innovation that starts on the prairie and ends up reshaping industries around the world. Together, these companies helped define what it means to build in North Dakota: Start with a problem, gather a team of people who care deeply and keep iterating until you've built something that works better, lasts longer and helps more people than anyone thought possible.

My journey with Bobcat and Steiger is personal. Growing up working at our family elevator business, I first had the joy of operating a Bobcat loader in high school. We were moving dry pelleted fertilizer in bulk late into the evening after spring track practice. The speed, power and productivity increase versus hard shoveling was incredible. The agility and precision of movement in tight warehouses was exhilarating. The Steiger plant tour was a highlight for many in the business and industrial engineering classes in college at NDSU. Like most small-town North Dakotans, “class B” kids, this was the first, large-scale manufacturing plant I had ever experienced. It was eye-opening and mind-expanding.

Later, as my career in building software companies took me around the country and world, I would beam with North Dakota pride seeing and taking pictures of Bobcats from Manhattan to Moscow and nearly every place in between.

After Great Plains went public, I was asked the classic question by a Wall Street analyst if I was going to buy a sports car. I replied, “No, but I am going to buy a Bobcat!” Thus began my 30 years and counting as a Bobcat customer.

Later in life, North Dakota's now former First Lady Kathryn Helgaas Burgum worked for Bobcat as one of the initial market managers for the launch of the innovative side-by-side Bobcat, the Toolcat. Last year while in my current role, I sprinted across the South Lawn to get my picture taken with one of our great National Park team members who was working with a Toolcat at the White House.

Howard Dahl coauthors this book not as an observer, but as a son, a steward and a fellow entrepreneur who has spent his life carrying forward the same values that animated his father and uncles. And he tells it alongside the stories of others whose leadership and grit shaped this era—entrepreneurs and innovators, like Ron Offutt, Barry Batcheller, Ron Bergan and others whose names appear throughout these pages. Their collective contributions remind us that progress is never the work of one person or one family. It is the product of teams, mentors, risk-takers, early believers, families and communities that rally around an idea and refuse to let it fade.

This book captures that history with clarity, honesty and heart. It reminds us that world-changing ideas don't require perfect conditions. They require courage; they require persistence. And they require leaders who are willing to take risks, overcome their self-doubt, stand strong in the face of their critics, learn from failure and keep moving forward.

The skid-steer loader and four-wheel-drive tractor revolutionized agriculture and construction, but their deeper legacy is the mindset they represent: The best solutions often come from people who are closest to the work, who listen deeply and who never stop tinkering. That curiosity-driven mindset continues to shape North Dakota today—from our farms and factories to our startups and research labs.

Howard's telling of this history is a gift. It preserves the lessons of a generation of builders whose impact continues to ripple across the country and around the world. And it offers inspiration for the next generation of innovators—those who will write the next chapter of American ingenuity from rural places that many still discount and underestimate.

As someone who has spent his life at the intersection of innovation, entrepreneurship and public service, I am grateful for this book and for the legacy it honors. The story of Melroe, Bobcat and Steiger and others is a reminder of what can happen when people believe in possibility, invest in one another and commit to building things that matter. It reflects the very best of America—our capacity to dream boldly, work tirelessly and never quit on an idea worth pursuing.

I invite you to read these pages with curiosity and pride. They tell a story that belongs not only to one family or one company, but to everyone who believes in the power of ideas—and in the extraordinary potential of the people of North Dakota to inspire our nation and the world.

Disclaimer: Mr. Burgum, a lifelong North Dakotan, has served as an entrepreneur, Governor of the State of North Dakota and the 55th Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior. The views expressed here are his own and do not represent the views of the department or the U.S. government.