

Introduction

Howard A. Dahl

I was having lunch with my father, brother and two of my mother's brothers, Cliff and Irv Melroe, in early 2000 when one of them said, "The story of the Bobcat loader has never been told properly." That thought lingered in my mind for years and became a recurring call to action.

What finally triggered the decision to proceed with this book was the realization that there was also an important story that needed to be told about the roots of agricultural innovation in our region. This story leads to and includes the history of the Bobcat loader and also the history of the Steiger tractor. Steiger is the other prominent name that invariably emerges when anyone talks or writes about the immense amount of agricultural innovation in the Fargo area that has taken place over the last century—and is now accelerating.

While most people today readily recognize the names "Bobcat" and "Steiger," far fewer know the name "Melroe." It was the company that first manufactured the Bobcat loader, and the Melroe name was borne by the hundreds of thousands of Bobcat loaders produced from 1961 to 2000 when Ingersoll Rand, which acquired the brand five years earlier, removed "Melroe" from the loaders and changed the company's name to the Bobcat Company.

Although the Melroe name has faded from memory, E.G. Melroe's inventions and the company he founded have had a profound and lasting impact on our region. E.G. was my maternal grandfather. In 1947, he established the Melroe Manufacturing Company, which later dropped "Manufacturing" from its moniker. After E.G.'s untimely passing in 1955, his four sons (Les, Cliff, Irv and Roger), along with his son-in-law (Eugene "Gene" Dahl, my father), took over and grew the company. The Melroe Company's Bobcat loader is North Dakota's signature to the world in that there are Bobcat loaders found in every country around the globe.

After the Melroe family sold the company in 1969, my Uncle Les Melroe acquired majority control of the Steiger Tractor Company. The following year, my father made a major investment and came on board to run the company as it pioneered the high-powered, four-wheel-drive (4WD) tractor industry.

At TEDx Fargo in 2018, Barry Batcheller—my father's favorite engineer at Steiger and my long-term friend—spoke "about a region in this nation that is developing technologies that are so profound that their implementation will

change the course of humankind. Now you may think that I'm talking about Silicon Valley, but I'm not." Instead, Barry referred to the Fargo region, which he said had developed so many similarities that it might become the Silicon Valley of agricultural technology.

Six years later, Barry spoke at an "Ag Innovation Corridor" event at North Dakota State University (NDSU) in which he drew a straight line from the Bobcat loader (the Melroe Company) through Steiger Tractor and the companies Barry founded in Fargo (Phoenix International and Appareo Systems, LLC, which were acquired by Deere and AGCO, respectively) to Grand Farm, asserting that "we are doing the exact same things as the founders of Silicon Valley, although we just don't notice it."

Barry could only have proposed such a seemingly outrageous claim because of the legacy initiated by E.G. Melroe. This legacy must be understood to comprehend what's happening in the Fargo area today.

As chronicled in Chapter Twenty-Six, dozens of companies were founded here to service the building of Bobcat loaders and Steiger tractors, and many more companies were founded and prospered as the Ag-equipment and research-and-development (R&D) ecosystem grew in the Fargo region. Major equipment manufacturers acquired both companies and continue to operate in the area. The Bobcat Company is currently owned by the Doosan Corporation, and Steiger Tractor was acquired by CNH Global N.V., one of the world's largest farm machinery manufacturers. The other two top equipment builders, Deere and AGCO, also have a strong manufacturing presence here.

Fargo is home to the world's largest Deere dealer, RDO Equipment Co., and another of Deere's largest dealers, Brandt Holdings. Fargo is also home to the largest retailer of CNH equipment, Titan Machinery. The second largest AGCO retailer, Butler Machinery, is headquartered in Fargo. In addition to manufacturing and retailing, many other companies have emerged to create a robust infrastructure for agricultural innovation.

What started in E.G.'s barn in Gwinner, North Dakota (about 86 miles southwest of Fargo), evolved into a family tree of invention and manufacturing that eventually blossomed into the vibrant innovation forest flourishing in the Fargo area today.

If E.G. Melroe had never been born, would this plethora of agricultural development and growth have occurred? Yes, of course, but not likely here. Fargo was not a natural powerhouse of agrarian invention, innovation and manufacturing. Although the region's rich soil made the Red River Valley a highly productive farming area, there was no dependable, navigable waterway, nor was there any major urban center in the region.

However, the story of E.G.'s inventions and the company he founded is anything but an easy, smooth tale of success. Many times, all seemed lost—but for indomitable perseverance. This story of never-quitters repeated throughout E.G.'s endeavors, throughout my father's involvement in Steiger Tractor and throughout the struggles my brother, Brian, and I endured establishing Concord, Inc. Without the never-quitter ethos, none of these companies had a prayer of succeeding.

Please note that the stories of the Melroe Company and Steiger Tractor

are not intended to be comprehensive histories but, instead, chronicles and reflections based on the personal experiences of my father, my brother, me and several key individuals who were interviewed at length. I apologize for leaving out so many people who helped make the companies so successful.

For additional details, please consult books by Lee Klancher, Peter D. Simpson, Martin Padgett and others.

When I began working on this book, I had no intention of referencing my private journals. However, I believe some entries from Concord's critical period—October 1987 to the end of 1989—shed considerable light on both my personal struggles with Concord's seemingly impossible challenges and the challenges every executive faces in running a business according to Christian principles.

This generational story, dedicated to those who never quit, I feel compelled to tell.