

## **100 Bushel Club pushed corn yields in the 1950s**

In this age of genetically modified crops, once unimaginable corn yields topping 200-plus bushels per acre are now becoming the norm.

But it wasn't so long ago—as late as the mid-20th century—that 100 bushels of corn an acre, half of today's average yield, was considered a noteworthy achievement.

The first 100-bushel-per-acre yield in McLean County, accomplished on the Mecherle farm east of Bloomington, dates to 1931. By the early 1950s, the 100-bushel barrier was still a formidable one for area corn growers. But the ever-greater application of commercial fertilizers—nitrogen, phosphate and potash—would soon usher in an era of explosive growth in corn yields.

It was with an eye on boosting yields that Farm Adviser Eugene Mosbacher organized the McLean County 100 Bushel Corn Club in early 1952.

The club was not predicated on competition, noted Mosbacher, who served as farm adviser for the McLean County Farm Bureau from 1947 until 1983. “It’s an educational program and not a contest,” he explained. Instead, the club aimed to grab attention and newspaper headlines—100 bushels per acre, wow!—all in order “to increase interest in better corn yields, to learn methods of achieving high production and to keep abreast of the latest findings in good crop management.” In other words, Mosbacher urged local farmers to first test in the field what worked and what didn't work, and then report back to the club so other corn growers could learn from both their successes and failures.

There was no membership fee to join the club, and no expectation that one had to reach or surpass the 100-bushel plateau. Instead, Mosbacher required members to keep detailed records, including field maps, notes on crop history, soil treatment reports “and all details believed to be of help in producing more corn per acre.” Farmers that reached the 100-bushel threshold (averaged over the entire farm, not just the most productive field or plot) then received special recognition at an annual wintertime banquet

In the post-World War II era munitions factories were converted to the peacetime manufacture of fertilizers (nitrogen was a key component in high explosives). Emerging agribusiness giants then aggressively marketed the heavy use of commercial fertilizers as the savior of the American farmer. This was part of the rapid postwar industrialization of the Corn Belt that included the full embrace of the machine age and an ever-greater reliance on tractors, corn pickers, combines and the like.

Farmers were also turning to “miracle” pesticides such as DDT that proved effective against the corn borer, a pesky nemesis of Central Illinois farmers. Yet DDT proved so destructive to the natural world, especially birds, that the federal government banned its use in the early 1970s.

Improved yields were the easiest way farmers could offset steep increases in production costs resulting from the purchase of expensive new farm machinery and commercial inputs ranging from fertilizers to pesticides.

To his credit, Mosbacher stressed soil fertility by asking farmers the question, “Are you putting back what you are taking out?” Although he embraced modern commercial and industrial agriculture, he also recognized the storehouse of knowledge carried by several generations of Central Illinois Corn Belt farmers. “The only thing wrong with manure is there isn’t enough of it,” went a typical Mosbacher observation, this one made at a March 1953 meeting of the 100 bushel club.

“Slapping on the fertilizer is not enough to assure good yields,” he said at another club gathering two years later. “It must be applied as needed. And there are other details to attend to, such as ‘stand’ [the number and condition of corn plants in the field], soil texture, moisture, insect and weed control, [and] planting time.”

Yet the prevailing ethos in the 1950s was to boost yields quickly with commercial fertilizers.

The 100 Bushel Corn Club of McLean County held its first banquet on Feb. 4, 1953, with George W. Scarseth, director of the American Farm Research Association, as the guest speaker. The Bloomington Association of Commerce (today the McLean County Chamber of Commerce) cosponsored the event and presented engraved certificates to the top-yielding farmers.

In the club’s first year, nine farmers reached the 100-bushel mark, with five others coming close enough to receive special recognition. Interestingly, six of the nine “100-bushel” certificate recipients were tenant farmers, clear evidence that this area has always had a relatively high rate of farm tenancy.

Only two club members, both tenant farmers, reached the 100-bushel goal in the second year, 1953, though twelve others came close. Newell Henderson brought in 103½ bushels per acre on a farm near Stanford, while Merle Keuhling reached a 102-bushel average on a farm outside of Arrowsmith (see accompanying photograph). Henderson applied 100 pounds of nitrogen per acre, 300 to 500 pounds of phosphate and 100 to 200 pounds of potash. He also added another 100 pounds of mixed fertilizer at planting time “to give the crop a good start.”

Glenn Klinger, operator of the farm at the Illinois Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Children’s School, was one of five corn growers to reach 100 or more bushels per acre in 1954 (the collections of the McLean County Museum of History include Klinger’s 100 Bushel Corn Club certificate). That year, the 63 club members averaged 80 bushels an acre in their combined 6,805 acres, which was well above the county wide average of 59 bushels.

The club then eased conditions to earn 100-bushel certificates for the 1955 season. Instead of averaging the yield from all corn acreage on a farm, corn growers could aim to reach the mark on identified 10-, 20-, or 40-acre plots alone.

In a way, the 100 Bushel Corn Club was a victim of its own success. By the late 1950s the club had become inactive as high-yield practices among area farmers became near-universal. In 1962, McLean County's average corn yield per acre topped 100 bushels for the first time.

Today, such an achievement seems quaint. In late August of this year, Soy Capital Ag Services predicted the 2016 McLean County corn crop would come in at a record 219 bushels an acre, besting the previous mark of 217 bushels from two years ago. Last year's yield was 199 bushels per acre.

Back on March 1, 1955, Dr. M.B. Russell, chief agronomist at the University of Illinois, was the guest speaker before a meeting of Mosbacher's corn club. "The 100 bushel yields you seek today will someday be commonplace," he told the 200 or so McLean County farmers in attendance.

Eugene Mosbacher knew that day was coming. His experience with the McLean County 100 Bushel Corn Club told him so. But 200 bushels an acre? In the mid-1950s, that seemed unlikely, even to the most forward-thinking agricultural researchers, educators and leaders.

Many longtime area residents will remember Mosbacher's daily farm program on WJBC radio, which aired for 35 years. He passed away in 2002 at the age of 83.