

Conservation Is Survival To Berks Co. Dairyman

BY JACK HUBLEY

ROBESONIA — When Lester and Harriett Gelsinger bought their 166-acre Berks County farm in 1950 their ultimate goal was to hand the place over to their children in better condition than it was when they bought it.

"This was the eyesore of the community," says Gelsinger, recalling the 20-foot-wide fencerows that zig-zagged aimlessly across the fields and the big patch of sky where the barn roof was supposed to be.

Because chainsaws were even less common than the money it took to buy them in the 1950s, Lester attacked the fencerows with handsaws and began contour plowing and strip cropping in an era when soil and water con-

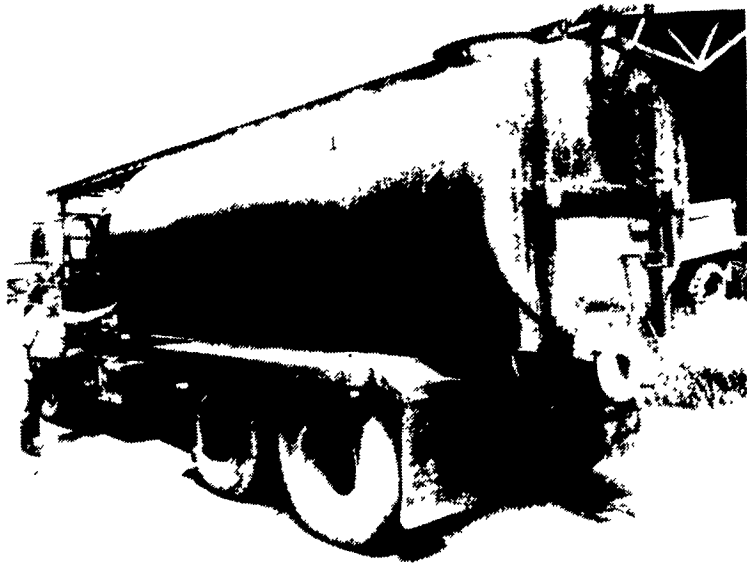
servation was still a revolutionary idea. Even in those early years Gelsinger realized that farming successfully in Berks County's hill country north of Robesonia means keeping the soil in place. "If you have erosion, you're losing your farm," he emphasizes.

Instead of losing his farm, Lester Gelsinger added to it. Starting with 166 acres and 13 cows nearly 30 years ago, he now owns 400 acres, rents another 500 and runs his crops through his 110-cow dairy herd. If conservation doesn't pay, it can't be proven by Lester Gelsinger's track record.

In recognition of his stewardship efforts Gelsinger was named Berks County's Outstanding Conservation Farmer last year, and this year the National En-



Knee-deep in no-till alfalfa, Lester Gelsinger believes that soil and water conservation have played a key role in the success of his Berks County dairy farm.



Combining a Diamond Reo cement mixer chassis with a pull-type manure tank, Harold built this tank truck that moves dairy manure from a 170,000-gallon storage structure to fields.

dowment for Soil and Water Conservation chose him to be Pennsylvania's representative in the annual National Conservation Farmer-Rancher Awards program sponsored by the DuPont Company. The award recognizes farmers for distinguished accomplishments in the area of soil and water conservation. Within the next several months 10 finalists will be picked from the state nominees, and of these, three will receive \$1000 cash awards.

The Gelsinger operation has long since outgrown Lester's and Harriett's ability to cover all bases. Their son Ernest, a Penn State graduate with a degree in dairy nutrition, takes care of the dairy herd, and son Harold ser-

VICES, rebuilds or builds nearly every piece of equipment that sees duty on the farm. Ernest and Harold, along with their brother Michael and Lester's grandson Keith, all pitch in when it's time for field work.

Although Gelsinger's conservation practices date back to the 50s, (he won his county's contour plowing contest in 1958), he points out that it was the equipment advancements of later years that allowed him to coax the full potential from his land. In the late 1960s he bought a John Deere sidehill combine that gave him the ability to harvest no-till corn on the steeper, more remote parts of his farm.

But his no-till program really

gained momentum about five years ago when he bought his 17-foot Tye no-till drill. "The cover crop is the main thing," says Gelsinger, adding that he tries not to let land lie idle over the winter. This year's corn crop was planted into rye at the boot stage when it was about three feet high.

Since the Gelsingers have no need for the rye, they kill it with paraquat, leaving all the organic matter to be recycled. "It keeps the soil soft," observes the dairyman. The family also no-tills soybeans, double cropping them into barley stubble.

Even though most of the corn, alfalfa, wheat, barley and soybeans are no-tilled, applying

(Turn to Page A26)



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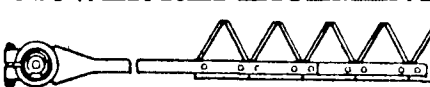
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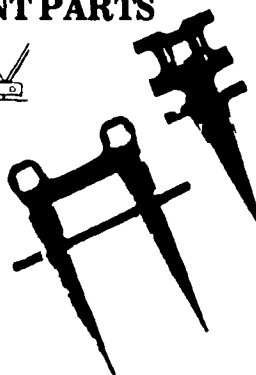
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