

By Dave Wilkins



Dr. Jack McPhedran and his trademark pipe.

The veterinary visionary.

Dr. Jack McPhedran.

A man with dreams, with vision and the tenacity to get a job done and done right summarizes the spirit and work ethic of Jack Alexander McPhedran. Through his unflagging efforts and stewardship he transformed his dreams into reality and in so doing enhanced the viability and profitability of animal agriculture in post-war Manitoba.

Jack was born in Stonewall, MB, in 1924 and has had a deep-seated love for animals since he was a young boy. His dad built a barn on the edge of Stonewall and kept four Jersey cows. One of Jack's chores was to milk and feed them. "While the other kids were playing baseball, I was milking cows and thought I was being very hard done by," he says. But Jack quickly adds that he didn't complain very much because he enjoyed working with animals.

His father bought two riding horses from a cousin in Saskatchewan and Jack trained them to the harness and saddle, and fed, cared for and rode them. "We traded two Jersey cows for the horses." Who got the best deal? "We did," he said with a smile.

Jack loved to ride the horses (Amber and Dixie), but he says, "We lived just a half mile from school so I didn't take the horses to school. I wasn't getting much use of the ponies so in one grade I started leaving school and riding the horses for an hour and then returned to school."

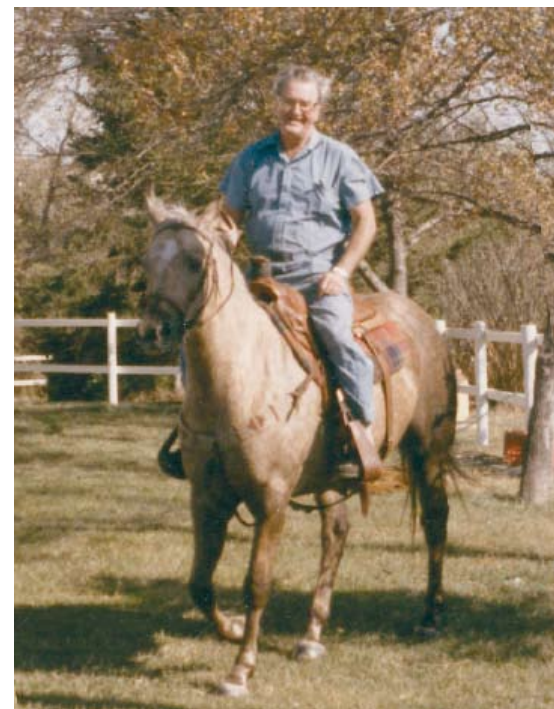
He remembers that caring for the horses and cows was one of the main reasons he became a vet. A major impetus in his career choice was the local vet in Stonewall who tended to the cows. "I would get in his way, thinking I was helping," Jack says. "He kept telling my dad he should encourage me to be a vet." Jack was about 12 years-old at the time and it's from that early age his career path was set.

World War II posed an obstacle for a few years and Jack saw service in the Royal Canadian Air Force. On his return he applied and was accepted as a veteran at the Ontario Veterinary College in Guelph, ON, graduating in 1950 with some of the highest marks in his class.

After four years as an apprentice at the Stonewall vet practice, Jack established a private vet practice in Neepawa. His love for farm animals was reflected in how he ran his practice. "If I had two calls, one for large animals and one for small (now called companion) animals," he says, "I'd make the large animal call first."

If you live in rural Manitoba and have a local veterinary clinic available, it may be thanks to the vision and effort of Dr. Jack McPhedran.

Always happy to be with horses.



In 1967, Jack signed on as the District Veterinarian for the Canadian Department of Agriculture* and two years later joined the Manitoba Department of Agriculture** as Director of the Veterinary Services Branch where he remained for 22 years until his retirement.

As Director, Jack was charged with providing Manitoba livestock producers with good quality, accessible and affordable veterinary services. He relished the challenge and it fit perfectly with his life-long motto of achieving "The art of the possible."

Once appointed, Director Jack wasted no time in turning his dreams into reality by establishing projects and policies that strengthened the diagnostic and veterinary services to animal agriculture. His list of achievements are extensive and include the building of a new veterinary lab in Winnipeg, establishing new provincial Veterinary Service Districts with a veterinary hospital or clinic in each district, a veterinary drug centre providing discounted animal drugs, a summer vet student employment program and various government policies and regulations to improve animal agriculture.

One of Jack's favourite projects was the successful rehabilitation of the imported Irish Bred thoroughbred stallion "Best of Five", who was retired from racing after sustaining an injury at Belmont Park.

Best of Five then began his second career as a breeding stallion. Many Manitoba race fans will recognize his lineage in thoroughbreds who have been winners at Assiniboia Downs.

This picture depicts Jack trying to restrain a feisty "Best of Five" who in his mid-twenties was still intent on covering a mare.

Jack's daughters always felt that Best of Five and their dad both possessed the "never give up" attitude which made them kindred spirits.

* became Agriculture Canada and now Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada

**became Manitoba Agriculture and now Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives

However, many feel Jack's greatest achievement for animal agriculture was the introduction of the veterinary service districts and veterinary clinics in every major livestock community.

As a practising vet, Jack knew only too well that Manitoba suffered from "a tremendous shortage of vets" and the demand for their services was very high. Frustrating working conditions in the field, including long hours on the road, inadequate facilities, and an unsatisfactory family life with inadequate income were the main reasons why vet numbers were low. The shortage led some producers to seek advice from those who were not trained vets, resulting in improper animal treatments.

One of Jack's dreams since his days as a practicing vet was to find a way to attract more vets to the province. His solution to the problem came from a simple realization. In the medical profession, you couldn't get a medical doctor unless you built a hospital. So he decided vet clinics needed to be built throughout the province to attract vets. The clinics would greatly improve working conditions for the vets and give them a better chance of a good family life. Large animals could be brought to the clinics for

examination, eliminating many of the long drives and most of the poor working conditions. And living quarters could be established in the clinics for the vets and their families.

However, the biggest hurdle to achieving his dream was that clinic construction and operating costs were too high for vets to bear. He speculated if the provincial, federal and municipal governments could be persuaded to cover the initial setup and on-going operating costs of the clinics, the veterinary dream could become reality.

Then he caught a lucky break. The Manitoba government acquired the ownership of a series of "married quarters" (one-level, two- to three-bedroom duplexes) located on an abandoned wartime airstrip. The obsolete buildings were made available free of charge to the public and government. Jack made a proposal to then Agriculture Minister Sam Uskiw (NDP) to use the buildings. The buildings would be renovated to create vet clinics and placed in the new veterinary districts. His proposal was approved. "Without the Minister's support, I wouldn't have been able to go two inches," Jack says.

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To aid in the fleshing out of his plan, he sent notices to all vets in Manitoba requesting their input. Jack encouraged municipalities to establish a Veterinary Service Board in each district to govern the clinic and to provide communication between the municipal councils, taxpayers and the vets.

Each district and its clinic were established only if requested or approved by the appropriate municipalities, with an average of five municipalities funding a clinic.

A budget was developed for each clinic. Capital costs were shared by the province and the federal governments while one-half of the operating costs was covered by the municipalities. The province also matched the municipal spending up to \$5,000 per year, making the basic operating grant \$10,000 per year. Jack commented, "That was a lot of money in those days."

Jack organized two meetings – at Johnny Wang's Cafe in Stonewall and another in Carman – to discuss the program and possible improvements. The discussions were fairly heated. "I wondered if I would get out alive,"

Jack recalls. Producers had several objections, including having to drive their animals to the clinics. To alleviate the concern, the distance between clinics was set so that producers had to drive less than hour, and vets would still make emergency and other farm calls.

Some private vets objected to the clinics. "However, because the proposed fee schedules were higher than most vets were charging, opposition died away," says Murray Esler, owner of E&M Veterinary Consultants, a large animal practice in Winnipeg. Murray was a practicing vet at the time Jack was setting up the clinics.

"Jack was very smart," Murray says. "He built the first clinics in the best livestock areas of the province where he knew they would be successful, which helped him get the other clinics off the ground."

However, a stumbling block was that most producers were suspicious of government interference. Jack commented, "There was tremendous resistance to the idea of government control of vet clinics." But with clinics just minutes away from producers' farms and standardized fees for vet services and drugs, objections to government involvement gradually faded. "Actually, looking back, I got

away with a heck of a lot." He smiled. "The clinics enjoyed and still enjoy tremendous producer support."

To keep government onside, Jack made a point of getting Sam Uskiw, Minister of Agriculture, out to look at the buildings once in place. "We flew him around a bit," Jack says. "However, one time in the remote north the plane got stuck in a snow bank taxiing from the airport. It's not so easy to push a plane, but the Minister was willing to help."

Jack crashed three planes over the years while spraying his crops, says Murray with a chuckle. "Jack was as tough as nails. He was at a meeting in the Interlake when his bowel suddenly ruptured. He calmly asked to be excused and then drove to a hospital in Winnipeg."

While Jack was setting up the clinics, he put on his recruiter's hat and set about encouraging vets to sign on. He made trips overseas and often came back with one or more vets in tow. "We didn't finish setting up a clinic until we had a vet ready to go in," Jack says.

While Irish vets were his best recruits, he also pulled in vets from other countries although language was a bit of a problem for some who spoke little English. When a new

Jack and Mabel McPhedran raised three daughters (Marilou, Betty Ann and Ede Mae). You may have met Betty Ann McPhedran in her career as an Equine Canada coach, judge and evaluator in Manitoba.

Betty Ann recalls, "On my fifth birthday, I opened the door that lead down a flight of stairs into the car garage. Standing tied to the support beam was a black and white Shetland pony gelding named Billy! The most beautiful wonderful pony in the whole wide world! I used to mount him by walking up to him, sitting on his lowered head, waiting for him to raise his head up and then crawling down his neck to his back and swinging around on my belly to sit facing the front. He was an amazing pony!

We had a family friend, Leigh McDougall, who owned a "castle" at the top of the hill leading into Neepawa. She let us build our small barn, corral and pasture on the property down the hill from her "castle". At the bottom of that hill,

there were houses being built. When Dad brought home a wild 6 month old Hackney/Arab cross mare I named Lady Bird, I learned to ride her by being led through the partially built houses.

One day Dad, being the practical joker that he was, rode Lady Bird up Miss McDougall's porch, into her house and part way up her stairs with Miss McDougall running and screaming ahead of him.

Dad's veterinary practice was far flung in those days. He used to fly himself out to some of the farms, summer or winter, and do his work. One time, there was a huge snow storm and Dad and his friend Lorne Kilburn decided to deliver the mail to some of the farms that had been snowed in. We joined a lot of the farmers and did fly-ins for "Flying Breakfasts" that were put on in the rural communities.

Dad flew our family down to Montreal for Expo '67 and all the way out to Victoria, BC, to visit with his mother."



One of Jack's planes in which he used to visit remote vet clinics.



Jack and Mabel McPhedran with granddaughters Alexandra and Chelsea (children's father in the background). Dec. 22, 1991.



St. Pierre Vet Clinic Grand Opening. (l to r) Betty Ann McPhedran, Jack McPhedran, Ede Mae McPhedran.

vet was flying into Winnipeg from overseas, Jack and his wife, Mabel, would meet the plane and drive the vet to his new clinic/home.

Jack recalled that another problem encountered with the foreign vets was most were not used to Manitoba-style winter conditions. He remembers one vet who drove into a ditch with the municipality's half-ton truck and almost got killed.

Jack took the new vets under his wing and went the extra mile to make them feel welcome and to help them get settled. "I made many good friends," he says.

He recalls a visit to check out one vet clinic after it was set up. Jack sat

next to the vet on concrete floor of the clinic and they chatted.

"Well, what would you change if you could do it again?" Jack asked while puffing his ever-present pipe.

The vet replied, "Jack, my God, I don't think I'd change a damn thing."

Over the years, 32 vet district clinics were set up, some were built from scratch. Today, 27 vet district clinics are still in operation along with private vet clinics. The Veterinary Services Commission now oversees the vet districts.

Jack always gave more than he received. In addition to his tireless efforts as Director of the Vet Services, he also found time to participate on

boards and committees.

The changes he ultimately affected "bear testimony to the influence, vision and tenacity of Jack McPhedran," notes the University of Saskatchewan's 1993 Spring Convocation. He received an Honorary Law degree at the Convocation.

According to Murray, "Jack did more for veterinary medicine in this province than any other individual."

In short, he made his dreams a reality and all those who knew and worked with him would unequivocally say Jack McPhedran helped make a lasting difference for agriculture and especially for those who loved and cared for animals. ☺

Drug Distribution Centre

Jack founded a Veterinary Drug Centre, which purchased drugs in bulk for a discount and sold them to vets who agreed to a low mark-up (29.33% for regular drugs and 38% for prescription drugs) on sales to producers.

Jack championed the distribution centre to kill two birds with one stone – maintain a consistent price for vet drugs to producers, and to encourage them to seek a veterinarian's advice. The vets and producers quickly adopted the drug centre.

The drug centre was eventually privatized (now owned by a cooperative of veterinarians) and has continued to grow.

Other Programs

Jack is also credited with establishing a veterinary student summer employment program, a semen purchasing and distribution centre, and amendment to the Animal Diseases Act to make provision for improved humane treatment of animals.

Another of Jack's goals was to improve the care of animals. Through his efforts, the Animal Diseases Act was amended to include "Deprived of the necessities of Life" as a disease. It allows the government to intervene in situations where animals are being abused. Vets are allowed to inspect complaints and order appropriate actions to remedy animal abuse.

The writer, Dave Wilkins, runs DLW Communications and can be reached at (204) 782-5612 or info@dlwcommunications.com.

He recalled, "As a farm journalist during the 1980s, I had the pleasure of interviewing Jack on many occasions. Sporting his ever present pipe with its aromatic tobacco, Jack had a commanding presence and resonant voice that exuded confidence with a dash of charm. His staff also saw another side – his iron fist rule. He didn't tolerate anyone who knocked the system. But his door was always open. He found time to answer my questions and was frank and open about his dreams for animal agriculture. I could always rely on Jack for a meaty quote."

We have to thank Betty Ann and Ede Mae McPhedran for their help in sourcing photos and checking facts for this article. Dr. Jack McPhedran now lives in retirement on Vancouver Island.