

Organic farming – an early champion

By Jan Nary

EIGHTY-THREE-YEAR-OLD BILL a'Beckett has been a farmer all his life. That's a lot of experience on the land and most of it has been as an organic farmer, though the term hadn't come into existence when Bill first started the quest for a better way of doing things.

The family farm Bill grew up on was run by his father using the conventional technology of the time - not always to advantage.

"I started on my dad's farm – he had about 324 hectares at Wellington, NSW, but only about 243ha were arable," Bill reminisces.

"He had horses and an old Fordson tractor. The tractor didn't have a magneto and when it got hot it couldn't pull anything so dad had to uncouple it and go get the horses."

"I got scared of what we were doing at the time. The country had been farmed for years before dad got it and he used to throw superphosphate on it.

"After rain, the superphosphate used to cake on the top of the soil and the wheat had trouble getting through it – it was a

"If you've got a bit of country and you want to make a living out of it you've got to look after it; don't over-farm it, give it a chance to recover and you'll improve the quality of the soil."

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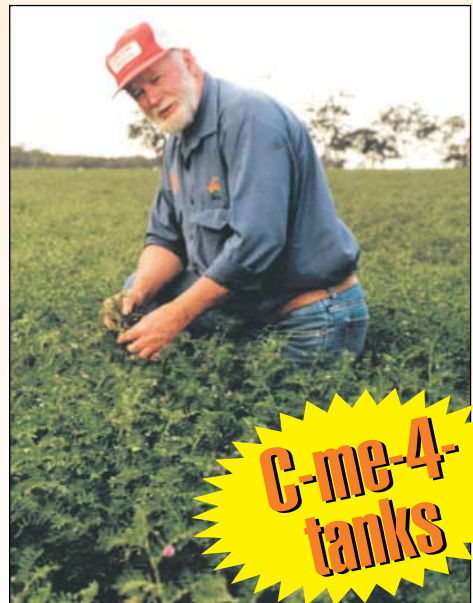
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LEFT Organic pioneer William a'Beckett with wife Diana a'Beckett.

crust you could hardly drive a nail through. He'd use his harrows to break it up but even with the blades turned upside down so that he wouldn't dig so much, the harrows used to drag the wheat out by the roots.

"He didn't have contour banks. The farm was on sloping country and it was just being washed away.

"We started contour farming – it was becoming common practice – but it wasn't enough protection from bad storms. Dad was over-farming the country."

Bill bought his own 688ha property in the Coolah New South Wales district, and began exploring ways of co-operating with the land to get better results.

"I was trying to grow crops without using fertiliser, I put in contour banks and in general treated my country less drastically than most other farmers did.

"There were still blokes putting in crop after crop for years – we decided to go the other way and do things like under-sowing the wheat with lucerne to put nitrogen back into the soil – that was a huge benefit to the country."

The tide of farming attitudes was on the turn; other farmers had also started to adopt more sustainable methods. A qualitative shift occurred when Gavin Dunn, founder of The Biological Farmers of Australia, called

an informal meeting of like-minded farmers.

"There wasn't anywhere much to go for help back then," Bill says.

"Gavin reckoned we should get together and share information – though Gavin had more information than any of us.

"The group didn't have a name originally, there were only about 10 of us but we could see the advantage of organic farming and we wanted to let other people know what we were doing because it was to their advantage."

Bill says that their conventional farming neighbours thought the organic group were mad and kept on with the practices that they knew.

"They kept wrecking their country - so to speak – you get startling results with superphosphate but it's short-term. It only took five or six years to see that we were getting ahead. If you've got a bit of country and you want to make a living out of it you've got to look after it; don't over-farm it, give it a chance to recover and you'll improve the quality of the soil."

Bill says he has seen a big change in attitudes to organic farming in the last few decades and an increasing amount of media coverage.

"BFA made a big difference," he says, "getting more publicity for reports, getting

interest in organics, pointing out the differences in our crops. It's taken a long while for other farmers to wake up."

Bill says that initially much of the process was trial and error.

"It was just a matter of observing and using your brain and you can continue that sort of learning from now until infinity. You just nurse your country along and do as little harm to it as possible."

Bill sold the farm at Coolah in 1993 to move closer to town and bought 486ha near Orange NSW.

He converted it to an organic farm and hand chipped for years to eradicate the Bathurst burrs.

This farm was sold in February this year and Bill and Di have retired to Parkes to be near their daughter and son-in-law Geoff and Julie Brown who run organic speciality grain company Buckwheat Enterprises Pty Ltd.

Julie says the agents were amazed to hear that the farm at Cudal had had no fertiliser in the last 16 years and that the stock had not been drenched for more than 30 years.

"The farm and the stock were in magnificent condition despite the tough year. It's testament to the saying 'Take care of the land and the land will take care of you'." 🌱