*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Farmers fight for the right to repair**

One attribute of nearly all farmers is their innate ability to fix things. It’s ingrained into farmers as much as the dirt that runs through their veins.

There’s a drawer in the old machine shed that’s full of operating and repair manuals for various pieces of farm equipment from years gone by. Breakdowns — particularly at the most untimely moments — were and are a part of farming.

Armed with an assortment of tools and timely curse words, I would remove the broken part, pick up the new part and replace it. Sometimes I was back in business a few hours later with only a little skin lost on my knuckles from slipped wrenches.

Big repairs required a call to a mechanic or the broken-down implement needed to be hauled to the dealer. But that was always the last resort; being handy with my own repairs helped keep costs in line.

But today the ability of the jack-of-all-trade repair prowess on the farm is under threat. When a new piece of farm equipment breaks down, major implement dealers have been requiring customers to call a dealership to send a service truck to the farm to identify the problem. The repair may even require a special tool only used by the dealerships.

The service call may not be available right away. It can cost $150 per hour, costing farmers both time and money. And when crops are ready to be harvested, time is money on the farm.

That has resulted in “Right to Repair” legislation being introduced in many agricultural states. Recently the Farm Bureau at its national convention — [as reported by the (Minneapolis) *Star Tribune*](http://www.startribune.com/farm-bureau-members-ratchet-up-right-to-repair-pressure/567459262/) — voted to support a policy for either comprehensive legislation or a written agreement that would give farmers and independent technicians access to the same diagnostic tools as implement dealers.

The Association of Equipment Manufacturers has opposed legislation. It states that giving customers too much access to tools could result in tampering, voided warranties or even the loss of intellectual property. But a spokesman said they are willing to work with farmers to give them access to manuals and tools “for purchase, lease or subscription,” the *Star Tribune* reported.

When I was younger our ability to repair was limited only by our knowledge and ability. Some equipment seemed to be cursed. I remember when Dad bought a used eight-row corn planter — tiny by today’s standards but big back in the 1970s. It would magically breakdown while it was parked in the shed during the winter.

The planter was working fine when we put it away at the end of the planting season. But when it was pulled out for use the following spring, it would need to be fixed. We did all the preventative maintenance — even removing each auger from the fertilizer boxes to coat them with waste oil to prevent corrosion.

Other equipment like the Ford 640 tractor required little maintenance. Every spring there would be the day when we needed the 640. It was usually parked where it was last operated the winter before. We’d check the six-volt battery, the oil and the radiator. Sometimes we’d need to evict a family of mice that decided to move under the engine cowling for the winter.

The battery would be dead, but we’d either pull it or roll it down the hill. We’d pop the clutch in third gear and the tractor would fire, ready for another season of work.

Today, interest and demand has increased for older tractors — not as old and small as the 30-horsepower 640, but the larger tractor models from the 1970s and 1980s. One can spend $15,000 to $25,000 for an older tractor that still does the job — and can still be fixed without expensive diagnostics. Or one can spend $150,000 or more — and deal with expensive repairs.

Farmers will always find a workaround — and older tractors can even be retrofitted with satellite technology used now.

Implement dealers, which have disappeared across the rural landscape along with many farmers, also need to make a living. But imposing expensive repairs on their dwindling customer base doesn’t seem like the answer. There should be a compromise of sorts similar to what has been reached with automakers and independent mechanics.

Leaving farmers without the ability to fix their own equipment seems anti-American.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at*[*chardie1963@gmail.com*](mailto:chardie1963@gmail.com)*.*

**Captions: (all Chris Hardie photos)**

021320-agrv-life-hardie-1: Older tractors can still be repaired because parts are available.

021320-agrv-life-hardie-2: A 1981 Ford tractor is still in demand because it can be repaired and fixed without expensive tools.

021320-agrv-life-hardie-3: New tractors have sophisticated technology that often requires a dealer service call.

021320-agrv-life-hardie-4: Many old tractors aren’t too far gone for enthusiasts who like to fix them.

021320-agrv-life-hardie-5: Even a 40-year-old tractor has a place on the farm today.