

Minnesota Inventors  
Congress celebrates  
50 years of ideas

By Dee Goerge

# Calling all ag inventors



Al Giese (left) and Lyle Stevermer attended the 1962 Minnesota Inventors Congress. Stevermer's entry, a metered grain weigher for his hog feed, won the Grand Champion prize.

Photographs: Minnesota Inventors Congress

It's a story many farming communities face — people move away to big cities to find work.

And that's exactly what was happening in Redwood County, Minnesota. So farmers and residents decided to take action. Bring in inventors, they thought. Give manufacturers new items to make. That'll create jobs and keep folks in the region.

That was 49 years ago.

Today, the Minnesota Inventors Congress (MIC) in Redwood Falls

— the world's oldest, continuous invention convention — has given more than 4,500 inventors the opportunity to introduce more than 5,000 inventions to the public. As hoped, some inventions ended in production and created jobs.

Bob Starr, 86, remembers pounding in lath stakes at the Redwood County fairgrounds to set boundaries for exhibitors at the first Congress in 1958. He and his friend, Herb Bollum, and two people from each township in the county volunteered their time to put

on the event. The Congress was an experiment patterned after events in other states.

Thanks to publicity efforts and support from then-governor of Minnesota Orville Freeman, 181 inventors brought 271 inventions that first year. For many years, the Twin Cities' radio station, WCCO, and popular agriculture broadcaster Maynard Speece promoted it with a contest asking listeners to submit ideas they wanted to see invented.

The first Congresses had a mom- ▶▶

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▶ and-pop atmosphere, Starr recalls, with simple prototypes. Over the years, the thousands who've attended have seen many firsts: the original skid steer loader, minnow bucket, Quick-Tach three-point hitch, as well as a few gimmicks to attract crowds.

Inventions reflect personal needs. Farmer Lyle Stevermer invented the metered grain weigher for his hog feed, a big improvement over estimating each scoop at 20 pounds. His parents encouraged him to attend the 1962 MIC, and he won Grand Champion. He started manufacturing the Tru-Weigh, and after five years quit farming to run his business.

Today, 74-year-old Stevermer oversees Meter-Man Inc., which manufactures 20 different products in 36 countries. Among the items are land measuring wheels, mechanical and electronic acreage counters, electric fencers, and livestock cooling systems. His business fills seven buildings in the rural town of Winnebago, Minnesota.

"I wouldn't be here without the Minnesota Inventors Congress," Stevermer says. "They give you so much guidance."

## EDUCATING INVENTORS

Since the beginning, education has been part of the Congress, says Deb Hess, MIC executive director. Patent office representatives, marketers, and other consultants offer workshops, present keynote speeches, and have booths at the event.

"According to inventors' evaluations, the educational seminars are one of the most important tools we have to help them develop



Grant Hanson, Glenwood, Minnesota, attended the 2006 Minnesota Inventors Congress in Redwood Falls, Minnesota, and submitted his Safe Loader.

successful products," Hess says. It's also a place to test-market their inventions.

MIC gives inventors feedback from the public, information about the patent and manufacturing processes, and the opportunity to connect with manufacturers.

Among the thousands who attend are product scouts for manufacturers all over the country. Inventors from 14 to 21 states exhibit at MIC.

As for the public, including aspiring inventors, it's a fascinating display of everything from a weed-killing roller in 1962 to an amphibious motorized ice-fishing house in 2006.

Even talk show host Jay Leno was interested enough to send a film crew to the 2006 Convention. Each inventor had a couple of minutes before the camera to promote his or her product. Some inventions may be selected for future "Pitch to America" segments on NBC's *Tonight Show*.

Though many prototypes are more sophisticated than they were in the

early years, MIC still has the same down-home, friendly atmosphere. Everyone is welcome to share ideas or to check out what their neighbors are up to in the shop. ■

## STORIES WANTED

In celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Minnesota Inventors Congress June 8-10, 2007, organizers of the event and *Successful Farming* magazine would like to gather inventors' ag-related success stories for display at the Congress and for future *Successful Farming* articles.

If you attended a Congress and manufactured or sold your product, we'd like to hear your story. Submit your information by January 1, 2007, including what you invented, the year(s) you attended, photograph(s) of your invention, and details of what happened to your invention after MIC. Mail details here:

Ag Invention Stories  
Successful Farming Magazine  
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Des Moines, IA 50309-3023



## learn more

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