

Francis Childs, 68

Francis Childs, a third-generation farmer who studied, schemed and tramped his fields with a spade to become the most productive corn grower ever, died on Jan. 9 in Marshall County, Iowa. He was 68.

Francis Childs, the first corn farmer to top 400 bushels an acre.

Carolynn Childs, his daughter-in-law, confirmed the death but declined to give a cause.

Mr. Childs shattered old notions of just how much corn could be coaxed from an acre of ground. He was the first farmer in a controlled contest to exceed 400 bushels an acre, achieving 405 in 2001 and 442 the next year.

Neighbors on land similar to his were getting yields just a third this size. When he passed 400 bushels, his nearest competitor trailed him by 85. In 1999, an Agriculture Department official watching the weigh-in of his 394 bushels likened the event to breaking the sound barrier. The Wall Street Journal reported.

The National Corn Growers Association ruled eight times that Mr. Childs's yield per acre had won his category of its hotly contested annual competitions. He won the Iowa contest 18 times and the Nebraska one twice. He displayed the awards with pride on the bug screen of his pickup.

In 2002, Mr. Childs told Iowa Farmer Today that he had recorded yields above 500 bushels an acre — the highest was 577 — in strips of less than the 10-acre crops required for contests. He envisioned getting more than 600 bushels from one acre.

Over the years, average corn

bushes per acre last year from 26.5 in 1932. The growers' association said that if yields had remained the same as in 1932, a farm more than twice the size of Texas would have been needed to harvest last year's crop of 13.07 billion bushels of corn.

In addition to making less land produce more corn, higher yields mean that soil that is more vulnerable to erosion need not be farmed. Also, the growing demand for corn for use to make ethanol to power cars might be met by higher yields.

Mr. Childs's crops were so jungle-like that his combine had to move at a crawl to harvest the corn. A green thumb and luck with rain only partly explained such success: he strategized constantly, enlisted experts to give advice, and changed direction each of the many times he walked through his corn patch.

Francis R. Childs was born on Aug. 30, 1939, in Delaware County, Iowa. His father, Ross, entered crop-growing contests, and Francis followed suit when he took over the family farm in 1966. The next year, he won the Iowa corn contest.

But he did not win again for 20 years, attributing the dry spell to an unwillingness to innovate but not to his interest in competing in demolition derbies and tractor pulls. He operated a Polaris snowmobile shop for many years.

Mr. Childs, who lived in Falls City, Neb., and suffered a stroke last spring, is survived by his sons Kirk, of St. Anthony, Iowa, and Sam, of Manchester, Iowa; his daughters Kelly Childs, of Manchester, and Hannah Childs, of Marion, Iowa; and three grandchildren.