

# Grasston Co-op Feed Mill celebrates 100 years

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Thousands of boots have tracked across its dusty plank floor since 1919, and yards of worn denim have come to rest on the chairs around the office table.

Farmers have brought their commodities, their ideas and their opinions to the Grasston Co-op Feed Mill since the days when the small community bustled with a bank, a pharmacy, a mercantile, and even a hotel.

One hundred years and countless changes later, the mill is still where local farmers gather.

“It’s unique,” said Manager Dave Thoren. “We have regulars who come in every day, twice a day. It’s kind of a social center. We exchange pleasantries, ideas, discuss politics and religion, solve the world’s problems.”

The mill stands on the same location as it did in 1919, when it was started as a cooperative creamery by farmers from the Grasston area. They paid one dollar per share to become patrons and used their investment to purchase equipment for separating cream from milk to produce butter. John August Anderson was the first share holder.

The cooperative model worked well, and farmers soon invested in equipment for grinding corn to produce their own livestock feed. Nearly every town had a creamery and a feed mill, serving farmers in their immediate vicinity.

Dean and Cordia Swenson operate a Century Farm “just a stone’s

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**Dave Thoren**  
Manager

throw away from the mill.” Dean has served on the mill’s board of directors for nearly 30 years. His dad, Melvin, served for decades before him.

“The building where the office is was the old Grasston depot,” Dean said. “It was moved over to the mill property in the late 1950s. The building furthest to the west, which is now used for storage, is the original mill building.”

As the farm economy changed through the years, the Grasston co-op adapted. The creamery, Dean said, was sold to American Milki Producers, Inc. (AMPI) in the 1960s. The mill has tailored its services to meet the needs of a broader population, from horse owners to hobby farmers, pet lovers and bird feeders, while continuing to serve the dairy and crop farming community.

“This is a place where you can come in and talk about what you need, and they help you,” said Terry Lind, a board member and farmer who’s been doing business at the mill since 1980.



In its 100th year of operation, the Grasston Co-op Feed Mill continues to be a popular gathering place for local farmers and a vital business for customers from near and far. Pictured, left to right, are employees Chad Kunst, Kathy Eklund and Dave Thoren, board member Terry Lind and manager Dave Thoren. Employee Vern Monson is not pictured.

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“We provide custom mixes that the bag stores can’t,” said Thoren, who’s been manager for four years and was the bookkeeper for 10 years before that. “We’re one of the only places you can come in, tell us what you need, we get it ready, and load it into your vehicle for you.”

Business continues to grow as more small mills shut their doors. It’s one of the only mills for miles

where farmers can sell their crops or bring them in for grinding their own feed.

“We have people who come from Anoka, Moose Lake, Wisconsin. We have 243 actual members, but we do business with far more than that,” Thoren said. “We succeed by making it a place people want to come. They enjoy their time here.”

Employee Dave Ostenson attributes the mill’s success to its leadership. “We have a common sense, level-headed

board,” he said. “They keep debt to a minimum and take care of customers.”

In addition to Lind and Swenson, current members of the feed mill board are Steve Gustafson, Chad Gardner, Gary Olson, Mike Wallace and Dan Hartog. They are elected by patrons at the annual meeting and serve three-year terms, with no limit on the number of terms they can serve. Board meetings are held monthly.

Retaining existing business while going out

and actively seeking new customers is a focus for the mill of today, Thoren said. “With commodity prices as low as they’ve been, we have to work with both the patrons and the suppliers and keep both sides happy.”

“We’re always trying to upgrade equipment,” Lind said. “We have a new mixer, we’ve added fertilizer equipment, and we bought a truck and trailer for doing on-farm deliveries.”

The mill has also been branching out into specialty areas, Thoren said, producing show feeds for county fairs and state fairs.

“You have to change with the times but also maintain the charms this place has,” he said with a smile. “You don’t want to change too much.”

He firmly believes the mill has stood the test of time because of a tried and true business philosophy. “You have to earn business, not just the first time you work with someone, but every time. You can’t expect loyalty. You have to earn it.”

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