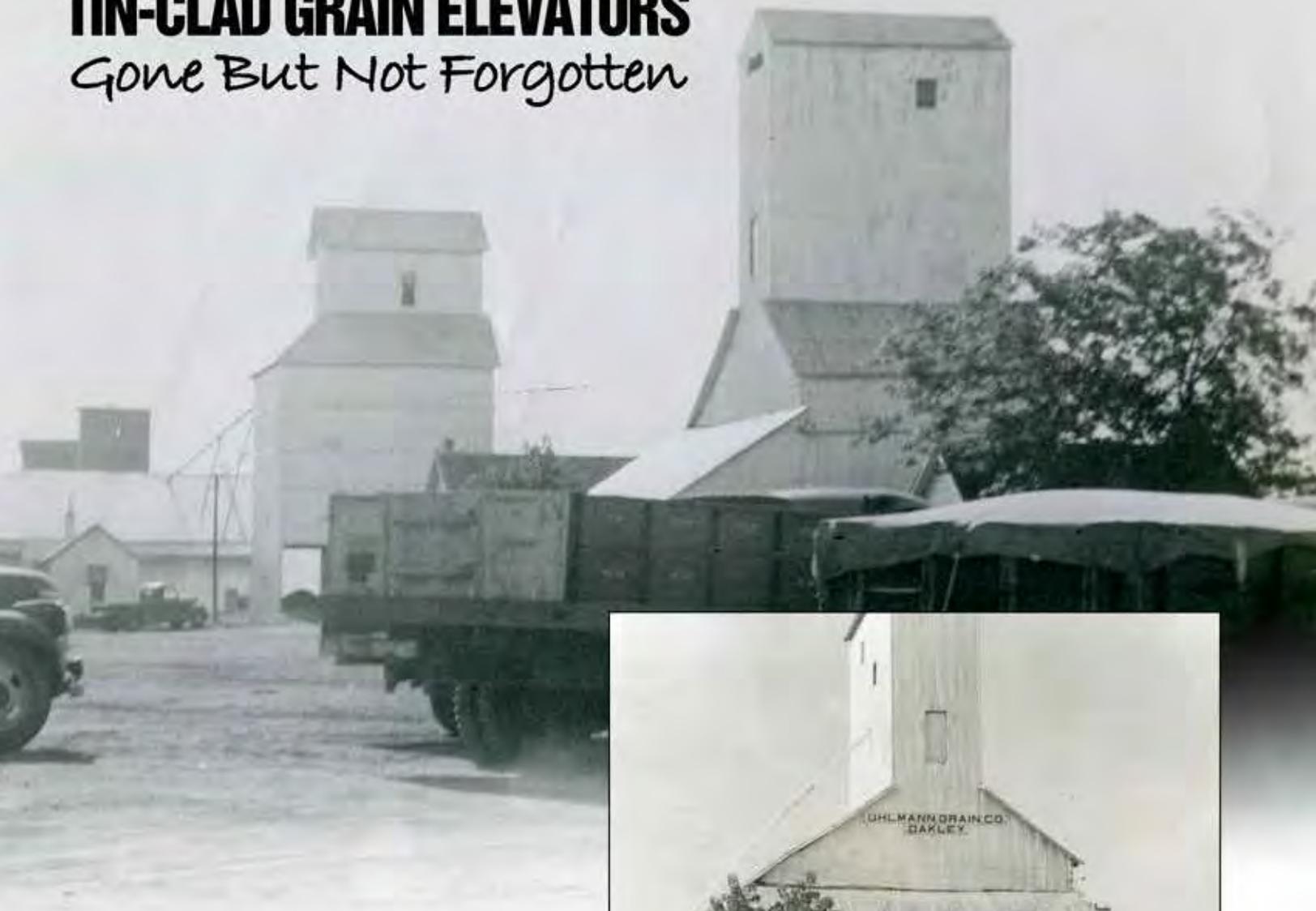


TIN-CLAD GRAIN ELEVATORS

Gone But Not Forgotten



The Uhlmann Grain Co. in Oakley, KS was the owner of the elevators photographed in these antique pictures. Don J. Brown was their manager when these photographs were taken. These elevators were located along the Union Pacific Railroad in Oakley. (Photographs are from Jim Brown, whose grandfather used to be manager of the elevator.)

Years ago, most Midwestern towns had grain elevators which were markets for grain raised by farmers on the surrounding farms. These elevators were busy places, especially during harvest seasons. On bad weather days, too, men gathered to partake of gallons of coffee and tell tales of good yields and complain about weather.

At night, those tall structures appeared slightly threatening and scary, especially on Halloween when children's fertile imaginations visualized white floating images lurking around the cor-

ners of the high buildings, and imagined hearing unexplained ghostly creaking sounds coming from those structures.

Our elevators were located in Julian, a village across the road from our Nebraska farm. At times, I rode with Dad in his old red painted truck to the elevator to deliver grain. In those days, we had no exciting daredevil rides or thrilling water slides. We only had the spine-tingling events associated with our farm. Being in the "tipped up" truck while the grain was dumped into the pit was one of those events.

Upon arriving, the elevator operator at the scale house took a sample of grain

to be checked for moisture content and weight. Then he weighed the truck loaded with grain.

Dad started the truck and drove around to the south side of the elevator. He turned the truck toward the opening and drove up into the elevator. After the unloading gate was raised, the front of the truck was slowly lifted so gravity caused the grain to flow into the pit. Then, after the front of the truck was lowered, Dad drove the truck forward and around to the scales again. There the empty truck was weighed.

At that time, Julian supported two elevators. Both were constructed of wood,



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covered with tin which helped to prevent fires. Elevators, during those days, were constructed in several ways. Some were cribbed, in which wood was stacked horizontally with broad sides together interlocking at corners. The base, constructed of 2x6 boards, decreased as the height arose to 2x4s. These walls were nailed together with 20-penny nails.

Other elevators were built using steel or frame construction. This less expensive method called for horizontal wood bands placed every four feet vertically to secure the perimeter, and the bins were interlaced with rods extending through the bands for support.

As time passed, only one elevator remained in our village. Tragedy occurred when one elevator operator left town with the grain receipts. He never reappeared, supposedly afraid of those farmers who lost their grain money. Money was scarce in those days; undoubtedly, some families suffered lack of necessities because of another's lawless actions.

Our remaining elevator designed to be functional, weighed the grain, stored it, and transferred it to railroad cars. These buildings were remarkable because they endured the tremendous pressure of tons of grain while protecting farmers' harvests. The Julian elevator stored the grain until it was transported by Missouri Pacific Railroad to larger markets.

In our community, grain represented the farmers' major income and became the basis of credit. Farmers exchanged their grain receipts for machinery, seed, food and other needs.

Years ago in Buffalo, NY, with no elevators, grain was unloaded from ships on backs of men. Local farmers first shoveled grain into sacks which they then carried to a loading platform along the rail line. There, they emptied the sacks into a waiting boxcar. This work was strenuous, difficult and dangerous.

Oliver Evans, born in Newport, Delaware in 1755, became a wheelwright. At the age of 24, he went into the flour-milling business with two of his brothers. While in the flour mill, he invented the grain elevator, conveyor, drill, hopper boy and descender. These labor-saving inventions meant fewer mill workers would be required.

In 1842, a retailer, Joseph Dart adapted Oliver Evans' idea for a grain elevator



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for use in a commercial framework. He was searching for a method to unload grain and load it on ships. He designed a wooden structure that had storage bins for grain. To transport the grain into this structure was a steam-driven belt which had buckets attached. As the belt with the buckets was powered into the hold of a ship, the buckets scooped up the grain and hoisted it up into the elevator's tall bins.

Later, Dart commented: "I began with buckets 28 inches apart, holding about two quarts and raised without difficulty a thousand bushels an hour." Later, he placed the buckets closer together which moved more grain at 1,800 or 2,000 bushels an hour.

There were problems associated with these early elevators. First, using wood in construction created problems as grain dust is a highly explosive substance. A spark could cause an explosion that would destroy the elevator and surrounding property.

Dad, even though our major crop was corn, like many neighbors raised wheat and threshed or combined it during July. He said that income helped with summer expenses. Before and during the '20s, Dad joined a threshing crew that traveled locally from farm to farm to thresh grain. This included a long season of work, as all the farmers worked at each farm even after their own crops were harvested.

Huge meals were usually eaten at the various farms where the threshing crews were working. On those hot summer days, flies warred with the men for the food on the table. One fellow spoke up, saying: "At that farm, I'm glad that the skin was on the potato, and the shell was on the egg!" Not everyone had the same standards of cleanliness.

Later, Dad purchased his own combine which meant that he did not have to join the threshing crews. Another advantage was that he did not have to wait his turn for harvesting the grain. Waiting meant the fear of heavy rains or hail. Farmers were anxious to harvest their crops before disaster struck.

Mother and we girls worked preparing food for those helping harvest. Someone drove the tractor pulling the combine through the fields. Several other workers drove horses and wagons to carry the grain to the bins in our barn or to the elevator. Some workers were

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waiting to scoop the grain into the bins.

Mother usually fried chicken, opened jars of canned meat, or put a large roast in the oven. It seemed that my sister and I peeled tons of potatoes for mashed potatoes. Of course, gravy was made, and a vegetable was served along with gallons of iced tea. Usually, Mother opened jars of canned fruit for dessert.

One time, Mother served cooked prunes for dessert. At each plate except one, there was a small pile of pits. We figured that the one man swallowed the pits rather than spitting them out.

The noon meal was just the beginning of food preparation for the day. In early afternoon, we prepared a lunch of grated cheese mixed with home-made mayonnaise sandwiches, iced tea and cake heavily frosted with cooked fudge or seven-minute icing. That seven-minute icing was difficult to make. If the timing was not right, it either was so sticky that it stuck to teeth, faces and hands, or it was so hard it shattered into hundreds of pieces.

Early elevators served many purposes. For example, Julian's elevator was once a meeting place for members of the Catholic church. During

pioneer days, our elevator, like others, served as a lookout post for marauding Indians or thieves. Since these buildings were tall and had ladders to the top, one could see quite a distance.

Elevators are part of our agricultural heritage. They not only represented markets for wheat, corn, oats and other grains, but within their walls, were the stuff for each farmer's dreams for a better life.

Today, many of the small town elevators have been abandoned because railroads are no longer in the vicinity. Railroad companies evaluated where they could gain the most business. Fewer passengers and less freight meant that some lines were abandoned. Railroads no longer reached all the small towns. Without railroad transportation, elevators were forced to close. Most remaining elevators have access to railroad lines or river barges.

At this time, most farmers in our area have semi trucks, and travel farther with their grain seeking the best price.

These abandoned elevators now mark graves of a vanishing way of life. During past days, these nostalgic icons were meaningful buildings that did

meaningful work. Indeed, they were built for function. Some "Prairie Sky-scrapers", "Sentinels of the Prairie," or "Prairie Cathedrals" are now gone, but many memories remain for those of us who frequented those early elevators and felt the excitement of being part of farm production.

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