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ADVERTISER • COMPLIMENTS OF THE WELLINGTON

FALL EDITION 2019

North Wellington Co-op

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North Wellington Co-op: Looking after communities for 75 years

By Jaime Myslik

HARRISTON – For 75 years North Wellington Co-operative Services Inc. has served local communities with more than just products.

The organization has roots that date back to 1921, but it officially became a co-op in 1944. Its origins began with farmers and turnip, corn and mangel seed as well as binder twine.

The Minto Farmers Club was able to get a better price for supplies when buying in bulk, rather than purchasing individual portions for each farm.

The Harriston Co-operative Association was formed on May 9, 1944.

In the summer of 1960 the Harriston Co-op merged with the Mount Forest District Co-operative Company Ltd. and the North Wellington Co-op was born.

The Durham and Hanover branches came on board in 1993.

Belinda Wick-Graham, manager of economic development for the Town of Minto, said reaching 75 years in business is an "amazing feat.

"I know of a few in our area that have hit this milestone but not very many.

"This is a very big accomplishment that the whole North Wellington Co-op team should be very proud of."

Today, North Wellington Co-operative Services continues to have operations in Harriston, Mount Forest, Durham and Hanover, and is still doing the same work as its founders.

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>
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"We still serve farm customers and homeowners," said general manager Kelly Boyle.

"We would consider ourselves a full-service co-operative."

Being a co-op provides different opportunities than a privately-run business.

Boyle answers to a board of directors and the business has about 5,000 owners. Those owners are co-op members through a member-loan model.

Boyle explained that when the co-op began 75 years ago, members gave a $500 member loan to give the co-op capital to buy the product it would then sell back to customers.

The members then made six per cent interest on the co-op's loan, which paid out yearly.

While that model still stands today, Boyle said it has changed a bit.

First, the membership fee is $10 and members can provide the $500 loan over time, through their patronage.

"A portion of the profits of the co-ops quite often are returned to the members," Boyle said. "So until a member had a fully paid membership of $500 that patronage payment went towards that until the member loan was entirely paid."

That patronage continues today.

"Over time members become what we would call a fully paid member in that they have $500 (loan)," he said. "So at that point, at the end of each fiscal year they would get interest on that $500."

If they move away or no



NORTH WELLINGTON CO-OP, HARRISTON



RILEY ALLAN, LEFT, AND JANNY SIMMONS, NORTH WELLINGTON CO-OP

longer want their membership, members can apply to the board of directors and get their $500 loan back. In fact, members can retrieve whatever amount they have paid into the co-op when they choose to leave, Boyle said.

Wick-Graham said she believes it is the co-op model that has led to North Wellington Co-op's success.

"The members of the co-op are the owners of the business. The member-owners are the boots on the ground and know what the community needs and because of this the community supports their business," she said.

"They are also led by a very competent general manager (Boyle) and a board of directors who keep investing in the business and moving it forward, keeping up with the changing times and technologies in the agriculture sector."

While its origins are rooted in farming, Boyle said the larger portion of customers now are non-farming homeowners purchasing furnace oil or propane.

Though a membership is not needed to make purchases, Boyle said it's advantageous for homeowners to purchase a membership because they will likely receive patronage on their purchases and eventually receive cash back at the end of the year.

The amount of patronage depends on the amount of money spent at the co-op.

However, despite the higher number of non-farm members, it's still farmers that bring in the most business.

For example, the co-op buys bulk fertilizer, brings it to the co-op's new fertilizer facility and gets it ready for customers.

That year-old fertilizer facility is about seven times the size of the previous facility, meaning the co-op can purchase even more fertilizer for discounted prices and have space to store it.

The money the co-op makes from discounted bulk purchases goes back into patronage or into the facility.

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"Buy more fertilizer spreaders, replace worn-out trucks, maintain our facilities," Boyle said.

"So that's a big thing for us ... maintaining the facilities because they're owned by the members and keeping good equipment and trucks so we can provide good service.

"Because the fertilizer is no good here if we can't get it to them in the field when they need it."

The co-op deals with a host of products from fuel to crop inputs to hardware stores to feed.

It's the feed portion from which student Riley Allen said she learned the most.

The 19-year-old has been working at the Harriston branch for four years and hopes to go to school to be a veterinary technician next year.

"I've learned what medications are good for your chickens and if people want medicated or non-medicated feed, and I know what's in the feed," she said.

She's also learned what medications certain animals can have and what medications they can't have.

Apart from the career training, Allen said she likes the social aspect of the co-op culture.

"For me I was really quiet ... when I started working; I was a very shy person and this has really brought me some great social skills," she said.

"I am so much more talkative than I was before."

Boyle said each store has between one and four students working to help full-time staff in evenings and on weekends.

"Our students are important to us," he said.

Community involvement in general is a big part of the co-op's mandate; it is where its membership and ownership is based.

"The community of Harriston and the greater Town of Minto is proud to be the home of North Wellington Co-op's head office," Wick-Graham, said.

"Agriculture is one of the largest employment sectors in Minto and the North Wellington Co-op not only employs a lot of people in our community they also provide key services and products to the larger agriculture community."

Boyle said the North Wellington Co-op is involved with numerous fair boards, 4-H clubs and minor sports.

"We do a lot of different things; we do donations, and as you can imagine because we have four stores in four local towns, we get visitors from every fair board, every hockey team and every bonspiel, you name it," he said.

The co-op also supports local hospital galas.

Wick-Graham said this is one of the reasons the co-op has been a key business in the community.

"They are always there to support the community groups in the area; whether that is by providing donations, volunteering their time or providing equipment, you can always count on them to be there," she said. "They are also a willing participant in any of our retail events (even though they are not downtown)."

For the co-op, 4-H is an important organization to support.

"If you stop and think about it, those children are going to be our next customers; chances are their parents are already dealing with the co-op in some fashion," he said.

Just this summer, during the co-op's 75th anniversary barbecue on July 13, the co-op used a 4-H club to help out in both Harriston and Mount Forest.

The co-op donated $600 for 4-H summer programing.

"I feel like they were talking about taking the kids to the CNE to see the cattle and stuff," Boyle said.

Having been in business for 75 years, Boyle said the co-op is constantly looking for ways to grow the business.

PHOTOS: JAIME MYSLIK

"We're always looking for new opportunities, not necessarily in the same businesses we're in," he said.

"We try to investigate two new businesses a year as part of our strategic plan."

While it didn't work out, he said the co-op had looked at purchasing a car wash one year.

"We are certainly blessed to have the North Wellington Co-op based in Minto," Wick-Graham said. "From the employment opportunities they provide, to the great products and services they deliver, they are a first class business and are helping our agriculture sector to remain strong.

"Congratulations to Kelly, the board of directors and all member-owners on a significant milestone and best wishes on another 75 years of success."

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