

Seed money
W.B. Johnston has been a leader in Oklahoma agriculture since 1893

By Jim Stafford
Business Writer

ENID — When Lew Meibergen was a preschooler more than 70 years ago, his grandfather would take him to work with him once a week at Enid's W.B. Johnston Grain Co.

"He used to come by and pick me up every Saturday and take me to the office with him," Meibergen said. "I can remember him sitting me on his lap and reading to me and feeding me an apple."

Today, 75-year-old Lew Meibergen is chairman of Johnston Enterprises, a family-owned diversified agriculture business that has its roots deep in the history of Oklahoma.

Meibergen's grandfather was W.B. Johnston, namesake of the company he founded in 1893. It claims the title of the state's oldest grain elevator company.

Johnston made the Cherokee Strip Land Run in 1893, then went to work in the land office, Lew Meibergen said. He opened the doors of W.B. Johnston Grain Co. in downtown Enid that year, bringing in supplies such as coal for settlers.

Then he got into the seed business.

"He brought in (grains) like oats because there wasn't anything raised here," Meibergen said. "It was all grass."

In 1897, Johnston abandoned the downtown location in favor of a more inviting site a few blocks north.

"They moved up here to be closer to rail," Meibergen said. "By then, they had broke out the prairie and started raising crops, wheat primarily."

W.B. Johnston is credited with buying the first carload of wheat in Garfield County, then building a 40,000 bushel elevator complete with corn-shucking equipment in 1910. Johnston died in 1937, but the company he founded to serve the needs of Oklahoma settlers continues to thrive and expand 114 years after it was founded.

Three generations of Meibergens work for Johnston Enterprises today, including Lew's son, Butch, 50, who serves as chief executive officer and president of the company. Butch's son, Joey, 25, is in charge of project management and development.

The trio gathered in a conference room recently at the Johnston Enterprises headquarters to discuss the history of their company and the new directions that it is taking in the 21st century.

W.B. Johnston Grain Co. and W.B. Johnston Seed Co. were both incorporated in 1938 after its founder's death and W.B. Johnston's son, Dale, took over the business.

Johnston Enterprises was incorporated in the 1940s as the sole owner of both corporations.

The company operated 32 grain elevators at one time throughout northwest Oklahoma, Kansas and the Texas Panhandle.

By the time Lew Meibergen bought the company from his uncle in 1976, the number of grain elevators it owned had dwindled to six.

"Lew told him he was interested in it, and Dale told him he couldn't make any money in it," Butch Meibergen said. "He sold down to six country elevators in the company."

Lew Meibergen defied his uncle's prediction, growing and expanding its influence in Oklahoma agriculture since he took the helm more than 30 years ago.

Johnston Enterprises has branched beyond marketing grain and seed to operating water ports in two states, a cotton gin, 19 country grain elevators, two grain terminals, a trucking company, five seed cleaning facilities, a 50,000-bushel-per-hour shuttle rail facility and an experimental research farm.

Butch Meibergen attributes the secret of its success to the fact that the big decisions have been made by one man.

"He'll (Lew) tell you that it's being able to have a board meeting every day when he shaves," Butch said with a laugh. "We don't have to go through a tier of bureaucracy, and we're able to act and not react."

"We're a small enough company that we can look at an opportunity and take action and not have to take it to a board. Since he's the majority stockholder, he can make the decision himself."

Along the way, the Meibergens have built a legacy of community involvement that includes serving as chairman of the Enid Chamber of Commerce and the Grand National Quail Hunt by both Lew and Butch. Joey is a member of the Oklahoma Agriculture Leadership Class XIII.

Lew even served as Oklahoma Agriculture Commissioner during the Bellmon administration in the early 1960s.

"Johnston has been a great corporate citizen over the years," said Jon Blankenship, president of the Enid Chamber of Commerce. "They have been very involved every year in our youth livestock show. They are usually one of the top donors to that every year."

"They have been great partners over the years, have been a tremendous community supporter, and that trend continues."

Added Joe Neal Hampton, who as president of the Oklahoma Grain and Feed Association has worked with Lew Meibergen for more than 30 years:

"I guess one thing that sticks in my mind about their operation is the fact that in this day and age of mergers and consolidations and acquisitions and getting bigger and the small operations going away, it is still a thriving, family-owned operation. That is becoming more rare every year."

Johnston employs about 300 people — more during harvest — and handles about 20 percent of the state's annual wheat crop in an average year.

Last year wasn't an average year, however. It challenged Oklahoma agriculture producers and businesses that market their products.

"We're in about a four-year drought," Butch Meibergen said. "This last wheat harvest was the smallest in over 50 years. We have 14 elevators in our western region. This year they did not take in 1.1 million bushels, total. The year before that, just one of those elevators took in 1.1 million bushels."

So, in the face of the long drought, the Meibergens are working to diversify the business once again.

Johnston Enterprises will be a partner in ethanol plants that will be built in both Shattuck and Enid, adjacent to their giant grain terminals.

Johnston won't own the plants but will handle the massive amount of grain needed to fuel the ethanol refineries and market the refinery byproducts such as distiller's grain.

"It will be a huge change for Oklahoma," Butch Meibergen said. "Along the I-35 corridor, they went from 30,000 acres to 70,000 acres of corn last year. I really feel that once they break ground in Enid for an ethanol plant, those acres could grow to 200,000 acres."

Most of the corn needed for conversion to ethanol at the 110-million-gallon-a-year plants would be brought in by rail from the Midwest, but the expanded Oklahoma acreage devoted to corn could provide up to 50 percent of the corn stock needed, he said.

"It gives (farmers) the opportunity to be more flexible and to make more money," Butch said. "With the ethanol plant they will have a year-round market for corn."

Oklahoma Secretary of Agriculture Terry Peach said Oklahoma has benefited for more than a century by the cutting-edge business operation developed by the Meibergens.

"This is a company that has consistently shown a willingness to embrace new opportunities to help better merchandize grain and develop Oklahoma agricultural products," Peach said.

As he discussed the history of Johnston Enterprises, Lew Meibergen turned and picked up a large framed black-and-white photograph that dates back to the 1890s.

"Here's a picture of the old store downtown," Meibergen said, showing it to a visitor.

The photo shows a small frame building with a large sign on both the front and the side that read: "W.B. Johnston Grain, Coal, Feed and Live Stock." A wagon and team of horses are parked on the dirt street outside.

"We've got coal stacked up in the back and a little bit of everything," he said.

Lew Meibergen never saw that original W.B. Johnston location, but he certainly knew the founder of the business.

"I can remember him well," he said, thinking back to those Saturday mornings more than seven decades ago.

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