

The Krause Plow Corporation

By Steven R. Sears

A young man growing up in western Kansas was attracted to the talk of the men at church and family gatherings. These men liked to discuss the condition of their horses and how they should be prepared for the long and difficult task of plowing their fields. This made a strong impression on the young man, Henry Krause. As he considered the burden his family and neighbors shared, he thought surely there must be a better way. Krause Plow Corporation, one of the leading agricultural machinery manufacturers in Kansas, grew from Henry Krause's belief that he could meet the needs of the western Kansas farmer. The company went on to prosper by a combination of attributes and strategies appropriate for agribusiness on the plains. As Carl F. Kraczel recognized in his book, *The Great Plains in Transition*, mobility, flexibility, and reserves are important means of survival in the Great Plains. Henry Krause and the Krause Plow Corporation have shown all three attributes in finding better ways to meet the manufacturing needs of the farmer.¹

Henry Krause was born June 7, 1887, on a farm in Woodson County, Kansas. Due to his father's illness he did most of the farming on the family place, and was only able to finish the fourth grade. He then moved with his family to Corn, Oklahoma, where he stayed until he married in 1906 and moved to Meade, Kansas.²



Henry Krause, one of the inventors of the one-way, founder of Krause Plow Corporation.
Photo courtesy Krause Plow Corporation

Krause was fascinated by machinery and would go anywhere to see it run. When he moved to western Kansas he saw a steam tractor plowing. It was a high point in his life, he later recalled: "They were actually plowing with a machine." It did not take anything away from the event that there were two men on the tractor, one man on the plow, two men with four horses each hauling water, and one man with four horses hauling coal. He stated, "I always knew machinery would plow."³

Despite the mill's ability to produce vast amounts of flour, diminishing markets, caused by housewives buying finished products from the baker, forced the mill to sell much of its flour at a loss. In response to this competition, Buhler Mills was quick to adopt attractive prints for its flour sacks, which included pillow-case bags. It was difficult for this small mill to compete with giants like General Mills and Pillsbury, so to meet this competition, it sold its flour under the name DIXIE LILY. Advertising of this product was focused on the South, where housewives still baked biscuits at least once a day.²¹

Meanwhile, as company spokesmen explained, they sought to retain their local family market:

"While the Mennonite housewife has succumbed to the lure of the bakery to some extent, it is still customary for those living in "Low German" communities to bake zweiback and bread on Saturday. As a result, at Buhler and Inman, the mill sells a special flour designed for baking with yeast. It is different from the flour it sells in the South. Even so, only two out of every thousand sacks milled are sold locally."²²

Thus the company's product line was an expression of the philosophy of a local firm turning cosmopolitan:

"If it was the ideal of the Mennonite of old to live with his own people, it is no longer possible for the company, as such. While its raw materials come from the soil, it cannot ignore the trend of national and international events and must shape policies accordingly. It cannot isolate itself from the balance of American commerce."²³

On November 1, 1979, the local business was purchased by a large, national enterprise and was absorbed into its production program to help it become even larger and more profitable. The purchaser was Nabisco, Inc. Nabisco's modification program took between twelve and eighteen months, and both the Buhler and Inman mills were modernized. Part of the modification plan was the use of more sophisticated machinery. "The mills will produce special wheat products for Nabisco's cereal plants, cookie and cracker bakeries and pet food plants," the local paper reported.²⁴

With the Nabisco takeover came new management and as a result, many of the policies that had become part of the business were also changed. Some of these policy changes were evident during harvest time. Whereas in earlier years trucks had lined up for many blocks at Buhler Mills, it became a common sight to see only a few trucks in line at Nabisco and a long line of trucks at the competing elevator.²⁵

Nabisco eliminated its competition in Inman by purchasing the competing elevator in May 1982. Farmers then had to decide whether to sell wheat locally or take it to neighboring towns or to Hutchinson, where terminal elevators paid them considerably more for wheat.²⁶

In May 1984, the mill once again changed hands as Nabisco, Inc., sold to A.D.M. Milling. The changeover in ownership was so smooth that, had it not been for the change of logo painted on the elevator tanks and office, it might have gone unnoticed by the public. The internal changes were also kept at a minimum. The only information provided employees about the A.D.M. takeover was a memo about the transaction. News about the change was almost nonexistent in the area newspapers; it had become apparent that the community and the mill were no longer as dependent on each other as they once had been.

On February 25, 1985, the A.D.M. office building was destroyed by fire. The office building, which also housed the laboratory, was a landmark building because it was the original building of the Inman Mill. The office was moved into a temporary building without any interruption of services and was later rebuilt on the original site.

A.D.M. has not recaptured the local wheat trade and while policies toward local wheat and milo trade have improved slightly, they have not changed enough to convince most farmers to market their entire crop in Inman. A.D.M. has, however, raised the local wheat price in an attempt to lure back some of the local trade that was lost over the years. This price increase has been somewhat effective, but with commodity prices being low, many farmers have sold their wheat where they can get the highest price despite local incentives.

It is apparent that the mill in Inman no longer exists for the same purposes that it did in earlier years. As the mill changed from a locally owned business to a part of a national conglomerate, the new owners have implemented policies that are more in line with those of larger corporations. Moreover, there is no longer the feeling that the mill exists primarily for the local community.

In the past it has been advantageous for the farmer to have a local outlet for his wheat, but unless the local mill and elevator can be competitive farmers will continue to explore other places to market their grain. The railroad, which played a major role in the establishment of the first mill, also has made it possible for the mill to import wheat, which minimizes some of the need for local wheat. People still believe there is a need for the mill in Inman, and it is their wish that the mill and farmers work together in the best Mennonite tradition.

NOTES

1. *Hutchinson Daily News*, 7 July 1887; Louis R. and Harold Regier, "The Buhler Mill and Elevator Company," *Mennonite Life*, April 1953.
2. Mrs. Harry Enns, "The Milling Industry," *Inman Review*, 1 July 1937.
3. Ibid.
4. *Inman Review*, 16 February 1894.
5. *Inman Review*, 2 May 1894.
6. *Inman Review*, 29 June 1894.
7. *Inman Review*, 24 August 1894.
8. *Inman Review*, 5 October 1894.
9. *Inman Review*, 15 May 1908.
10. Buhler Mills Collection, Historical File, Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kan.
11. *Inman Review*, 18 September 1908.

12. "Canton Pilot," *Inman Review*, October 1908.
13. *Inman Review*, 22 January 1909.
14. *Inman Review*, 22 January 1909.
15. *Inman Review*, 4 December 1908.
16. Luty Lee White, interviewed by Allen Pauls, Inman, Kan., 9 April 1987.
17. *Inman Review*, 3 October 1919.
18. Ibid.
19. *Inman Review*, 9 October 1908.
20. "Enns Milling Business to Buhler Company," *The Southwestern Miller*, 29 October 1946.
21. Regier, "The Buhler Mill and Elevator Company."
22. Ibid.
23. "Historical Background of the Buhler Mill and Elevator Company," p. 3, Buhler Mills Collection, Historical File, Mennonite Library and Archives.
24. *Inman Review*, 8 November 1979.
25. Here the author writes from personal observation, as he does in later sections of the paper.
26. Martha Wicns, interviewed by Allen Pauls, Inman, Kan.