

Since 1910...



*F. J. Krob*

# Table of Contents

<b>1910</b>	
Beginnings . . . . .	2
<b>1920</b>	
Building up the Business, to a Fit of Depression . . . . .	6
<b>1930</b>	
The 2nd Generation & Increased Mechanization . . . . .	10
<b>1940</b>	
Yet Another World War . . . . .	14
<b>1950</b>	
Changing Hands . . . . .	18
<b>1960</b>	
Celebration and Expansions . . . . .	22
<b>1970</b>	
The Third Generation, Changing With the Times . . . . .	26
<b>1980</b>	
Dealing With a Farm Crisis . . . . .	30
<b>1990</b>	
Generation Four: Hope and Tragedy . . . . .	34
<b>2000</b>	
More Second Generation Losses, More Expansion for the Company . . . . .	36
<b>2010</b>	
2010 and Beyond . . . . .	42



## Beginnings

Frank Joseph "F.J." Krob was raised on a farm south of Lisbon, Iowa. Frank's father Joseph, a Bohemian immigrant, had made the six-week voyage across the Atlantic Ocean with his family when he was eight years old, and Frank's mother Frances was the daughter of a Union infantry soldier who was killed in the Civil War. Frank received his education in the Lisbon school system and played center on Lisbon High School's famous football team when the gridiron sport was just getting underway in Linn County. His parents did not want him to play football, so he never told them about it, but the secret came out one day when he came home with a broken collarbone. After Frank graduated from high school, he went to Cedar Rapids and got a job as a street car conductor.



In addition to farming, Frank's father Joseph had formed a partnership with his son-in-law Wes Fiala in the Lisbon Elevator. Seeing little fulfillment or future as a street car conductor, 21-year-old Frank went to work for Fiala at the elevator. Soon Frank and Wes decided to form a partnership of their own. Wes and his brothers had recently purchased the grain elevator in Solon from C.S. King, who also had an elevator for sale in nearby Ely, along the same railroad, the Rock Island. Frank and Wes purchased the Ely Elevator from King, and the property officially changed hands on March 1. Frank handled the day-to-day management, and after some time, Fiala sold out his interest to Frank.

Frank still lived in Lisbon and made the daily 20-mile commute to Ely on his motorcycle, until one morning when he was running late, went too fast around a corner and wrapped the motorcycle around a tree. He never rode a motorcycle again, and soon made his new home in Ely.

The Ely Elevator had been constructed in 1900 by local entrepreneur Joseph Woitishek, and was described by the Cedar Rapids Gazette as "modern in every detail, with equipment for the rapid unloading of grain from wagons, etc." It had a capacity of 26,000 bushels, and a twelve horse power single cylinder gas engine, used to power the corn sheller and the elevator with its six-foot fly wheels and a loud bark that could be heard for miles across the countryside. The engine was started by turning the flywheel back against the compression, then forth once, then back again against compression, and then by flipping the switch on the magneto, the elevator roared to life. The engine was cooled by water that was pumped out of a nearby cistern.



All grain was brought in by horse-drawn wagons that contained roughly 26 bushels of ear corn or 52 bushels of shelled corn, depending on test weight. The grain was not graded as it is now, and any discounts were eyeballed. Those familiar with the Ely elevator are also familiar with the daunting ramp which leads up to the driveway, so it is easy to imagine that the horses were sometimes reluctant to drag the wagon up into the elevator, and often had to be led. The scale in the driveway was made so that it could be raised to dump the wagons. By turning a wheel that looked like the helm of a ship, the rear wheels would be lowered and the front wheels raised two or three feet, allowing gravity to take some of the burden off the man running the scoop shovel. The grain would be dumped into the pit just behind the scale, and there was a trap door in the pit which could be changed to direct the corn to feed the sheller (if it was still on the ear), or directly to the leg (if it was already shelled).

According to Frank's own handwritten ledgers, the price of corn in 1910 was about \$.44 per bushel, and the price of oats was about \$.30 per bushel. The grain was purchased from the local farmers and shipped out on the Rock Island railroad.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the area around Ely had been largely settled by Czech (Bohemian) immigrants. Since this time period was only one or two generations removed from the boat ride across the Ocean, nearly everyone of Bohemian descent, including Frank, could speak fluent Czech, and while most of the business Frank conducted was in English, some of the older farmers who came to deal with Frank did so in their native tongue.

On June 30, 1914, Frank married an Ely girl named Libbie Zvacek. Between 1915 and 1921, Frank and Libbie had five children: Joseph Victor (whom they called Vic); Martha; twins Robert and Norbert; and the youngest daughter, Doris. As the children grew, Frank discouraged them from spending time at the elevator because there were so many places where they could get into trouble.

The first grain truck owned by the company was a 1916 Hudson touring car, which had been converted into a truck. At this time there were no augers, and every bushel of corn that was picked up on the farm was thrown over the side of the truck with a scoop shovel.



View of Ely from the East. Note the horses at the front of the elevator.

## Beginnings

Coal retailing was an important part of the early elevator operation. A familiar sight was of an elevator employee, with only the whites of his eyes showing, after a day's work of unloading coal cars and delivering coal to customers. Coal was unloaded by hand out of flat bottom cars, loaded by hand onto the old Hudson, and unloaded at the farm in the same manner. Most of the coal was shipped up from eastern Kentucky, although they also brought it in from West Virginia, along with some poorer quality coal from Indiana and Illinois. There were some mines in southern Iowa, but the quality was so poor that Frank never handled it.

Commercial fertilizer sales began in 1918, when Frank Krob shipped in the first car load of fertilizer ever brought into Linn County. It was a fifteen-ton rail car of 125 lb bags which took three years of hard selling, finally going door-to-door, to convince farmers to try a few bags.

In 1914, the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand caused a bit of an uproar in Europe. Three years later, on April 6, 1917 President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war against Imperial Germany, and military conscription soon followed. With the United States now engaged in a Great War, Frank Krob joined the army. In 1918, he served as an instructor in gas warfare at Camp Gordon Georgia, but was never sent overseas. In the following years, Frank served as mayor of the town of Ely, as the town marshal (1924), and was also Ely's first fire chief (1932).



LEFT: Frank J Krob and Ely local Forrest Fuhrmeister in uniform, post WWI



**AN AMERICAN TONE.**

The tone of the proceedings in the senate in connection with the consideration of the Nicaragua canal is good to contemplate. Incidentally, John Hay, secretary of state, is getting about the worst reversal that ever came to any man in that position. Hay is not an American. In sympathies Lord Pauncefoot is his superior in this direction, and is a fair sort of American because he is the highest type of the Britisher. Hay is a poor Britisher for the reason that he is insignificant as an American. His presumption in making two protocols depend upon the ratification of a treaty with another country than the nations concerned in the protocols should bring upon him dis-

**PROGRESSIVE AT ELY**

**Fine New Elevator Just Completed for Joseph Woiteshek.**

Among the practical improvements in the bustling little town of Ely this year is the handsome new elevator, just completed by Joseph Woiteshek, a pioneer of that community. The building is modern in every detail, with equipment for the rapid unloading of grain from wagons, etc., and has a capacity of 26,000 bushels. It is operated by a 12-horse power gasoline engine, which also runs a large corn sheller. This is an entirely new venture in Ely, but Mr. Woiteshek is assured of the patronage of the many excellent farmers in that community.

**THE NEW ELEVATOR AT ELY, BUILT BY MR. JOSEPH WOITESHEK, HAS A CAPACITY OF 26,000 BUSHELS.**





## Building up the Business. to a Fit of Depression

As the twenties roared, Frank Krob grew his business. In 1927, Frank partnered with another brother-in-law, Joe Pavel, who had bought interest in Frank's elevator back in 1914, and the two purchased the elevator in Solon, Iowa, just seven miles south of Ely, from the Fiala Bros. Frank worked in Ely, while Joe managed the Solon elevator.

During this period he purchased a second vehicle, a 1922 Ford Model T truck. Some years later, FJ Krob and Company upgraded to a 1928 1 ½ ton Chevy, with a 100 bushel wood box, built with the help of Ed Vavra, who owned the lumber yard to the north of Frank's elevator, right along the Rock Island. Ed's family had owned interest in the in the Ely lumber business since 1892. Vavra Lumber would remain a good neighbor and close business partner to FJ Krob clear into the 21st century.

In 1928, Frank purchased grind-and-mix feed equipment, including the area's first hammer mill and a one-ton mixer. The stationary eighty horsepower four-cylinder gas engine that ran the hammer mill was initially cooled out of the same cistern as the elevator engine, but it ran so hot that the water in the cistern would be near boiling. Frank began traveling to Iowa State College (which would become Iowa State University in 1945) once a year to learn about animal nutrition and feed, and began marketing his own brand of feed, Purity Feeds.

As time progressed, Frank continued to build his business a little bit at a time. Things went well until the market crash of 1929. A great economic depression began to take its toll on the world, reaching even the small rural community of Ely, and Frank took on many extra jobs just to keep his head above water. He was the night operator at the telephone office, sleeping there every night, and carried the mail bags from the post office to the depot to put them on the train each evening.

He also worked with the Ely Shippers Association, receiving, weighing, and shipping livestock from the stockyard located just south of the elevator. Every so often he and another person would take two three-ton truck loads of livestock to Chicago in 1927-model Chevrolets. This was not always a winning situation, as there was at least one notable instance where a load of sheep didn't even pay the freight. The Ely Shippers Association soon dissolved, and the money which was left in the kitty was donated to the City of Ely to be put toward the purchase and installation of a DC electric light plant, which was located right next to Frank's elevator. Frank, who was mayor at the time and one of the driving forces behind the project, was given the task of starting the plant up every night and keeping it running.

Frank's wife, Libbie, also helped out by singing in a quartet for funerals, making two dollars per funeral (this money was kept in a bowl in the pantry). In addition, they had a small acreage with a large garden, a small fruit orchard, a few cows, and several chickens, and so were able to keep the family fed, however bland the fare may have been. Their children would later recall one evening when they were playing out in the yard, when their mother raised the window called out to them from the kitchen, "What do you kids want for supper tonight, potatoes and eggs or eggs and potatoes?"



Frank had always been very lenient with credit and when corn hit below ten cents a bushel, and hogs were less than one dollar per hundredweight, the farmers had no way of paying him, so he had no way of paying the bank. He had over \$30,000 in accounts receivable, which in those times would have been enough to buy several farms. One evening he came home from work and announced that he no longer had the elevator because the bank had foreclosed. Norb later said, "I remember Mother and Martha crying and the rest of us just walking around in a daze." However, the bank had no idea on how to run an elevator and nobody had money enough to buy it so after a few days they just gave it back to him.

During these times, Frank often did not even have enough money to pay his main full-time employees. He told them, "If you just stick with me through this, I'll make it right with you." They remained loyal, making nothing more than grocery money, and in the end Frank was able to make good on his promise.

Cash flow was a constant struggle. Whenever a coal company shipped a car of coal they sent the bill of lading to the local bank, and before the coal could be unloaded, Frank had to go to the bank to pay the freight charges. They would then give him the bill of lading which he had to present to the station operator before the coal could be unloaded. On one occasion, a load showed up, and Frank had no money to pay the freight. His five children each had a savings account between 25 and 50 dollars so he had to withdraw that money before he could unload the coal. Later on, when things improved, he bought them each a one thousand dollar insurance policy to repay them. He maintained the payments until the children reached adulthood and they took over the payments. They maintained the modest annual payments for the rest of their lives, and as they wrote that small check each year, they were always reminded of how their father tried to make things right.

Ely Railroad Depot



# Building up the Business, to a Fit of Depression



Benesh threshing machine, photo courtesy Ely Community History Society



Young Bob Krob. Each year the farmer that rented Frank's farm would give the family an orphan lamb to care for.



Vavra steam engine  
photo courtesy  
Ely Community History Society



Fuhrmeister binder men  
photo courtesy  
Ely Community History Society





## The 2nd Generation & Increased Mechanization

By 1935, the situation had improved considerably. Frank's eldest son Vic had graduated high school in 1934 and was working with him in Ely. Vic and Frank decided to once again try their hand at selling commercial fertilizer, running test plots to show the benefits of fertilizer use. Frank's twin sons, Bob and Norb, also worked at the elevator after school and on weekends. It was becoming clear that the business was needing to grow. Frank purchased the Rowley elevator in the winter of 1936 for about \$3000, and the following spring, Vic was sent up to Rowley to manage the new elevator. That summer Norb began working with Vic at Rowley, and Bob became Frank's right-hand man in Ely.

The Rowley elevator was quite run down, and it took the Krob men lot of work to get it back in good operating condition. "We poured so much concrete that you wouldn't believe it," said Bob. They made enough to pay for it in less than a year because Frank had canvassed the country buying cribs of corn. He bought so much that it took Norb and Vic all summer, a summer of heat wave and drought, to get it hauled. Norb made quite a reputation for himself handling a scoop shovel. The truck held 100 bushels of ear corn and it was a matter of pride for him to never stop shoveling until it was loaded, usually within an hour, four loads a day. (Norb often joked that Krobs cut their teeth on the handle of a scoop shovel)

The ground around Rowley was very boggy, and raised poor quality corn. The use of tile to channel water became increasingly popular, and the elevator began bringing in railcars full of tile to sell. Thousands of miles of tile were laid, and the land around Rowley became some of the best for cropping.

The blizzard of 1936 was so severe that trains could not run, and coal supplies became so critical that customers were rationed to 500 pounds each. That same year Frank bought a coal conveyor. It was powered by an electric motor and one end fit under the bottom of hopper bottom coal cars. It piled the coal in piles about ten feet high, so while it eased the manual labor requirements considerably, it caused some problems in the winter because of snow and ice, as prior to this the coal could be stored in covered sheds. They hauled the one conveyor from elevator to elevator, and had to schedule the shipments so that they could unload at least five cars before moving to another elevator. The hopper cars held from fifty to seventy tons each depending on whether they were two hopper or four hopper cars. On average, 40 to 50 railcars full of coal were handled each summer to fill customers' coal bins, and another 40 to 50 were sold in the winter.

In 1936, FJ Krob and Company began the tradition of giving away a Christmas gift every year. The first item they gave was a quart cream pitcher. Subsequent years brought the coveted Wattware bowls, followed by an array of tools and household utensils, all bearing the mark of FJ Krob & Co, all given at Christmas time. This tradition has continued without fail through the generations.

In 1937, Frank's daughter Martha married John Phillips, who had started working for Frank one year prior. John's parents, Lester and Katie, owned the tavern across the street from Frank's elevator.



The Krobs had a family dog, a mongrel named Snoop, who gained local notoriety for riding on the hood of the company truck as it headed down the road. If the driver took a corner too fast, Snoop would slide off, and the driver would have to stop and let him climb back on. On one occasion, Norb and Bob were making a delivery near Mount Vernon, and Snoop had run off. Snoop was nowhere to be found, so they headed back without him. By the following day, Snoop had made the twelve mile journey back to Ely on his own. "Somehow he found a way to cross the Cedar River," Norb later mused.

At this time farming was just beginning to step out of the era of horse-drawn cultivators and test the potentials of internal combustion and the gasoline traction engine. The tractor had become a small, mobile power source that had various uses around the farm, but many farmers still chose to rely on their horses. Willy Klinsky had one of the first tractors in the area. There were a few pre-1920s-era Fordsons, but most of the work was still done with horses. In 1938, the area was struck by a Horse-Sleeping Sickness (Equine Encephalitis), and many of the horses died. This spurred many farmers to purchase small two-row tractors.

Soon trucks had almost entirely replaced the horse-and-wagon as the means for delivering grain, and so a new truck dump was installed. Norb Krob later described this new contraption as "quite an affair." The system consisted of a cradle for the front wheels, attached to heavy chains that went up onto a large cylinder which crossed the driveway overhead. An arrangement of gears and chains enabled the men to turn a large crank and wind the chains around the drum. Needless to say, this system required considerable effort, but as far as everybody was concerned, it beat unloading the trucks by hand.

More mechanization was soon to follow. In 1938, Frank purchased a large amount of corn from a farm near Lisbon. The Mechanicsville Elevator had also bought some of the grain, and whereas the Krobs had brought out a couple of scoop shovels to get their load, the men from Mechanicsville



Norbert Krob

## The 2nd Generation & Increased Mechanization

had brought out their portable elevator for the job. Intrigued by the new contraption, and seeing no one around to give or deny their permission, Norb and Bob took it upon themselves to give it a whirl. Upon their return to Ely, the boys told their father about the elevator. Frank went out to see the machine for himself, and then sought out the help of a local carpenter named Albert Hruby. The two devised a way to build one of their own. They cut a used farm elevator in half, hinged it, and mounted it on an old Ford Model T chassis. They then fitted it with a system of gears and pulleys, and built a mechanical drag to feed it from the ground. The new elevator did not trail well, and could not be pulled more than 25 mph, whipping back and forth behind the old Chevy. The elevator was powered by a water-cooled gas engine, which had to be drained between loads in the winter to prevent freezing. Despite its shortcomings, the Krobs felt that they were really in the clover with a modern convenience such as this.



FJ and Vic Krob measuring the benefits of commercial fertilizer



Convoy of FJ Krob coal trucks



1939 cob pile



Bob and Snoop







## Yet Another World War

By 1940, with three sons and a son-in-law being groomed to take over, Frank began to look toward retirement. However, these plans were interrupted by the antics of an Austrian corporal named Adolf Hitler, who plunged the world into a second, even greater armed conflict. Military conscription was reinstituted, and in March of 1941, Norb Krob was drafted into the army. Nine months later, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The Second World War was on.

Bob was drafted in November of 1942, followed by John in January of 1944. This left Frank's wife Libbie and daughter Martha to fill in for them in their absence, taking on many jobs previously considered to be strictly "man's work." The two women mixed feed, and at that time most of the feed ingredients came in 100-pound bags, requiring both of them to drag the bags across the mill room floor to dump them into the mixer. Martha and Libbie also sacked corn cobs and lugged them out onto the box cars on the railroad. For Martha, one of the most irritating aspects of the job was the group of three men who sat on a bench next to Phillips' tavern, just watching the two women hard at work.

Martha also kept the company books and made pickup deliveries of coal and cobs. There was a man who hung around town that Frank would hire to help shovel the stuff off, if he was sober at the time. They took what help they could get. One day Frank came into the office and said, "Mart, don't get the books out. Guess you will have to drive a truck today. I have a corn sheller out in the country and my truck driver didn't show up." He pulled one of the big trucks up to the gas pump, filled it up, backed it away and said, "OK it's ready for you. It's okay, you can do it." Martha had never driven a truck before. She was about 2 miles north of town before she found high gear.

Outside of working at the elevator, Martha served as the town clerk, the treasurer for the school, and president of the American Legion Auxiliary, in addition to having a young daughter to care for. She was featured in the Cedar Rapids Gazette, along with two other Ely women having to fill in for their husbands who were in the army.

When Norb left Vic in Rowley in 1941, things got tough, but when Vic volunteered for the service in 1944, they became downright impossible. He left for the army with a railcar full of coal sitting there in Rowley with no one to unload it. His wife Edna unloaded the entire coal car by herself, and from then on was in the position to keep the elevator running. In spite of her best efforts, the Rowley operation had to be closed



while Vic and Norb served, and re-opened when they returned.

One characteristic of the rationing that occurred during the war was price caps on grain. In order to allow people to keep eating, the government would not allow grain prices to get above a certain level. Food rationing helped feed not only the folks at home, but the soldiers overseas as well. This included Frank Krob's sons, which he well understood. One day, a man entered Frank's office and offered him an under-the-counter deal of \$200 on a railcar load of soybeans – a lot of money at that time. Frank promptly threw him out of the office.

The three brothers and brother-in-law were all sent overseas to Europe to fight the Germans. Incredibly, all four returned intact (three with Purple Hearts) from front-line combat. Norb and Bob were back by Christmas of 1945, and John Phillips and Vic shortly thereafter.

With the war over, the next generation of Krobs began to take the reins. Vic resumed his station in Rowley, John was put in charge of Solon, and Bob returned to help Frank in Ely. Since there were only three elevators for the four brothers, Norb became the resale man for all three elevators. Norb recalled "one crusty old Bohemie" greeting his sales call with, "Well, if you're half as good as your Dad, you'll be okay..." Incidentally, although this time period was now another generation removed from immigration, there were still some older customers who preferred doing business in their old language, and Bob's daughter Mary Jeanne would later recall her father occasionally conducting business in Czech.

Due to steel shortages, equipment was very hard to come by during the war, and as a result the company's trucks were quite run down. Norb recalled the truck he drove upon his return from service: a 1938 International, which had no doors. In the wintertime, he wrapped gunny sacks around his left foot to keep it from freezing.

In 1946, Norb and Bob decided to run some feed trials, to see if the Krob-manufactured label, Purity Feeds, was up to snuff with the larger manufacturers. They set up ten coops of chickens, 2000 total, in the Ely CSPA hall and ran a feed trial with nine other feed brands. Kent Feeds came out on top, and from that point on FJ Krob and Company was a Kent Feeds dealer. (Regrettably, Purity poultry feed finished near the bottom.)

There is a story of an Ely customer who had been struggling to support his six kids with the farm, and as a result, owed the Krob elevator \$5000. When he saw Frank Krob pulling into his driveway one Christmas Eve, he thought Frank was coming as a bill collector. Frank motioned him over to the car, pulled out a turkey, and handed it to him, saying "Here, this is for your Christmas dinner."



Siblings Vic, Doris, Norbert, Martha, and Bob

## Yet Another World War



Martha stacking feed

John, Norb, Bob, and Vic in Germany, June 24, 1945



Frank Krob and granddaughter Sandra



Edna Krob with the company pickup

Bob along with Vic, Edna, Larry, and Karen



Bob and Frank, just before  
Bob's deployment to Europe  
March 1944





## Changing Hands

In 1950, the grain elevator in Walker, Iowa, owned by Frank Takes and Thomas Gardner, was destroyed by fire. The railroad lease became available, and FJ Krob purchased the property. A new elevator was constructed, which consisted of six small silos all connected together, with another interior bin. The new construction cost about \$15,000. Norb moved to Walker to manage the new location.

In the early 1950's, Frank bought four 37,000 bushel Quonset building, one at each location, so they could store corn for the government. It was a tough year, and the company ran out of money. There was a period of a couple weeks where they beat the system by hand delivering ten thousand dollar checks from one elevator to the other and surviving on the float. "It was a nightmare," Bob recalled.

In 1952, the company introduced a new service with the purchased of a Clipper seed cleaner and seed treater. During this year, the company also took on a Pillsbury Feeds dealership. "Pillsbury had a terrific marketing and promotional program," Norb would later state, "Unfortunately, the pigs wouldn't eat their pig starter." This deal-breaker soon led to the dissolution of the dealership.

Frank Krob remained active in the elevator business until 1952 when he sold out his interest to Vic, Bob, Norb, and John Phillips. They operated as a partnership for a few years and then incorporated in February of 1955. Frank, meanwhile, having worked hard for 42 years, began spending his winter months in Pheonix, Arizona. On one occasion Frank was sitting in on a monthly meeting with the four young managers when he remarked, "You kids waste more than I used to make."

Staying in business often requires creativity to handle difficult times. One year there was a particularly large bean harvest. At that time Iowa Milling Company was the only bean plant in town and the line of trucks was many hours long. They solved the problem by pooling all their trucks, plus some trucks that they leased from farmers. The drivers would just park their trucks in line and then grab the first Krob truck that got unloaded.



Edna and Vic with the Rowley crew: Lloyd Fox, Norm Olson, and Bill Wathen. All three worked with Vic until retirement.

Bob stayed there and kept moving the trucks up in line. He stayed there for at least twenty four hours before someone relieved him. This way they could operate 25 or so trucks with only about ten drivers. This practice of one driver moving several trucks in line continued on through the years, although circumstances where it becomes necessary or practical are few and far between.

In spite of the improvements in equipment, grain handling still



required much physical labor. Most of the corn was still delivered on the ear. They worked hard handling 3000-4000 bushels of ear corn per day, then spending all summer shelling it out and hauling the cobs to Cedar Rapids. The years 1952, '53, and '54 were big harvests, and the Rowley elevator alone handled over 200,000 bushels. Yields were increasing dramatically, reaching the 100-bushel mark during those years.

In 1956, the company began offering a new service on the production side of the crop, setting up a truck for bulk fertilizer spreading at Ely. Bulk fertilizer was shipped in on rail and stored in the south portion of the Quonset. The new service showed promise, and two years later, Walker and Rowley set up a fertilizer truck of their own. In 1964, a dry fertilizer blend plant was built in Walker, and in 1969, Solon followed suit.

In 1959, a new feed mill and elevator was erected in Solon. This new facility was extremely progressive for the time, with the elevator featuring 57000 bushels of grain storage (of which 12000 was overhead), an electric hoist for raising and dumping wagons, and a 600 bushel receiving pit. The mill had eight bulk bins supplied by a dedicated leg, a Bryant-Poff hammer mill, a corn sheller, and an oat huller, and boasted four overhead loading bins. The mill was officially opened for business in 1960. At this time, FJ Krob and Co introduced a Grainbank storage program by which farmers could store corn and oats at the elevator at a reasonable price, and draw the grain out as it was mixed for feed. This program was extremely successful, benefitting both the farmers and the company.



## Changing Hands



Norbert Krob and  
Walker employee  
Merle Burkart



Bob, Verona, and Mary Jeanne







## Celebration and Expansions

June 15, 1960 was a day of celebration for the company's 50th anniversary. Advance publicity involved national recognition in the May 7 issue of "Feedstuffs," the weekly newspaper of the feed industry, telling of the leadership and progressive developments such as a pioneering grain bank and new grind and mix plant installation. Kent Feeds devoted space in their dealer publication "Kent Trade Trends" on May 27, including recognition of Krobs' 14 years as an outstanding Kent dealer. A flyer was sent out inviting area farmers to visit with Frank Krob from 9am to 5pm at Ely, take advantage of free gifts with Kent feed purchases, register for hourly drawings, free gifts for the first 50 ladies registering, and free refreshments all day. The evening celebration in the Ely Legion Hall featured a dinner and a program with over 900 guests. Introductions were handled by Bob Krob, observations by Frank Krob, and an address by Chuck Worcester, the widely known farm voice of WMT radio. Entertainment included the "Jolly Boys" of College Community School, and trumpet trio featuring Ron Serovy, Danny Merta, and Larry Walshire with Pam Peterson as accompanist, a piano solo by Karen Krob (Vic's daughter), plus a medley of songs by Lenita Chadima.

Frank's children later presented him with a large frame containing color aerial photos of all four elevators. Not typically known to be an emotional person, it surprised them to see tears well up in his eyes, as he said, "That's my whole life's work right there."

Presentation to Frank J Krob by his family on the 50th anniversary of the company



The company's status as a close family business was soon augmented as the three brothers and brother-in-law established a banking relationship with their youngest sister Doris' husband, Lester Buresh. Lester, a farm implement dealer in nearby Mount Vernon, also had ownership along with his brother Ernie in Citizen's Bank in Anamosa. The relationship was very good for both parties, although Bob would joke, "How would I like to be borrowing money from your brother-in-law?"



Frank Krob speaking at the 50th anniversary celebration

The 1960s were characterized by large expansions of grain storage at all of the Krob locations. There were more concrete grain tanks built at Walker and Rowley than at Ely or Solon, simply because there was more grain to be had in those areas. More tanks were built every two years, always adding one or two at a time. A man named Chuck Lauters, along with a crew of African American men from the south, built most of them. The crews always found a place in town to stay during the projects. Chuck stayed in a little motor home next to the office. In Solon, the crew stayed at the home of John and Martha Phillips. In Walker, there was an elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Danny Mahoney, who took in roomers. Norb sent Chuck over to Danny to ask him about keeping some of his crew. Danny said, "Sure, send them over." Chuck told him, "I didn't tell you they are Black." Danny replied, "I didn't ask you what color they are." The Mahoneys treated them just like family. Erecting the tall silos was dangerous work, and one worker in Solon reportedly fell over thirty feet partway through construction. Thankfully, he survived the fall.

As the use of oil burners increased coal was gradually done away with. It got so all that was handled was a little stoker coal. Norb's sons, Mike and David, were in high school, and one of their summer jobs was screening the coal slack to salvage what coal was left in the piles. The coal business was phased out in the 1960's, and no one was too unhappy about it. Their wives were quite pleased that they no longer had to launder all those sooty clothes.

The dissolution of one aspect of the elevator business gave way to another. An anhydrous ammonia plant was installed in Rowley in 1964, ushering a new era of agronomy products and services. In 1965, the company made further investments in the liquid fertilizer and chemical business, purchasing their first self-propelled sprayer, a Hagie 260 row crop sprayer. The following year, Ely added its own anhydrous ammonia facility. More spray equipment, tanks and applicators were soon to follow.

## Celebration and Expansions

In 1963, Dick Murphy of Eldora, Iowa had invited a group of independent feed and agronomy dealers to join together to become a buying group. This organization was formed under the name of United Suppliers, and in 1966, F. J. Krob & Company joined that group, which consisted of only twenty dealers. Norbert Krob served on the Board of Directors, which at that time met in a small rental office in Eldora. United Suppliers has since grown from a small group of dealers in Iowa to a dealer network of 1011 dealers, representing 18 states, in 2009.



Ely employees  
Ray Shramek and  
Lloyd Cooling



Last coal car ever  
unloaded in Ely



Bob Krob and Ray Shramek  
at the Ely counter



Vic Krob with unidentified Rowley customer



John Phillips  
at the Solon counter



Life-long Ely employee  
Vernie Yarborough running an early Hagie





## The Third Generation. Changing With the Times.

The elevator depended almost entirely on rail to ship grain until the railroads closed down. Prior to that the only grain shipped by truck was soybeans. The branch that went through Walker and Rowley closed in 1972, and that is when they purchased their first semi. They shipped corn cobs by rail for several years to a plant that made a chemical called furfural. One of the plants was in Cedar Rapids. For a couple of years they sent about twenty five cars a year of ground corn to Cargill. It was bagged in 100# bags and wheeled it into the cars. Recalling this, Norb later quipped, "Man, talk about work." They ground it into one of the feed mixers and used the bagger on the mixer, weighed it on a little platform scale and piled five bags at a time on the hand truck. The job was to keep ahead of the grinder. Cargill became equipped to handle bulk cornmeal so they were able to auger it into the cars. The last railcar to be loaded out of FJ Krob and Company went out of Ely on November 15, 1979. Shipping was then done entirely with trucks.

At this time, the third generation began stepping in. Vic's son Larry began working with him in Rowley after spending three years in the Army. He started the way each and every Krob starts in the business: At the bottom (or "pit rat" as Larry referred to himself). Cleaning leg pits (a most unpleasant task), cutting weeds, then driving trucks and scooping bins, working up to and experiencing all aspects of the elevator operation first-hand. In 1966, he moved down to Solon and became assistant manager to John.

Robert "Mike" Krob, Norbert's eldest son, worked at the elevator after school, on weekends, and summers. He remembered spending a lot of time delivering coal. He later said, "It seems the pickup deliveries were always saved for me...coal, feed, and tile." He graduated from Loras College in 1968, was immediately drafted, and served in the Army until his discharge in 1970. He returned to the elevator to work full-time. Through the years, Mike picked up his father's ability to maximize operating efficiencies, and continued to grow the Walker location.



FJ Krob and Mark Krob

Likewise, Norbert's younger son David had worked in the same capacity as Larry and Mike. David graduated from Iowa State with a degree in Industrial Engineering, and served stateside and overseas in the Army from 1968 until 1970. After returning from service in Vietnam, he worked for Caterpillar in Aurora, Illinois for four years. He returned to the Ely elevator in 1974 as a truck driver, sprayer operator, and "Just about anything that needed to be done." David noted, "I learned the business side of the



Frank J Krob with Norb and Mike Krob, both sporting Walker centennial beards

operation by taking my coffee breaks in the office, listening to and observing Bob at work."

Around 1976, FJ Krob and Company joined the computer age. Bob and Norb had gone to visit a dealer they knew who was managing a large cooperative in southern Iowa. The coop had gone to computers, and after spending the afternoon with him, they decided that they would purchase a computer of their own to aid in bookkeeping. The \$26,000 technological wonder, which operated on punch card-loaded programs, was so large that it covered the top of a desk. About this time, long-time bookkeeper Norma Wilde retired. The company initially hired on an individual who was trained as a computer operator, but it was soon realized that she knew nothing about bookkeeping, so it was determined that what the company needed instead was a bookkeeper who was willing to learn how to use a computer. Some years later, when buying a new computer, Bob asked the salesman about the trade in value of the old one. The salesman suggested they use it for a boat anchor.

With the third generation coming on board, the second generation was pleased to relinquish the reins, beginning with Vic, who retired in 1978, after nearly 43 years of service. John Phillips also retired that year, whereupon Larry was named manager of Solon. Having worked through bitter Iowa winters for decades, both were content to seek the warmer temperatures of Arizona during the winter months, as their father had done.

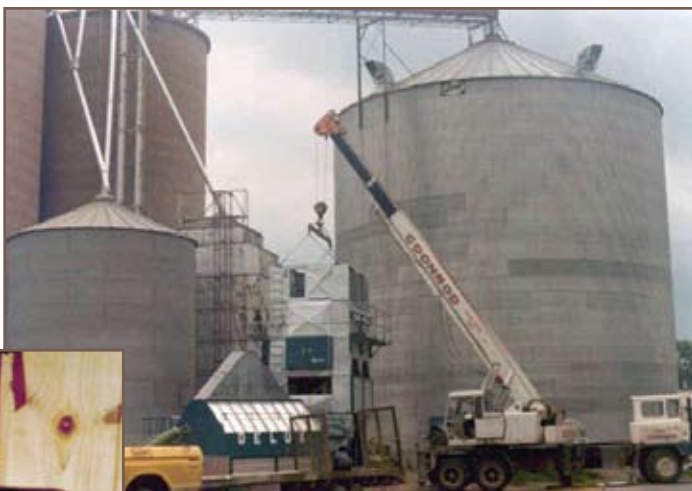
Fertilizer and chemical sales continued to grow, as Walker purchased the company's first Big A floater sprayer in 1978. A giant yellow machine with huge tires and a straight-piped diesel engine, such a monster as this could scarcely have been conceived of when Frank Krob first started his elevator business.

## The Third Generation, Changing With the Times.



Mike Krob and corn ground pile, a common harvest necessity when space gets tight

Erecting the new Deluxe dryer in Ely



F.J. Krob



Krob managers at Kent Feeds 100,000 ton award dinner



Walker elevator, circa 1971



Norb and Mary Ruth Krob





## Dealing With a Farm Crisis

In 1980, four additional Big A floaters were purchased throughout the company. Additionally, a fluid blend manufacturing plant was built in Walker. Ely, Rowley, and Solon all put in Liquid storage tanks and liquid blenders, and the term “weed and feed” became part of the Krob lexicon.

Second Generation attrition toward warmer climates continued. Norb and Bob retired in 1982, whereupon Mike was named manager of the Walker location and David was named manager at Ely.

A year later, another family member moved on to a new phase of life. On December 3, 1983, nearly three-quarters of a century after starting his business, Frank J. Krob passed away at the age of 94.

The early eighties were notably characterized by the Farm Crisis. Farms were over-extending by borrowing on the rising value of the land to buy even more land and machinery. As a company, FJ Krob allowed the farmers to run up large bills. When the farm economy collapsed and land values plummeted, the banks called their loans, resulting in a domino effect. The company was hit with uncollectable accounts, and although they survived, the blow was substantial. Still, the company weathered the crisis far better than others: There was a case in Hills, Iowa where a farmer killed his banker and then committed suicide. These years led to the birth of Willie Nelson’s Farm Aid concerts.

David Krob at Ely counter



In 1986, FJ Krob and Company made its first major facility acquisition in 36 years, purchasing Mount Auburn Grain. The company now had five locations serving five communities.

The late Eighties and early Nineties were sometimes referred to as the PIK years. Farmer production had increased substantially and was outpacing demand. The government stepped in, but did not want to get into the business of owning grain, as they had before. Instead, they paid farmer to idle the land, and the payment came in the form of a Payment In Kind (PIK) certificate, which had an actual cash value. Farmers presented the certificates to the elevator for cash, and in turn the elevator gave the certificates to the processors. No money was made by this transaction, and FJ Krob served only as a middleman.



Bob Krob mixing feed in the Ely mill

Larry Krob left the company in 1989. After some difficulty finding a solid manager in Solon, it was decided that the Ely and Solon facilities would operate as one, with David managing both locations, and the result was increased efficiency for both.



## Dealing With a Farm Crisis



Life-long Ely employee Al Levein weighing in



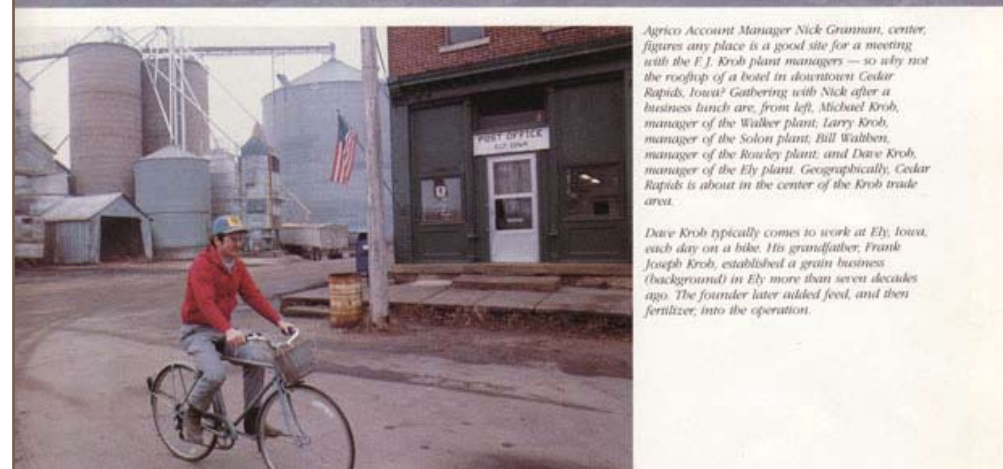
David Kroh and Vernie Yarborough loading up the Big A sprayer



Ely Elevator



View of Ely corn ground pile



Agrico Account Manager Nick Gramann, center, figures any place is a good site for a meeting with the F. J. Kroh plant managers — so why not the rooftop of a hotel in downtown Cedar Rapids, Iowa? Gathering with Nick after a business lunch are, from left, Michael Kroh, manager of the Walker plant; Larry Wabben, manager of the Solon plant; Bill Wabben, manager of the Rowley plant; and Dave Kroh, manager of the Ely plant. Geographically, Cedar Rapids is about in the center of the Kroh trade area.

Dave Kroh typically comes to work at Ely, Iowa, each day on a bike. His grandfather, Frank Joseph Kroh, established a grain business (background) in Ely more than seven decades ago. The founder later added feed, and then fertilizer, into the operation.





## Generation Four: Hope and Tragedy

The Nineties began solemnly, as Bob Krob passed away from cancer on September 29, 1990. At the same time, the decade showed the promise of great hope and excitement as the fourth generation joined the company. The farm economy was improving from its lows of the 1980s, and each location was continuing to make facility improvements. Equipment continued to get bigger, farms were consolidating and growing, and FJ Krob & Co strived to keep pace.

Like the generations before, the fourth generation of Krobs began working at the elevator as soon as they were old enough to handle a scoop shovel, and as they got older they graduated through every echelon of the business, from scooping out soybean bins in the heat of summer, to delivering feed in the dead of winter, to working 100-hour weeks operating sprayers in the springtime. The “old timers” always enjoy telling the young guys how much easier they have it, missing out on things like shelling corn and handling coal, but the younger generation might not completely agree, as there is still plenty of hard work to be done. During this decade, the fourth generation became an integral part of the company’s management team.



Solon railroad siding, over 20 years after the rail stopped going through

Lee Cherry began working out of the Walker location as a semi driver in 1989, and in 1992 Lee married Mike’s daughter Michelle. He was sent up to manage the Rowley elevator in 1997, as well as running a sprayer at planting time.

Allen Krob, Mike’s son, graduated from the University of Northern Iowa in 1992 with a degree in Business Management. He returned to the elevator immediately after college to work out of the Walker location, helping Mike with the management of the facility and also running a sprayer.

Likewise, Mike’s younger son, Michael, graduated from UNI in 1995 with a Business Management degree. He also returned to the elevator right out of college, mixing feed and running a sprayer. Tragically, on April 13, 1999, Michael Krob



was killed in an accident while operating a Big “A” floater. He was only 26 years old. Although the cause of the accident was never determined, the end result was clear: A big part of the future of FJ Krob & Company had been lost.

Michael died doing what he loved, and with the support of family, employees, customers, communities and friends, the company grieved Michael’s loss while continuing to look ahead to the future. There was, after all, still work to do.

David’s son Mark graduated from Iowa State in 1999, and began working full-time in Solon shortly thereafter. He started on the feed truck and in the mill, as well as operating a sprayer. Mark began managing the Solon location in 2005.

The Nineties were a decade of hope and tragedy, beginning with the loss of Bob Krob and ending with the loss of Michael Krob. But through it all, the company emerged poised for the new millennium stronger than ever. Still dedicated to the farmers they served, FJ Krob continued to celebrate success, overcome adversity, and forge boldly ahead.

Michael Krob



## Generation Four: Hope and Tragedy



Semi and driver in Rowley

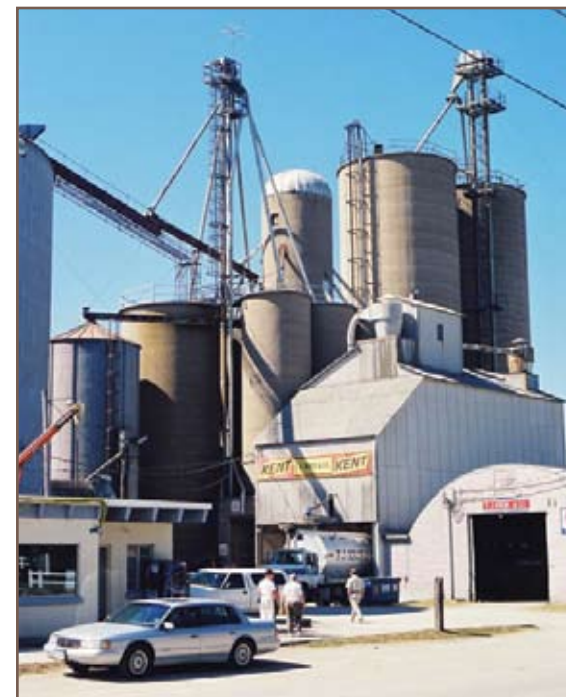


John Phillips, Carol (Phillips) Scanlan, Mike Krob, Martha Phillips, and David Krob on a Board of Directors tour in 1999

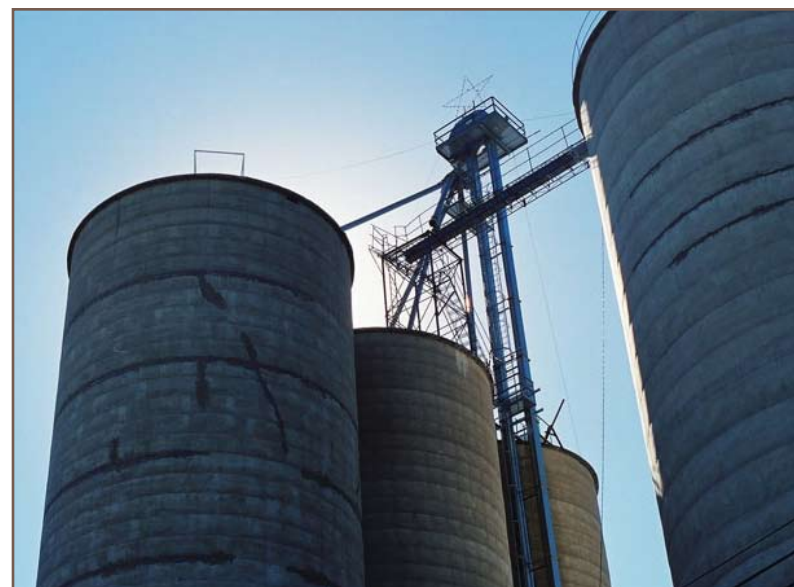


Walker Elevator, 1999

Solon Elevator 1999



Rowley Silos







## More Second Generation Losses. More Expansion for the Company

The world crossed over into the year 2000 without incident, and the work continued at the elevator. More of the “old guard” moved on during this decade, as John Phillips passed away on November 6, 2007, followed by Vic Krob on December 23, 2008.

As in the previous 90 years, challenges continued to present themselves, and as always the company adapted. The increased regulations subsequent to the attacks of September 11, 2001 reached out even to Frank Krob's small group of elevators, as its role in the food chain and buildings full of bulk fertilizer made it subject to anti-bioterrorism laws. The epic flooding of Cedar Rapids in 2008 not only paralyzed the city, but the aftermath left damaged soybean silos at Cargill and a swept away a railroad bridge at Penford. Hence, FJ Krob trucks had to drive over 100 miles in order to fill the company's soybean contracts, and had no way to deliver the Penford corn for over 6 months.

The 2000s notably brought forth an abundance of technological advancements. Over the course of the decade, global positioning guidance systems (light bars) were installed on nearly every sprayer and spreader in the company. On many of the larger farms, farmers were installing systems which allowed tractors to steer themselves. FJ Krob began offering Variable Rate fertilizer application, which utilized targeted soil testing and GPS to apply fertilizer only where it was needed, at the rate it was needed. Genetically modified corn and soybeans became far more prevalent than conventional seed. Amid all the new gadgets and ideas, the company endeavored to keep pace, without sacrificing practicality.

The increase in crop yields, with 200-plus bushel corn becoming the expected norm, increased the need for grain storage, and in the period between 2001 and 2007, the company expanded in Rowley, Solon, and Walker, adding a total of five new large steel bins and two corn bunkers, resulting in an additional 1.5 million bushels of grain storage, as well as new legs and receiving systems in order to improve unloading efficiency. FJ Krob and Company, after nearly 100 years of conservative, steady growth, now had a total grain storage capacity of over 5 million bushels.



Mark Krob on his Hagie STS 12 sprayer

In 2008, due in part to the massive expansion of the ethanol industry, as well as non-agricultural investment funds pouring money into farm commodity futures, grain prices reached phenomenal highs. This in turn caused all costs, including fertilizer, chemicals, and seed prices, to skyrocket to previously unheard of levels. In a very short period of time, it was requiring significantly more



capital just to continue doing the same amount of business. FJ Krob needed increased financing, and despite putting forth great efforts to keep the Krobs in business, the company's long-term relationship with Exchange State Bank in Springville (Formerly Citizen's Bank in Anamosa) came to an end. With the help of Exchange State Bank, FJ Krob and Company began a new relationship with Dubuque Bank and Trust.

Like Frank Krob's original 26,000 bushel wooden elevator, which is still in use today, the company still strives to be “modern in every detail,” although we still operate on the same century-old principles of hard work and honesty, the same principles that carried the company through two World Wars and a Great Depression; through droughts, blizzards, and floods; a Farm Crisis, and countless other challenges. Norb once stated, “I used to tell a good customer of mine that there's no point in me sticking my hand in your pocket if there's no money there. There are few businesses like ours that are so dependent on the success of our customers.”

As the third generation looks toward retirement, the fourth generation of Krobs is endeavoring to maintain the integrity and focus on quality that has kept the company going for as long as it has, and hoping that if they, like the old farmer told their Grandpa Norb in 1946, “are half as good as” their great-grandfather, that “maybe they'll be okay,” and understanding that in order for an elevator to prosper, each farmer it serves must prosper as well.



Past and present Rowley managers  
Bill Wathen and Lee Cherry



Drying corn in Walker on a cold day

## More Second Generation Losses. More Expansion for the Company



Rowley corn pile



Erecting a new leg in Walker



Allen Krob



Family member Rob King  
stacking bags in the Solon  
Quonset



Steel bins in Rowley, built in 2002





## 2010 and Beyond

Two thousand and ten, the company's centennial year, was intended to be a celebration with everyone who had played a part in FJ Krob and Company's 100 years in business: Customers, employees, business partners, and family. The year's festivities were kicked off in February with an open house at each location office, where customers were introduced to the new FJ Krob & Co logo, and were invited to share some "birthday" cake and fellowship.



On March 2, the company hosted a half-day fertilizer seminar at Kirkwood College, entitled "The World Fertilizer Outlook & Fertilizing for the Long Term." The event was sponsored by Dubuque Bank and Trust, and Potash Corporation of



PCS Sales President David Delaney speaking at the spring 2010 fertilizer seminar

Saskatchewan, Inc (PCS), the world's largest fertilizer manufacturer. The keynote speakers were Dr. Kim Polizotto, chief agronomist of PCS Sales, and David Delaney, President of PCS Sales, with introductions given by Lee Cherry, and closing remarks by Mark Krob. The seminar was very well received by the well over 100 farmer customers in attendance.

The big event for the year was our 100th Anniversary Celebration at the Walker elevator on August 5, sponsored by United Suppliers and BASF. The day began with over sixty farmers driving their old John Deere, IH, Oliver, and Allis Chalmers tractors in two separate tractorcades which left the Ely and Rowley elevators in the morning, arriving in Walker at noon under a comfortable and beautiful mid-day sun. The tractors were all parked in a designated area, and attendees arriving at the event were greeted by the sight of a giant, white tent on the lawn south of the office, next to scores of old and new tractors. There were two bounce houses for the kids, plus a clown, who spent the entire afternoon painting the faces of a seemingly interminable line of excited children. Walker's new fertilizer spreader, a large, shiny red four-wheeled floater, stood on the lawn, juxtaposed in contrast to the portable elevator that Frank Krob and Albert Hruby had built back in 1938. The old wooden "modern" contraption had been saved out of an old barn that spring; refurbished, and resurrected for the celebration by long-time Ely employee Vernie Yarborough, and was even pulled in several small-town parades during the course of the summer. Local news media were on site conducting TV interviews, and KGAN did a live weather broadcast.



Featured guests for the day's events were the surviving second-generation Krob family members: Martha Phillips, Norbert Krob, and Doris Buresh. Several Krob family members had flown in from all over the country: California, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Florida, Minnesota, and Arizona. The family was easy to spot in the crowd, as every member, young and old alike, wore matching green polo shirts, all sporting the new FJ Krob logo.



Lee Cherry, Allen Krob, Mark Krob, David Krob, Norbert Krob, Leo Greco, and Mike Krob in front of Frank Krob's portable elevator

While guests enjoyed a lunch of hamburgers and tenderloins, WMT and WHO radio personality and farm commentator Mark Pearson did a live broadcast of WHO's "Big Show" on site, under the big top. Mark conducted on-air interviews with Mark and Allen Krob, Mike and David Krob, Mary Jeanne Krob, and Norbert Krob, along with another local celebrity guest, 90-year-old Leo Greco. A long-time WMT Radio host and musician, Leo had been associated with FJ Krob and Company since the 1950s. His band, Leo Greco and the Pioneers, played for many Kent Feeds events at the Krob elevators, and Leo will always be considered a good friend of the family. In 2010, Leo Greco received the Marconi Award for Small Market Personality of the Year from the National Association of Broadcasters.

After lunch, a speaking program was offered. Allen Krob gave the opening remarks, and introduced Brad Oelman, CEO of United suppliers, who spoke briefly regarding the relationship between United Suppliers and FJ Krob and Company. Allen then introduced Mark Pearson, who gave a talk to the crowd, with topics ranging from the history of agriculture to the current state of affairs, intermixed with humor and an interview with Norbert Krob. Mark Krob offered the closing remarks, and the day's events drew to completion.

The last event for the year was a farmer bus trip to the 2010 Farm Progress Show in Boone, Iowa, on September 1, which was sponsored by Specialty Fertilizer Products and Hagie Manufacturing. The trip was offered on a first-come, first served basis to all customers, free of charge. Two chartered buses carried nearly 100 farmer customers, accompanied by Allen, Lee, and Mark, out to and back from the Farm Progress Show. Everyone had a grand old time, to the point where many customers suggested that such a trip could become an annual affair.

The year 2010 soon came to an end, and as fascinating as it was to look back on our past, we never failed to keep our eyes focused on the future. All in all, we felt that the year was a resounding success. We hope that the year's offerings adequately conveyed our appreciation to all those who had a part in maintaining 100 years in business, as a family and as a company.





## 2010 and Beyond



Allen Krob gives the opening remarks



Mark Pearson interviewing Norbert Krob



Mike and David Krob on the radio



Martha (Krob) Philips – My dad started all this!



**Thank You  
FJ Krob & Company**

