

GOING with the GRAIN

Dennis Cunningham
develops his business
relationships in bulk

BY SHAWNDRRA MILLER
PHOTOS BY JOSH MARSHALL



Dennis Cunningham

Just off County Road 200E, south of Lebanon, the historic Kern, Kirtley & Herr grain elevator rises white against the sky. Continuing a nearly century-old tradition, the facility now spans numerous buildings on both sides of the road and offers ample services to area farmers, including those raising organic and non-GMO products.

Presiding over it all is Dennis Cunningham, who isn't kidding when he says he "grew up here." His father ran the place back in the day, and Cunningham's playpen used to be set up right in the wood-paneled room that now constitutes his office. The white house to the north of the complex was his childhood home. For a time he lived there with his own family, though the house is now vacant and structurally unsound.

Central Indiana Organics is a relatively new business, added to the already existing services provided at the grain elevator. Launched in 1997 in response to farmers' needs for organic pig feed, it now markets all kinds of feed under the Fertile Fields Organic label. The grain mill also offers products free of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Services targeted to local organic farmers include seed cleaning, grain storage, custom grinding and grain roasting.

Across the road from the original elevator, about 65,000 bushels of organic products are stored along with 150,000 bushels of commercial grain. The old mill elevator itself holds 30,000 bushels, and another 13,000 are held in storage behind the mill.

Working with organic material means careful segregation, extra paperwork and Cunningham's eagle eye on cleanliness, starting with the trucks bringing the material in. "The trucks have to be clean," he says. "I'm the Gestapo of clean trucks. I rejected one the other day because it was dirty."

That attention to detail means customers can count on high quality. Cunningham says 15 percent to 20 percent of the overall business is in organics. Farmers can pick up feed in a "drive-through feed barn" with options ranging from organic to GMO-free to commercial. "We probably go through 3 to 6 tons (in sales) between the

organic and non-GMO a week," he says.

One of the farmers sourcing his poultry and pig feed here is Darby Simpson of Simpson's Farm Market in Martinsville. Simpson pasture-raises beef, poultry and pork, eschewing GMOs and chemicals in their feed. Though his farm is 50 miles away, it's worth it to him to buy feed from Cunningham.

"We have it bulk delivered," he says, "but a lot of times I have to run up and get stuff, like if I need a ton instead of 8 tons." It's an hour's drive each way, so he faces fuel costs along with the higher price tag of GMO-free feed, but Simpson is a loyal customer.

"It's one-stop shopping," he says. Conveniently, Central Indiana Organics carries a line of certified organic supplements that get mixed into his animals' feed rations. "You can get as little as 500 pounds of feed custom-mixed, all the way up to 12 tons, and anything in between."

Aside from local business, Central Indiana Organics partners with Buffalo, New York-based Lackawanna Products in distributing grain from all over the Midwest. Lackawanna is a large grain broker that manages purchases and sales of organic wheat, corn, beans and oats. "We get a load of wheat in here," Cunningham explains, "and we will hold it for them, and they will send it out to somebody else to make feed with or (if it's) food grade, to make flour."

But back in 2007, this new branch of the business originated with one thing: soybean meal. David Randle of nearby Randle Family Farm had transitioned his farm to organic in the late 1990s and had been raising pigs for the regional cooperative, Organic Valley. He had grown organic soybeans, but pigs require the beans to be roasted for edibility. Lacking a way to process his own beans, he was forced to go far afield for soybean meal.

"I was having to buy soybean meal from northwestern Ohio or Wisconsin," he says. "So every time I bought a semi load, I was looking at a freight bill of \$1,500 to \$2,000."

Wanting to put his own organic soybeans to use as feed, he decided to purchase a roaster himself. He approached Cunningham about setting up the roaster at his elevator.

Central Indiana Organics

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Cunningham agreed and began to process soybeans on-site, offering the service to other farmers as well.

Randle and his son bought into the business when Cunningham decided to expand further into the organic market, and they are now partners in Central Indiana Organics. But Randle's history with the place runs as far back as he can remember.

"I'm 70 years old, and one of my first jobs when I was 12 years old was to drive our tractor to the Herr elevator," he remembers.

Over the years the elevator's role shifted as the business of farming evolved into large-scale agribusiness. A local elevator started to have less business with area farms as each grew larger. As Cunningham explains, "Years ago, we bought grain constantly, but the big grain terminals started buying directly off the farmer. That made it difficult to compete."

In the 1980s and '90s, the facility was full-service, marketing fertilizer made on-site, along with grain and feed. From about 1987 to 1992, the elevator also served as a wholesale distributor for Ralston-Purina pet food and supplies, a perfect fit for the business, which serves as "the second oldest Purina dealer in the country," he says. Cunningham still stocks both Nutrena and Purina products.

Now when Cunningham walks through the complex, he can point out where ice melting road solutions are blended, where asphalt grinding happens and where barley will be malted for beer.



TOP: A view from the top of the grain elevator overlooks the tracks that used to deliver and carry grain and feed.

ABOVE: An empty bag that will be filled with organic feed. RIGHT: A small grain wagon at Central Indiana Organics.



His longtime presence in this place uniquely qualifies him as a tour guide. He shows a visitor where the old diesel engine sat, before descending into a dungeon-like space that used to house an even older steam engine. Dust-weighted cobwebs loop from thick beams overhead, low enough to touch Cunningham's ball cap.

Fired by coal or corn cobs, the steam engine powered a complicated pulley system. Through various levers, the operator could tell the system to grind, shell or clean the grain, or ladder it up to the elevator on "grain legs."

It wasn't until the 1960s that three-phase electric power reached rural Boone County. That's when Kern, Kirtley & Herr converted to an all-electric system.

The switch from steam to diesel and finally electric is not the only change Cunningham has seen over the years. Just behind the original facility is a defunct railroad track, where trains used to deposit coal into a pit. "There was a conveyor there," Cunningham says, "and people would come in and buy coal."

"I remember throwing coal off the cars — a bunch of us kids around here would get on the coal cars," Cunningham recalls. Asked if the cars were stationary during these hijinks, he admits, "Well, we rode a few trains."

Back then, a "cob house" held the corncobs after they were stripped of grain. "All the corn that came in years and years ago was in ear," he explains. The cobs ended up as fuel or fill.

Aside from these physical changes, there's less of a social feel to the place in recent decades because of the drop in small-scale, local commerce. As a kid, Cunningham was on the receiving end of farmers' amiable teasing (and in turn his daughter was). But even if there were children here today, there'd be little occasion for that, because farmers have largely moved their socializing to other places.

"Years ago the grain elevator was a place for the farmers to congregate and tell all their lies and stories and whatever," Cunningham says. That's not the case anymore. "As times have changed, now they go to break-fast at the truck stop or wherever."

Randle remembers those days, too. "Back in the day you had three centers of social interaction in our community," he says. "One was the school; two was the church. And three was the country elevator."

"The country elevator was the equivalent of today's coffee shop."

Despite the changes, farmers like Simpson appreciate this particular country elevator more than ever. It's not just the products' quality that brings him back, but also the relationships built over the years. Randle mentored Simpson early on, and both Randle and Cunningham have gone the extra mile to support Simpson's efforts, understanding the challenges of starting a small farm operation. "I could say without a doubt that if it weren't for Dave Randle and Denny Cunningham," he says, "we would not be where we are today. They've just been very gracious in working with us." *FI

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