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Lewisville Feed Mill closes doors after 124 years

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LEWISVILLE - A chapter of Lewisville history recently closed its doors, but James Polser hasn't gotten around to locking it up.

He's the owner of the Lewisville Feed Mill, which closed at the end of October after operating as a family business for 124 years. But each morning, Polser drives his 1946 Chevy pickup to the store and puts on a pot of coffee. Within minutes, the chairs in his office are filled with his old friends, swapping stories, killing time, just as they have for years.

And customers still wander into the cavernous old building, looking for fertilizer, a tool, or some fox urine to chase away rodents.

"When they see my truck, they know I'm here," said Polser, 70, whose love of history is preserved in the old mill that still retains the smell of grain and the echoes of Denton County's agrarian past.

"We call James the historian of Lewisville," said Denton County Commissioner Bobbie J. Mitchell. "If you wanted some information about Lewisville, you could always go to James."

Polser's great-grandfather J.W. Degan founded the Lewisville Feed Mill Livery Stable in 1886. Polser bought it from his uncle, James Degan, in 1978.

The store, on Main Street in Old Town Lewisville, has changed little through the decades.

The ornate brass National cash register still sits on the counter, where J.W. Degan placed it when he purchased it in 1912.

Cobweb-lined drawers

A cabinet of wooden bins, once filled with bush bean, yellow corn and other vegetable seeds, is mostly empty now, cobwebs lining the drawers.

Massive silos still stand on the side lot, where farmers used to come to fill their wagons with grain for their horses and herds of cattle.

"When I was growing up, there were farms on both sides of Main Street," said Polser, who was born in a house where an IHOP restaurant now stands, at Main Street and Interstate 35E.

In those days, the feed mill did a brisk business, selling oats, corn, wheat and other grains for livestock. The feed was ground at the mill, then blended with dried molasses in a large mixer that almost reaches the rafters. The machine, which still operates, stands empty now.

Over the years, the farmland was replaced by subdivisions and shopping centers, and the need for tow sacks of grain disappeared.

"It started to change in the late '60s and early '70s," said Polser, who figures he hasn't used the feed mixer since the 1980s and stopped selling cattle feed in the early 1990s.

"I miss the small-town Lewisville," he said.

As suburbanites replaced farmers, the Lewisville Feed Mill shifted with the times.

Instead of oats and corn, Polser began stocking the store with lawn fertilizers, gardening supplies and pet food.

All the while, the store was filling with relics of the past - a 155-year-old corn grinder, a woman's side saddle, a circa-1862 broom maker, and a variety of scythes, harnesses, saws and other farming implements.

Polser said his friends knew that he cherished "old things" and gave him castoffs that they no longer used or had room to store.

"They knew I took care of things," said Polser, whose feed mill is now as much of a museum as it is a store, decorated with bales of hay hanging from the rafters and burlap bags on the walls.

He loves showing visitors his collection, hosting school tours and sharing his knowledge of bygone days and ways.

Georgia Caraway, executive director of the Denton County Museums, says his collection, especially his assortment of old photographs, is priceless.

'Wonderful archive'

"James, over so long a period of time, has amassed a wonderful archive of Lewisville memorabilia," Caraway said. "I don't think it can be duplicated."

The future of the old feed mill is uncertain.

Old Town Lewisville is undergoing a revival, with a new arts center and the A-train commuter line beginning service next year, linking Denton County to Dallas.

Caraway would love to see the old mill find new life as a museum. "It's a Lewisville icon," she said.

Polser says he's already fielding offers to sell the property. But he seems in no hurry to make any moves.

"I love this," he said, standing in the old building, alive with the past. "I hope it stays just like it is."

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