

# CUTTING A PATH WITH PERSEVERANCE



Across the Great Plains of Texas, harvesters are prepping for the upcoming harvest season. The Texas Panhandle is home to several custom harvesting operations. Some stay within a 100-mile radius of home and others start in Texas and finish near the Canadian border. However, there is a sad truth that lies within, the number of custom harvesting operations have been dwindling across the area in the past few decades.

Spawning after World War II, the custom harvester rose from all around the American Great Plains to meet a need. America's concern with providing an ample amount of food to its citizens and allies was growing. Harvesters answered the call with a quick and efficient avenue to get grain from the fields to storage while keeping the strain off the farmer. Equipped with their combines and trucks, these independent operators would start in the south and follow the ripening crops north, harvesting millions of acres in each state along the way.

While this craft played a crucial role in the history of American agriculture, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find one of these combine-clad crews, especially in the last decade.

According to the Custom Harvesting Association, the average age of custom harvesters is 56, and that number is dropping. Morgan Crabtree, a custom harvester from Conlen, Texas, has seen this trend grow in the Texas Panhandle.

"Every year I see, especially this last year, several older guys that just said, 'Alright, that's it. I kind of lost my tail this year and I can't recover,'" said Crabtree.

According to Ralf Meister, a former harvesting hand from Kansas, there are several aspects that are making life difficult on custom harvesters in the 21st Century. First is the rising cost and availability of equipment.

Gary Don Evans, owner and operator of Levelland-based Evans Harvesting said the price of the same

machine has jumped roughly \$40,000 from last year. And even if you could pay the higher price, Evans said there was no guarantee that you would be able to get one.

"It's a lot harder to start an operation than it used to be," said Mickey Blackwell, who operates a smaller harvesting unit out of Tulia, Texas. "You've got to pay over \$1 million to get all the equipment to start up."

According to the Farm Industry News website, the price of a 2012 John Deere Combine ranges anywhere from just below \$300,000 all the way up to \$450,000. With a price this staggering, many harvesters have opted to repair their machines rather than purchase new combines.

Once a new harvesting operation has gotten a hold of their new and expensive machines, what do they have to overcome next to survive? The elements. This is evident with the toll the drought had on the wheat industry this past year, especially in Texas.

"It devastated our Texas run, is what it did," Evans said.

Evans takes his harvesting outfit to the Canadian border every year, so he managed to avoid serious repercussions. Others weren't so lucky, specifically harvesters who don't leave Texas.

"Last year, 2011, was one of our worst years ever," Crabtree recalls.

Despite all the hardships these grain-harvesting outfits must face, they are still here. So what has helped these local gentlemen stay in the game, especially in the Texas Panhandle? Simple, the love of their craft carries them from year to year.

"This is a passion," Crabtree states, with an undeniable sense of pride. "It's something I was born to do and when I'm not doing it I just get antsy, I'm ready to get back in the combine."

Crabtree keeps his business alive by retaining a very loyal customer base. He cuts the same fields for the same farmers year after year. He said that is what is so great about being solely locally based. He truly values keeping the same customers year after year.

As Blackwell looked across I-27 onto his beloved home of Tulia, where he has operated for the past four decades, he said it was nice how immediate the sense of accomplishment sets upon him. He simply turns back and looks at a field after a long day of cutting.

"What I like most, you know, is the sense of accomplishment you get when you look back at the field and see what you cut," Blackwell said.

Providing a much-needed service for farmers has become a welcome way of life for these men of harvest. That's why they get up day after day, not sure what unexpected hurdle will be thrown in their way; they love what they do. Crabtree said the best way for him to sum up this feeling was quoting his great-grandfather.

"My great-granddad always said that work's not called work if you enjoy it." 🍷

## "WORK'S NOT CALLED WORK IF YOU ENJOY IT"

Austin Zimmer | Morse, Texas

