

# It's all about the wheat: A fable

—by N.W.J. Hazelton

“Back of the loaf is the snowy flour,  
And back of the flour the mill;  
And back of the mill is the wheat and the shower,  
And the sun and the Father's will.”

M.D. Babcock



## DOWN IN THE VILLAGE

Once upon a time there was a farmer who grew wheat. He sold his wheat to a miller, who ground the wheat into flour and sold it to the local people, who made bread at home. It was one of those old-fashioned rustic communities that seems to have always been like it is, and this arrangement worked well for many years.

One day, the miller, facing having to replace the aging grinding stones in his windmill, installed a new milling system (called a Complete Automated Degranulizer), which allowed him to produce a wider variety of products from the wheat, and to do it quicker, cheaper and better. The miller now found that he had extra time on his hands, so he decided to start a bakery. His first efforts were a bit rough, but with a bit of help from his oldest daughter, he was soon able to produce all kinds of fancy baked goods. The local people started to buy their bread more often from the bakery, rather than making their simple loaves themselves. They also bought his other wares, like cakes, rolls, pastries and cookies.

The miller found that demand had increased, so he persuaded the farmer to increase his wheat production. The farmer retired his horses, upgraded his equipment (he bought several Enhanced Digging Machines), improved his productivity and was able to meet the increased demand.

He also brought his children into the business, now that they were getting older and more responsible.

The youngsters had many good ideas for how to improve production further. One introduced a Grain Productivity System that produced a lot more wheat per acre than before. Another developed a Legume Integrated Double-Arable Rotation system, which produced higher protein wheat, much better for bread making. A third invented a Double-Articulated Tractor Add-on Collector, which allowed the wheat to be transported to the miller's place much more efficiently. Things were certainly humming along down on the farm.

The miller had not been standing still while this was going on. His children were now involved in his business, and were advancing those operations. One implemented a Remote Sales ENhancing System INtegrating Grain, which allowed the miller to sell to a far larger market, shipping his products far from the original customer base. Another developed a Grain Integration System/Legume Inclusion Sub-system that greatly expanded the range of goods they could produce and sell. A third developed a Permanently Hot Oven Temperature Operating, Grilling, Rack Arranging, Measurement and Monitoring Effective Throughput Rate

Integration Control system, which was a major improvement to operating efficiency in the bakery. The bakery was turning into a major commercial operation, and the farm was producing more, too.

The farmer and the miller were now far better off than they were before, and they saw the benefits of introducing new technology to their operations. Of course, what they were doing was far more complex than in the old days, but they had their various children educated in getting each of the parts working properly, and under their guidance everything seemed to work together.

#### GROWING VS EATING SEASON

The problem with growing wheat is that it takes a full cycle of a year to produce the grain. Even with the introduction of spring wheat grown in different fields from the usual winter wheat, only two crops could be harvested in the year, late spring and early fall. However, people want bread to eat year-round, and like it baked fresh.

So the wheat had to be stored after the harvest and then fed out to be milled throughout the year. Back in the early days, the farmer bagged his wheat and stored it in his barn, taking a few bags at a time to the miller on his wagon, as they were needed. Now this system was incapable of keeping up with the quantities of wheat being grown and milled. The farmer and miller realized they had to move to bulk handling systems. This also meant bulk storage arrangements. So they invested in Self-contained Integrated Logistical Organizing Systems.

This allowed a much smoother flow of grain to the miller's

organization, and decentralized the storage problem. Each area of the farm had SILOS, as had various parts of the mill and transportation operations. These SILOS were painted with the names and graphics of the various parts of the operation, and came to symbolize each part.

One year, one of the miller's sons married one of the farmer's daughters, and it looked like the two operations would be united with stronger ties than the firm friendship between the farmer and the miller. The farmer and the miller looked fondly at their families and grandchildren, and the future looked rosy. They had achieved a great deal, but there was still so much potential in those lively youngsters.

#### DECENTRALIZATION OF OPERATIONS

The various farming, milling, baking and distribution parts of the entire system were now run by the various children, while the miller and the farmer were able to transition towards retirement. As operational control moved from the farmer and the miller to the various children, the children began to assert control of their various parts of the enterprise. Naturally, there was some sibling rivalry and competition between the various groups.

As control gradually moved to the parts of the operation, each of the children focused on improving the efficiency of their own area of responsibility, as this was thought to improve the overall return on investment. One of the obvious means of improving efficiency was vertical integration within each part of the overall operation.

One of the first signs of this vertical integration was the introduction of new

milling equipment (known as the Automated Milling/Flour Management system) associated with the Grain Productivity System on the farm. This allowed the farmer's oldest son to mill and transport flour on demand to the mill, which improved the price he was paid. The SILOS were able to be adapted to store flour, and some of the other milling products were able to be sold to other markets.

Soon the milling operations were buying land and growing some of their own grain, using the Commercially-Oriented Grain Operations system, and there was a bakery operating down on the farm. After some years, there were at least eight parallel operations taking wheat from the field to the table quite independently from the others. Since each of the operations had started from different technology, they each had their own approaches to growing, harvesting and transporting wheat, and then milling and baking the flour, and distributing the finished goods. Each operation had its own language or dialect, and of course, believed it had the one right way to produce bread, and that its products were by far superior.

Family get-togethers at Thanksgiving and Christmas were becoming more strained, as the rivalry between the various siblings grew. Soon the various siblings started to go their own way, and their children in turn naturally stayed close to their parent's operations. These various cousins became progressively more estranged and antagonistic towards each other.

The farmer and the miller were distressed at these problems and



tried to bring their various children and grandchildren back together. They tried to stress that they were all one family now, and all in the one business, growing and adding value to wheat. But the children were too deeply involved in their own operations and were fascinated by the technology. The small victories that the farmer and the miller achieved for family unity were overwhelmed by the on-going competition and rivalry between the various operations.

The farmer and the miller now spent much of their time playing golf together in Florida. They were deeply saddened by the state of affairs, after the earlier success of their business operations. They rarely bothered their families, since visiting them involved treading on egg shells all the time, and they simply enjoyed the occasional visit by their grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

#### MEANWHILE, BACK IN THE KITCHEN...

The local people had initially gone along with the development of the bakery by the miller, as they could obtain fancy goods that they didn't have time to make themselves. They could buy bread, although some still made their own. So their lives continued much as before, with some extra choices.

When the technology started to flow into the farm, mill and bakery, those who were interested marveled at it all, but

all it meant for the rest of them was a continuation of the past. But presently the technology started to filter down to their own kitchens.

The first appliance that arrived was a bread-making machine. With this machine, you could put the ingredients into the machine when you went to bed, and wake up to a freshly-baked loaf. Soon the more adventurous discovered they could produce a greater variety of bread than the bakery. This didn't make much difference to the bakery, as they still sold the flour.

One day, someone bought a small wheat mill and demonstrated how to grind wheat into flour. Several people bought their own machines and then bought wheat from one of the farm operations. Some adventurous people even bought durum wheat from outside the district and made their own pasta, something quite new.

One year, a few of the locals plowed a field and grew some winter wheat, and added this to the local people's processing capabilities. Various people now had some experience of the whole bread-making process, from field to table. It was all still a bit of an adventure and very small scale, but it was a lot of fun for the locals.

The next development was a bulletin board that was placed in the town hall. The locals started to put their own bread recipes on the bulletin board, and other

copied to them. Soon there was a lot of bread making going on around the place. Many people said they felt that the bread that the bakeries were making was not as good as in the past, and that they were going back to 'real bread.' One day, an enterprising soul opened a hot bread shop, named it the Wide-area Whole-wheat Wizard, that produced loaves just like mother used to make them, and did very well. The various bakeries' managements started to take notice, a bit.

#### MANAGEMENT STARTS TO ACT

At first, the management people refused to take the hot bread shop seriously. After all, they had vertical operations, controlling everything from field to table in the same organization. But the different bread-making operations that had grown from the farmer and miller's operations weren't always producing the bread that everyone wanted. They had gone after various market niches, and were relying on sales in other markets far away, rather than selling to the locals. So the local efforts, while annoying, made little impact on the various bottom lines. They were just one more small competitor, and not even a relative.

The first shock came the year that the professional bakeries failed to win a single award in baking at the Town Fair. The local judges seemed to prefer the local bread, rather than that of the

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All these shots are from Australia, as that's where I know all the silos from! When I was a student one year, I drove a wheat truck from the farm to the silo to drop off the wheat, pretty much hot from the harvester. That was in the Mallee in northern Victoria, in an old International truck, well old now, but relatively new then! The one we drove to, Kooloonong, was much smaller, but it's no longer served by a train, so I suspect that silo is no longer in use. The line was ripped up back to Piangil, and Natya lost its silo, too. The line used to go through to Annuello and Robinvale, but that was long, long time ago.

bakeries. Bakery managements just passed it off as an aberration. But when it happened again the next year, they quietly decided not to compete again. The various management executives claimed



that their product was subject to different and more complex professional standards, only really appreciated by other bakers, and so the locals' bread was just a good amateur effort.

Some of the locals had started to complain about the quality of the bread from the bakeries, and had pointed out the much higher cost of the 'professional' loaves compared to their own. Surely it was all bread, they claimed. Why didn't the economies of scale lead to a cheaper product? They asked. No one at the bakeries seemed to have any answers.

The miller's son who had married the farmer's daughter was now in a fairly senior position. After much discussion, they decided to try to get the various family members back together again, to try to get the whole operation back to the admired business it once had been. What surprised them was the negative reaction from their siblings, nephews, nieces and cousins.

Everyone wanted to keep their own operations. Everyone was of the opinion that they were carrying on the original tradition of the farmer and the miller, and that they had the one true approach to bread making.

Many of the operations had set up their own training schools, to continue their methods of operation. There were trade paper stories about the various operations, praising their work and products. The advertising budgets and recruiting efforts were too big to abandon or amalgamate. Even the terminology each operation used didn't match that used by the other operations, even for exactly the same thing. The divisions remained, if anything deeper than before.

The second shock came during a surprising economic downturn. The separate operations were almost all found to be very delicately poised between solvency and bankruptcy. The vigor, strength and security of the original farming and milling operations had disappeared in the divisions. The duplication and in-fighting had sapped the strength and resources of the entire operation. Its survival was now questionable, especially as the locals had spread their recipe network and complaints all over the country. The local hot bread shop had grown into a franchise, with properties all over the country.

#### SOME TIME LATER...

One day, the farmer and the miller came back to pay a visit to their families. With the poor business situation, it wasn't a happy visit. The added tension only made the divisions within the family all the more touchy

and unpleasant. Even the youngest great grandchild seemed depressed.

After the time in Florida, the farmer decided that he wanted to walk around his old fields, to see the waving wheat beneath the spring skies of speedwell blue. The miller walked with him, and they reminisced about their early days. On a slight rise, the farmer stopped and plucked an almost ripe ear of wheat. "You know," he said to the miller, "these kids just don't get it. It's all about the wheat. The processing isn't really important."

"Exactly!" said the miller. "You'd bring me the wheat, and I'd just rearrange it a bit and have wheat flour. Then we'd add a little salt, sugar, water, oil and yeast, and we'd have wheaten bread. The details and technology don't matter. It's all about the wheat."

The farmer surveyed the scene. There were the signs and symbols of the various farming, milling, baking and transportation operations all round the horizon. They reared above the fields and trees, towered over the houses in the villages and town. "It's all about the wheat," he echoed quietly. "But what have our kids achieved? Look around us. They're trapped inside all these SILOS they made for themselves. Those SILOS look like gravestones for our lives' work."

"It could be worse," said the miller. "We could've been in the geospatial data industry. The SILOS there are even worse." He grinned. "There's still golf. I'll give you two strokes on the first nine holes. Winner buys drinks."