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In this January 2013 photo, the abandoned Light Grain Flour Mill structure sits in the location of the original flour mill built by Charles Moses Light Sr. in the spring of 1918. It was expanded throughout the years to meet the demand for flour and feed grains. The structure, a nearby warehouse and two railcars burned to the ground Sunday evening. It had been scheduled for demolition prior to the “undetermined” fire. L&T photo/Chris Linenbroker

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times Liberal firefighters still have not determined the cause of a fire Sunday, May 26, at the abandoned Light Grain and Milling Co. flour mill.

Thursday, deputy fire chief Skeety Poulton said investigators with the Liberal Fire Department started working on the fire scene on Monday morning and continued throughout the day attempting to determine a cause of the fire.

“LFD investigators met with insurance fire investigators on Tuesday,” Poulton said in a press release. “Through efforts of both parties, the official cause of the fire will be listed as undetermined.”

Poulton said all accidental and natural causes have been eliminated, but due to the extensive damage and destruction of any potential evidence, a finding of anything other than undetermined is not possible at this time.

“Interviews with potential witnesses will continue, and investigators encourage anyone with

information regarding the fire to contact Poulton or Fire Inspector Cody Regier at the Liberal Fire Department at 626-0128," the release noted.

The flour mill had been a part of the Liberal community for nearly a century. Light Grain & Milling Company was organized in May 1915, under the name C.M. Light Grain Company by Charles Moses Light Sr., who in subsequent years acquired country elevators at many points on the Rock Island, BMME and the Santa Fe Railroads in Southwest Kansas and the Oklahoma Panhandle.

Flour and feed warehouses have been operated at many of these elevator points as well as Miami, Okla., Tucumcari, N.M., El Paso, Texas, and Amarillo, Texas. In the spring of 1918, a flour mill of 200 barrels, or 39,200 pounds, daily capacity was built, and the name of the company was changed to The Light Grain & Milling Company.

Two years later, the flour business had increased to such a volume that it was necessary to increase the daily capacity of the mill to 500 barrels, or 98,000 pounds.

Light's sons, George and Charles Jr., were also sent to Kansas State University, where they took a course in flour milling.

One of Liberal's early economic developers, Donna Belle Schultz said in a 1993 article in the Southwest Daily Times in the mill's early days, people from all over the world came to Kansas to learn about milling.

Soon the increased demand from poultry and dairy feeders of the southwest and especially the New Mexico stock country made it necessary that grinding equipment for coarse grains be installed. This was done in 1922 for the purpose of manufacturing chopped and mixed feeds.

Business soon increased to a point where the equipment was inadequate to give proper service to its patrons. In 1924, one of the most modern and up-to-date grinding and mixing plants in the southwest was installed.

In 1931, a concrete elevator with a capacity of 250,000 bushels was constructed on the site of the original elevator which was dismantled. In 1947, additional space of 350,000 bushels was added, making a total of 600,000.

Then in 1958, 400,000 bushels were added making 1 million total capacity, and in 1960, the capacity was increased to 1.35 million bushels.

In 1952, the present feed plant of concrete construction was erected, and it was equipped with the latest feed manufacturing machinery. This enabled the company to formulate a complete line of animal and poultry feeds of which 44 different kinds were manufactured prior to Monday's fire.

At its peak, the mill produced 750 railroad carloads of flour each year along with mill feed, formula feed and ground grain.

George and Charles Jr. would take over the company after their father's death in 1942. Flour milling at the Liberal facility would continue until the mid-1960s. Schultz said this was due to unfavorable transportation rates and the greater competition from the many mills in central and eastern Kansas.

In 1970, Perryton Equity Exchange purchased the Light Grain and Milling Company. The transaction involved facilities capable of handling more than a million bushels of grain.

The SWDT story said the group had made its goal "to establish better and more stable grain prices for producers in the area."

Prior to Sunday's fire, however, the flour mill facility stood unused, and a few antique flour sacks were the only concrete evidence that Light's Flour was once a household name.

At the time of the mill's closing of operation, local historian Paul Boles said something many people were likely feeling after the fire that destroyed the facility.

"I think everyone felt a little sad and disappointed," he said. "It was the end of an era."

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