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By RACHEL COLEMAN

Leader & Times

The framed photographs that hang on the walls of Keating Tractor & Equipment show farm life in faded black and white. Overall-clad farmers stand next to iron tractors with wheels that resemble a child's toy set, and heaps of hay bigger than a house.

Just feet away from the sepia-toned images, the store's showroom offers a colorful look at modern farm life. Green-enameled pieces of John Deere farm equipment gleam in the sunlight, visible through the new building's vast windows. Inside, display racks showcase bright-colored children's toys and T-shirts that declare "Live, Love, Farm!"

In about the space of a city block, Keating embodies the history of agriculture in Southwest Kansas.

“We’ve been here since my dad purchased the business in 1958,” said Julie Parsons, office manager and sister of owner Russ Keating. “He’d probably be rolling over if he could see everything we’ve added.” Of the John Deere apparel and toys, Parsons said with a smile, “my brother says, ‘Well, that’s Julie’s idea.’” When farmers come to shop for equipment, though, a spouse often comes along and “the wives buy it,” said Parsons.

For 55 years, Keating Tractor has been a family endeavor.

“Growing up, my dad had us out in the shop, sweeping, stocking, helping customers,” Parsons said. “He expected us to help. In grade school and high school, you got drug out here to work. If you wanted something, you had to work for it.”

Jim Keating had learned the value of hard work growing up on a farm himself, though Parsons said it was always clear that he didn’t want the life of a farmer.

“Both my parents’ families were in farming, but my dad didn’t want to do that,” Parsons said. As for her mother, “she always said she wasn’t going to marry anyone who was a farmer, because she was tired of always eating late.” Her husband’s desire to pursue a life in business suited her as well.

When Keating purchased the dealership where he’d worked through high school, college summers and for several years afterwards, it was just one of many farm equipment providers in the area. Dealerships for Ford, Massey, International, Minneapolis and Oliver jockeyed for the ag trade. Yet Keating, with its green-and-yellow John Deere lineup, prevailed. That’s due in part to the enormous popularity of the brand.

“I don’t have to sell the John Deere name,” said sales representative Ryan Martin. “What I have to sell is Keating Tractor.”

It’s not hard to do, he added. After Jim Keating died in the late 1990s, the business stayed in the family, a definite strong point for farmers who value continuity.

Though the business has expanded exponentially to employ 43 people, “we’re still kind of a mom-and-pop store,” said Parsons. “Up until a year or so ago, Russ and I were still cleaning the bathrooms. I bet we were the only dealers attending those John Deere conventions who did that.”

The personal touch goes further than elbow grease.

“Farmers appreciate coming to a family-owned business,” said Martin. “There’s something to be said about that, because you’re going to have to drive pretty doggone far to find a dealership that’s still owned by the same family after 50 years.”

Martin has sold tractors to “70-, 80-year-old farmers who say, ‘I don’t know if I’ve ever bought a tractor from anyone else,’” he said. “They remember buying from the store on Second Street, and they like it that the ownership has stayed the same, in the family. And then, a lot of ’em, their sons will come in and say, ‘I remember when I was a kid, my dad bought a tractor here.’ They can relate with the ownership. They know who they are, on a personal level, and the Keatings know them, know their kids.”

In the maintenance and repair bay, those same customers have a chance to meet a third-generation Keating, Alex Parsons. He oversees a maintenance crew of 20, with technicians who specialize in every permutation of tractor imaginable: tractors, combines, sprayers and more. The crew offers old-fashioned practical help like service calls on site and towing, along with repair to electronic, computer-based elements.

“These new tractors are so high-tech, I joke that the farmers can just get in the cab and go to sleep,” Julie Parsons said.

Another modern advantage: though Keating used to receive a once-weekly parts order, customers who need a particular item can receive it the next day, provided the order comes in before 6 p.m. That’s critical in a region of the country where the weather changes daily, and the window of opportunity for time-sensitive tasks like planting or harvesting can be stressfully slim.

“I usually have parts the next day,” Julie Parsons said. “The farmers like that.”

To celebrate the 55th anniversary and the official opening of the new building, Keating Tractor hosted a customer appreciation open house before Labor Day weekend. In past years, the store put on an annual “John Deere Days” event, with workshops for farmers. During the lengthy construction phase at the dealership, though, the event was put on hold. Last week’s open house was a return to the tradition.

With free food, prize giveaways and a chance to tour the gleaming new facilities, it also served to thank the Keatings’ customers.

“We wouldn’t be here without them,” said Parsons.

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