



Community Cooperative marks 100 years of serving Faribault and surrounding area

By Janet Kubat Willette

A century ago, when a gallon of gas was 20 cents and an acre of Minnesota farmland was \$59, six farmers came together to form the Community Cooperative Oil Association of Faribault.

"It all began in 1925 when six local farmers came together to obtain better pricing and purchasing power for fuels and lubricants for their farming operations," according to a historical video compiled for the 100th anniversary. "This concept was brilliant. It has led us to savings on a much larger scale today. What those farmers created has allowed us to grow and improve our service and offerings to many patrons and local businesses today."

The first board members were P.H. Donkers, president; Frank Friesen, vice president; W.H. Miller, secretary/treasurer; Homer Paquette, Victor Genette and W.B. Drehmel.

The co-op's first building was located near the Straight River and railroad tracks at the corner of Highway 60 and Division Street, just kitty corner from the current home office at 9 Central Ave. N., Faribault. The cooperative has grown from that one location to seven locations – six in Faribault and one in Morristown. They are the third oldest continuously operating business in Faribault, behind only the Faribault Woolen Mill and the State Bank of Faribault.

Being a cooperative sets Community Cooperative Oil Association of Faribault apart from other businesses, said Josh Selbrade, the co-op's director of energy



From left, Kelley Watts, Lisa Karl and Josh Selbrade manage Community Co-op in Faribault.

and a 22-year employee. Cooperatives are groups of people who come together to meet a certain need and who are willing to work together to organize and operate the cooperative. There are cooperatives in agriculture, financial services, housing, groceries and utilities. Cooperatives are governed by member-owners, and each



owner gets one vote, which is different from publicly traded corporations who divide votes based upon shares owned.

"In the spirit of cooperation, you get a say," said Kelley Watts, cooperative director of operations. She's been with Community Co-op for 11 years.

Democratic member control is one of the seven principles of a cooperative. The other six:

1. Voluntary membership
2. Member economic participation
3. Autonomy and independence
4. Education, training and information
5. Cooperation among cooperatives
6. Concern for community

Community Co-op gives about half of its profits back to patrons, retaining the other half in equity. Equity is returned to members beginning at age 70. The cooperative shows its concern for community by contributing to several efforts including farm safety, agricultural education and grain bin safety training.

The cooperative was formed three years after the Capper-Volstead Act was passed in Congress. Known as the "Magna Carta of Cooperatives," the act provided limited exemption from antitrust laws for agricultural producers. The chief authors

Far left, townspeople gathered for the opening of the Highway 60 viaduct over the Straight River and the railyards in Faribault in the 1930s. The Faribault Community Cooperative store is in the background next to the Alexander Faribault house.

This ad for the Community Co-op Oil Association appeared in the Faribault Daily News in 1949.

of the legislation were Rep. Andrew Volstead from Minnesota and Sen. Arthur Capper from Kansas. The American Historical Association calls it “the most important single piece of legislation relating to cooperatives.”

In Minnesota, there are more than 1,000 cooperatives and more than 3.4 million cooperative members, according to University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives data from 2009. Globally, there are about 3 million cooperatives and 12 percent of the world population belong to a cooperative, according to the National Cooperative Business Association.

Cooperatives are celebrated annually during October, National Co-op Month. Additionally, the United Nations designated 2025 as the International Year of Cooperatives. The theme of National Co-op Month 2025 is “The Future is Cooperative.”

Cooperative proponents say the business model is important going forward as it creates shared prosperity and allows more people to participate in the economy as ownership rests with the people served.

People who do business with the Community Co-op of Faribault do not need to be members, but members do have a say in how the organization is operated and do receive a dividend. The cooperative has 5,000 active members and is governed by a seven-member board of directors. It serves customers within a 70-mile radius of Faribault, located in Rice County. Board members are Scott Donkers, president; Ron Wegner, vice president; Paul Meyer, secretary/treasurer; Ben Johnson, Dan Pumper, Joe Grote and Jeremy Hanson. An interesting note about the cooperative’s leadership: Founding president P.H. Donkers was a cousin to the great grandfather of current co-op president Scott Donkers.



Frank Pluemer and Johnny Thompson by a Community Co-op truck. Pluemer was the cooperative manager.



This photograph of the Community Co-op store is from the late 1950s. The cooperative convenience store is at the same location on Division Street today.



Board members and cooperative manager from the late 1960s, from left, back row, Earl Thom, Ambrose Gillen, Steve Kitzman and John Olson. Front row, Arnold Reuvers, Don Markman, Harold Quiggle and Frank Pluemer.

“Our mission is providing quality goods and services at a competitive price,” Donkers said.

The cooperative remains focused on energy products, selling diesel, biodiesel, DEF, gasoline ranging from 87 to 110 octane, E85, E15, propane, oil, grease and lubricants. It also operates a tire shop, service center and three convenience stores. For a brief time in the 1980s, the cooperative operated at hardware store, said Lisa Karl, cooperative general manager. Karl has worked at the cooperative for 26 years.

Another cooperative value for Community Co-op is providing consistent service for customers. In 2014, when LP prices skyrocketed to \$8 per gallon in some parts of the state due to several factors including a cold winter following a fall with a lot of wet corn to dry, Community Co-op changed its policy to allow customers to take smaller deliveries of propane at a time when it was too expensive to pay for a full tank.

“We don’t make decisions for one person, we make them for everyone,” Selbrade said. The co-op LP price peaked at \$4.65 per gallon that winter, he remembers.

Adjusting that delivery policy is another way the cooperative aims to serve their community. “We’re here to do the best job we can,” Selbrade said.

“And sustain the co-op for future generations,” Watts added.

The board of directors is committed to keeping the cooperative moving forward as a stand-alone cooperative. Community Co-op has acquired other businesses, but it has never merged with another cooperative, Karl said. It continues to adhere to the values set forth in 1925 when those six farmers came together to start a cooperative to obtain better pricing and purchasing power.