

Horton's

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Political & Social Commentary

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Lott Elevator in Cohoctah closing doors at end of month

*Family-owned business
dates back 96 years*

By Steve Horton

“The ending of an era” is an oft-used phrase, but it best sums up the announcement that Lott Elevator in Cohoctah— after 96 years as a family-owned business—is closing its doors at the end of the month.

The remaining merchandise and accessories, along with the buildings and property, are being sold on-line by Sheridan Auction—with the final bids taken on March 19.

The elevator includes a grain facility, feed mill, and retail store. A variety of products and services have been offered, including buying and selling grain (primarily wheat, soybeans, and shelled corn), preparing livestock feed, offering seeds, fertilizers and chemicals to large farmers as well as gardeners, and providing all manner of merchandise at the store—from clothing to farm supplies to snacks.

Brian Lott, 52, and the fourth generation of Lotts to own and operate the business, made the announcement via Facebook on Jan. 17,



The retail store and feed mill at Lott's Elevator

along with posting a letter in the front of the store. “It’s a sad day in Cohoctah,” he wrote.

“After much soul searching and introspection, I have decided the Lott legacy ends with me. So, with consideration, I have decided that Feb. 28, 2019 will be our last day of operation.”

After noting that a discounted price would be offered for much of the in-store merchandise, Lott continued, “It’s been a pleasure and blessing to have been able to serve you for all these years. And I will definitely miss you all, but fate being what it is, it’s time to gracefully step down.”

He ended by saying, “I thank you for all of your years of support.”

By social-media standards, the post got a lot of response. It reached 10,637 people, had 113 shares, and generated 67 comments—

most of those replies expressing regret at the news and wishing “the best” for Lott.

As for ‘why?’, Lott said that the financial institution that had given him a revolving line-of-credit, used each year, declined to continue the arrangement.

“What we did and have done for many years, is borrow money to buy the seeds, fertilizers, and chemicals area farmers need for planting their crops, sell it to them on credit, and then re-pay the short-term loan in the fall after our customers harvested their crops and paid us. We were in effect, the farmers’ bank.

“When this arrangement was set up, I told them I’d have a zero balance or close to it when I closed the books at the end of the year—which I did,” Lott said. “I never missed a payment and never had a late payment. However, the determination was made that we no longer met their asset-to-debt ratio.”

Lott said that he looked at other options, including a long-term loan, but was unable to get the amount he felt was necessary. So, he decided against incurring this kind of debt.

He added that the seed and fertilizer vendors who supplied him “have worked with me as much as they can to help out.”

“I finally decided that I didn’t want to do this (borrow the money) and maybe be in the same situation a few years from now,” Lott said. “The reality is that financial institutions don’t like to lend to agri-businesses, like mine, or to farmers due to the uncertainty. Bad weather can hurt the harvest, prices fluctuate, and markets for commodities can change.”

Lott said there were additional financial factors that played into his decision. “I do have bad accounts from those who didn’t pay their bills, some of them inherited when my father passed away unexpectedly in 2010 and I took over the business,” Lott said. “And I have some money I owe.

“I have a nice business here and feel it has been doing well,” he said. “But when I first took over, having the business thrust into my lap and dealing with the financials, that caused a lot of stress and put me in the hospital. I didn’t want it to happen again.

“As a sole proprietor, I had a choice after the line-of-credit was withdrawn,” Lott pointed out. “I could borrow the money, try to keep going, but then something happens to me and I can’t take care of the people I owe money to. Or a few years from now, the same thing happens where the credit is withdrawn. Or, instead, I could close, have the auction, pay what I owe, and hopefully have some money left over.”

Lott said that he felt confident the sale would take care of the debts, but added, “It’s an auction, you don’t know until it’s over.”

There are 16.24 acres available. On the south side is the feed mill and store which consists of three buildings. On the north side is the grain facility and a couple of storage buildings. Lott pointed out that the two parcels are being offered separately as are the accessories and remaining merchandise still available after Feb. 28.

THE LOTT LEGACY THAT BRIAN REFERRED TO in his announcement dates back to 1923 when his great grandfather, Floyd Lott, purchased what was then a feed store and lumber yard from John Wrigglesworth.

“His father, Daniel Lott, my great great grandfather, had fought in the Civil War and one of the benefits offered to veterans was the opportunity to homestead available land,” Brian noted. “Michigan was one of those places. A whole clan of Lotts left Pennsylvania and headed here. Daniel and his brother decided to settle in the Cohoctah area.”

Daniel settled on 40 acres just west of the town on what’s now Cohoctah Road. “I have

my home on the last acre left of this homestead,” Brian pointed out.

Floyd, after buying the business, ran it until 1934. His son, Dan Lott, Sr. took over and owned it until 1979. That year Brian’s father, Dan Lott Jr., took the reins and continued until his death in 2010.

“I worked here from the time I was a kid,” Brian said. “We also had 40 acres on Durand Road, our family farm. We raised 100-to-150 beef cattle and rented nearby land to raise feed for them. So, my time was spent between the farm chores and helping at the Elevator.”

Brian noted that he is the youngest of four children. There’s my older sister, Beth, my late brother John, and my brother James. His mother, he added, passed away in 2015.

“I attended school in Byron and graduated in 1984,” he said. “I then took the two-year short course at Michigan State University for Elevator and Farm Supply Management. From the time I was young, I always wanted to work at Lott Elevator.”

As for the history of the business, Brian said that the original feed store and lumber yard were built on the north side of the road in 1899 by Frank Wrigglesworth. “He died soon after and his brother, John, took over in 1900,” he noted. “In 1931, the feed store was destroyed by fire, but not a nearby warehouse. But in 1937 the warehouse was also lost to fire and that same year a building was constructed on the south side.”

Another landmark of the business was the construction of the two-story building that’s now located to the west of the store, also on the south side, although Brian doesn’t have a date for when this occurred.

“It was located in Holly when a train derailed and destroyed part of it,” Brian noted. “My grandfather (Dan Lott, Sr.) bought it, dismantled it piece by piece, and then brought it here and re-assembled it.”

The current store replaced the two-story office building that burned down in the mid-

1960s. As for the grain facility, Brian noted it was built in 1978.

“Before then, there was nothing on that side of the road but the shed where the bulk fertilizer was stored and a lot of trees,” he added.

Other than getting “everything squared” as far as those who owe him money and settling his obligations, Lott said he doesn’t have any definite plans for what’s next. “I’ll be looking for a job,” he said.

In recalling the history of the business and his family’s involvement, Brian said he feels “the business has been a valuable part of the community.”

“Lott Elevator served the area farmers who grew crops, those who raised livestock, the people who needed a convenient source for farm supplies, and nearby homeowners who purchased some of the merchandise we offered in the store,” Lott said, adding, “I’m not the only one who’s impacted by what’s happened.”

“I feel there’s a need in the area for the kind of retail store we have, one that services a rural clientele,” he said.

But all of that—what happens to the buildings and property as well as his personal life—is the future.

As for these final few days of February, at this place where he’s spent most of his life, there’s time to visit with customers, many of them longtime friends, to reflect on the end of the Lott Legacy after 96 years, and—given what this business has been and what it’s meant to the Cohoctah community for nearly a century—to reflect as well on the ending of an era.