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## Hills Inc. Continues Tradition in Red River Valley

The North Dakota-based dealership is entering its fourth generation of equipment experts.

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It was 1946 when Howard Hills decided to build a shortline dealership in the heart of North Dakota's Red River Valley. Scott Hill says his father, John, took over after and he and his two brothers (Dave and Mike), are at the helm of Hills Inc. today. A couple of Dave's sons are working their way into the family business as its fourth generation.

The Hills brothers each have their own department of oversight — Scott manages sales, while Dave focuses on parts and Mike, service. "Dad is still alive, has an office and comes out every day," says Scott.

### **Hills Inc.**

**Founded:**

1946

**Location:**

Grafton, N.D.

**Employees:**

10

**Primary Lines:**

Art's Way and Bobcat

Scott adds it's important his dad can visit with a lot of the customers, both the old and new generations too.

The Hills Inc. service area stretches in a 60-mile radius from Grafton, N.D., but during the sugar beet harvest, that territory stretches a lot. In addition to beets and potatoes, farmers are planting spring wheat, beans and in the past decade, much more corn and soybeans.

### **Secondary Lines:**

Brillion, Alloway Standard, Banjo, Salford, Enduraplas

## **Quality Lines**

Quality products have been a mainstay at Hills Inc. since its opening day. Scott says the original main line they provided was the Oliver tractor, which has since been merged into other companies. Hills Inc. has always had a focus on sugar beet and potato equipment, and that emphasis has not changed over time. Scott notes that Art's Way and Bobcat are the two primary lines the dealership carries today, along with a host of others.

Since Hills Inc. is located 700 miles from the Art's Way plant in Armstrong, Iowa, the machinery is sent disassembled. "When it shows up, it's well-designed, well manufactured and fits together so nice," he explains. "Seldom are we missing parts or anything like that." The service staff even likes the instruction manuals, and says they provide very clear direction on how to assemble the pieces.

Even if there ever was a concern, Scott says it was addressed immediately, one of the things the service department appreciates about the Art's Way company. "It's never been they have to go to a board meeting to discuss something," he mentions.

He also recommends shortline dealers never burn bridges with a manufacturer that may be bought by another, as "you'll never know when you could find yourself doing business with that other company."

## **Sugar Beet Success**

"Up here in the Red River Valley, when they start sugar beet harvest, it's a 24-hour, 7-day-a-week campaign for up to a month," says Scott.

Beet farming has changed, though with the Roundup Ready crop availability, as there's very little row cultivation being done any longer after using a row-crop planter. He says there's still a very rigorous spraying program in place to keep the plants weed and disease free, and in fall, customers are looking for harvesters and defoliators.

He appreciates the Art's Way dedicated sugar beet team, too. Scott says during harvest, they come to the Red River Valley to see what improvements can be made to the harvester, as well as take recommendations from these specialty crop farmers.

"They know the different challenges we face and if something comes up, they know how to possibly modify their machine to the various harvesting conditions," Scott adds. "Every year it seems like there is a different challenge. One year could be dry, the next terribly wet, you just never know what each fall is going to bring."

## **Parts & Promises**

Hills Inc. has always been known for its incredible supply of parts and service department, says Scott. “My grandfather had that reputation when he started the business, and when I started selling, a lot of older customers made the comment, ‘Well, I hope you can keep up the reputation that your grandfather and dad had started,’” Scott says.

The Hills brothers were determined to keep good on that promise and have. With the intense sugar beet harvest, Hills Inc. has made it a priority to be available to customers when they need something. With 10 dedicated employees, Scott says the team is a close-knit group.

“Everybody knows come harvest they have a certain role to play,” he says. “Everyone chips in, and it does get to be long hours at times, but when we work together, it runs smooth.”

Scott says he believes there will always be a major industry presence for shortlines, as many major manufacturers don’t want to deal with segregated markets. “So, this is where the shortlines find their niche, and are building specialty pieces,” he adds.

He says that having a pulse on the customer’s needs and challenges helps keep the shortline business steady. Scott says the dealership’s management team believes in keeping abreast of the trends, different ways of growing crops and also the changing weather conditions.

This is definitely a challenge he’s seen in the potato industry, as the number of growers has dwindled from 100 to just 7 major farming operations. “Contracts are a lot bigger than they used to be,” Scott says, explaining that alone makes forecasting equipment needs for the next year a bit tricky.

Hills Inc. has weathered the change in farm markets for multiple generations and so have its dedicated customers.

“A lot of these people are your best friends and you know everything that’s going on,” he adds. “It’s a small community, so they know what’s going on in your family too. It’s a lot of fun and we trust each other.”