

Got Knob Grass?

The History of Kruse Farm Supply

The Bainter family on my mother's side, and the Kruse family on my father's side are long-time residents of Elkhart County, Indiana. Some might say we come from a long line of farmers proud to have the fertile soil of Indiana farmland under their fingernails.

My grandfather Harry Bainter was a dairy farmer who raised Guernsey cattle on his farm at the top of the hill along State Road 15 South in Bristol, Indiana. He was attuned to the nuances of nature, and the predictability, as well as the random nature of events. It was he who taught me the old tenets of farm lore.

“Plant your peas on St. Patrick’s Day and your potatoes on Good Friday,” he told me; advice which factored in the time of the year and a reasonable expectation that the weather would be suitable.

Others of his sayings, like plant root crops during the dark of the moon and tall crops in the light of the moon were more subjective and open to question. But he had an instinct that all good custodians of the land and their animals always have, along with the ability to pick up a handful of soil and tell you what it needed or what would grow best in it.

My mother, Harriet Bainter, Harry’s daughter, went to work at the Farm Bureau Co-op after high school in the spring of 1950 until 1956. It was there that she met my father Owen Kruse, and became a stay-at-home mom. In 1965, she returned to the Co-op to work, until 1970. Meanwhile, her husband Owen had managed the Bristol Co-Op for 15 years before it burned in 1969. When management decided not to rebuild, his friends urged him to open a much-needed feed mill and farm supply business to serve the local community.



In 1970, he converted a barn on the family property on C.R. 6, turning it into a feed mill and began custom mixing feed for local farmers and sold them products to help grow their crops. Over the years, he expanded into custom field pesticides, large and small animal feed and bird seeds. He knew every one of his customers by name and maintained that friendly old-fashioned general store atmosphere. In his later years, Harry Bainter would help out in his son-in-law Owen's store, pleased to keep active in farm business.

Owen was a practical man who based his choices on experience and results. He'd sell you marigolds to keep insects away from your vegetable garden, but remind you that the relative strength of that strong smelling flower was only about 2" - but after all, the bright color made for a pleasant sight. He'd tell you that lime wouldn't kill those moles in your yard, and offer a more reliable solution.

Owen's customers relied on him to interpret their needs, even if there was a language barrier. After World War II, a number of Russian immigrants had settled on the lush farmland around Bristol. They would come to the store, knowing that Owen would get them what they needed. A Russian poultry farmer and frequent customer, whose English was minimal, came to the store seeking "baby chick na-na-na." The farmer pulled a bunch of striped feathers out of his pocket.

Oh," was Owen's reply. "You want Barred Rock chickens."

The farmer nodded and grinned broadly. Another satisfied customer.

Owen once told a customer that his value mix seed could grow grass on a doorknob. For years, people would come into the store and ask for that "Knob Grass." In 1985, he retired to Arizona with Harriet for the winters, and sold the business to me, his son Steve. Owen continued to be involved in the summer season, until his death in 1997. His Golden Retriever, Sam, who had been his constant companion, so missed his master that he died just 6 months later.

In 2010, the store celebrated its 40th Anniversary, and Harriet returned from Arizona to celebrate the occasion with us in April for the annual Kruse Farm Supply Open House, complete with free hot dogs for shoppers. It is always a festive occasion, though bittersweet without the man responsible for creating the spirit of a hometown farm store that lingers today.

We're still doing business with the same diligence and care in serving the customers that Owen taught us. We think he'd be proud to see the service he provided that was so important to him, still continues today.

Oh, yes, we still sell "Knob Grass."