

Robertson Corporation

Founded: 1881

Location: Ewing, Indiana (town later annexed by Brownstown) (1881– ); P.O. Box A, Brownstown (1999)

William R. Bolles, Charles A. Robertson, Capt. John Scott, and James Wayman entered into a partnership in the fall of 1881, forming the Ewing Mill Company. The partners opened a flour mill on land where the company continues to operate a plant in 1999. The \$13,500 three-story brick building they built operated on steam power, complete with a “Redfield Middling Purifier” strainer. The partners were also business associates in the W. R. Bolles & Company, a general merchandise and farm products store in Ewing that also possessed more than seven hundred acres. Some of the flour and other goods made in the mill were sold at the store, and the wheat under production in the company-owned fields allowed for surplus product to be shipped to larger cities, such as Cincinnati.

The company produced three types of wheat flour at first, ranging from “patent,” to “fancy,” to “extra,” that corresponded to the texture of the flour as well as bolted and unbolted meal. Robertson supervised the mill. He had been a farmer until 1864, at which time he entered the county clerk’s office; he left county government in 1872 to again take up farming. Sometime around 1885 Scott and Bolles sold their interest in the business to Robertson and Wayman.

The mill was processing more than 20,000 bushels of wheat a year by 1884. However, the long depression of the last half of the 1880s and the tight money supply policies of the federal government added to the partners’ woes. Robertson and Wayman

mortgaged their property in order to raise capital for continued operation. Henry B. Smith, the man who held the title deed to the mortgaged property, died in 1887, and the property fell into the hands of an heir, Simeon Smith. Throughout this period the mill continued operating under the guidance of Robertson and Wayman.

In 1888 Jonathan A. "Jont" Robertson, one of Charles's brothers, purchased the property from Simeon Smith and with it ownership of the mill. Soon thereafter Charles and another brother, R. Livingston "Livy" Robertson, entered into a partnership with Jonathan. Before the turn of the century Charles's son, Roscoe M. Robertson, began working with his father and uncles in the mill. The company struggled under the management of the three brothers and may have been eventually repossessed by the bank. Like many concerns operating in the rural areas of the nation before 1920, the Ewing Mill accepted for payment various goods, such as hogs, in lieu of cash. Payment by goods could not always or easily be converted into specie, which sometimes led to money problems.

In a public auction around 1900, Jonathan and his son Joseph M. purchased the company. Roscoe continued to work for the firm, rising to head miller sometime later. Under Jonathan and Joseph the business became more innovative and profitable. In 1903, for example, the Ewing Mill Company built a 25,000-bushel-capacity grain elevator that held not only wheat but corn and other grains as well. Moving away from a dependence on wheat, the partners also began producing white cornmeal. By 1905 the company was drawing customers from six surrounding counties. During World War I the company participated in the American war effort by shipping grain overseas for the troops. After

the Great War the mill began manufacturing scientifically managed livestock feeds under the brand names of EMCO Feeds, Robertson Feeds, and Triple-R.

Jonathan moved into politics, as had his father and grandfather, in 1900. He was elected to the Indiana house of representatives in 1900 and 1902 on the Democratic ticket. After his venture into state politics he returned to the business world, organizing the Jackson Brick and Holloware Tile Company in 1906 and joining the Medor Shale Brick Company in 1923 as a full partner. Politics continued to hold his attention, however, and he served on the Jackson County Council for a decade after his term as representative expired in 1904. His son Joseph followed him in both business pursuits and in politics. Joseph Robertson served in the Indiana house in 1917; he joined the state senate in 1933 and resigned in 1938 to fill the vacant post of state treasurer, a position he held until 1941.

In 1921 Roscoe purchased his uncle Jonathan's interest in the firm, and nine years later he bought out his cousin Joseph as well. Roscoe continued the expansion and innovation of his predecessors. During the Great Depression the company began buying other plants in southern Indiana: first the Lemmon mill in Bedford in 1938 and two years later the John Gienger feed store and elevator in Jeffersonville.

The depression decade was, ironically, not only one of physical expansion for the business, but also one in which the company introduced new products onto the market, goods that would become very important for the business's future profits and further expansion. Beginning in 1930, Roscoe Robertson's sons, Richard S. "Dick," Charles R. "Buck," and Joseph E., joined their father in the family business. By the late 1930s the milling firm had developed and begun to produce GLU-X, a wheat-based product that the

furniture industry could use to improve the spreading qualities of glue used in wood-product manufacturing.

The 1940s marked a time of tragedy, change, and novelty for the company. In the autumn of 1941 a fire swept through the Ewing mill, destroying the central portion of the building in which the milling equipment was housed but leaving untouched the grain elevators and the two ends of the original facility. The company survived the conflagration, at least financially, in part because of the earlier expansion. Within a year the company rebuilt the mill, but it placed only cornmeal machinery in the building, ending forty years of wheat milling at the Brownstown plant. Production of flour and GLU-X were transferred to the Bedford facility.

Innovation remained a hallmark of the small-town business as it introduced Kitchen King brand flour, one of the nation's first vitamin-enriched flours. The firm helped the Second World War effort, as it had in the first world conflict, by shipping grain to troops in the various theaters of operation. In 1945 the company again expanded by purchasing the Farmers' Hominy Mill of Seymour.

The 1950s brought new challenges to the family firm. With the rise of national and multinational flour and cornmeal makers there seemed no room for a small, independent producer such as the Ewing Mill Company. In 1952 the Brownstown-based company stopped manufacturing flour and cornmeal. An experiment, begun in 1950, to grind or cut corncobs for use as an abrasive in metal production or as mulch for flowering plants proved ineffective and was discontinued in 1954. Although various facilities shut down, the company did grow during the decade through the acquisition of a grain elevator in Bloomington. Additionally, the Seymour facility began making feed for dogs,

birds, and exotic fish, further diversifying the company's product list. The Brownstown plant continued to operate a grain elevator and produce cracked corn and scratch feeds. Luckily the business had also delved into scientific feed and glue-extending production before 1950.

Upon incorporation of the firm on 1 January 1960, the company's owners chose to rename the business the Robertson Corporation. Roscoe, at age seventy-eight, became the first chairman of the board of the seventy-eight-year-old business. The 1960s and 1970s proved to be decades of change, not only for America, but also for the Brownstown corporation. Richard R. "Phil" Robertson, Dick's oldest son, became the fourth generation of his family to enter the employ of the mill. The Brownstown mill became the primary producer of GLU-X in 1965. Thirteen years later Roscoe, still chairman of the board in 1978, died. In 1981 Joseph E. Robertson, a graduate of Kansas State University who majored in cereal chemistry, became the fifth generation of the Robertson clan to head the company.

Another fire tested the strength of the company in 1986. The fire destroyed the Bedford plant, a facility used to make the company's glue extender. Immediately after the disaster the Robertson Corporation purchased the Plainville mill, retooling it to manufacture GLU-X. Amazingly, the production of the company's famous product was virtually unaffected, and total output of the glue extender reached a record high by the end of 1986. The year of the fire also saw extensive improvements made in the Brownstown plant and the building of a manufacturing plant in Washington State.

In 1999 Joseph E. Robertson served as chairman of the board, while his nephew John served as president. The company employed twelve and expected sales of more than \$1 million.