



Nor-Am firm expands meat packaging business

By **Dave Dreeszen**

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Employees work in the beef packaging line of Nor-Am Cold Storage's new facility in Le Mars, the former Harker's processing center. (Photo by [Jerry Mennenga](#))

LE MARS, Iowa -- Nor-Am Cold Storage moved its meat production lines across town last week.

The firm, which repackages beef, pork and poultry for packers and food service firms around the region, outgrew its former complex at 555 21st St. SW. on the south end of Le Mars. A shortage of cold storage space forced the growing business to quickly get orders out the door, President and CEO Greg Brandt said.

"We had grown to the point where as soon as we got a pallet loaded, we had to get it into a truck," Brandt said.

The closing of meat distributor Harker's Distribution last fall allowed Nor-Am to expand and stay in Le Mars without constructing a brand new facility.

In a \$1.9 million deal that closed last month, Nor-Am acquired Harker's former corporate offices and plant at 801 Sixth St. SW.

"It's a big move for our company," Brandt said last Monday, as he gave a Journal reporter and photographer a tour of Nor-Am's new location, which encompasses more than 100,000 square feet of space.

Greater efficiency

The tour came on the first day of production at the new site, which Harkers vacated in September after closing its doors for good. Harkers, founded as a small meat market in 1908, built its Sixth Street facility in the 1960s.

To help run its new property, Nor-Am brought on two veteran Harker's employees -- Harold Peters, general manager of provisions, Sharon Freking, Nor-Am's production manager.

About 25 people work in Nor-Am's production area. No new jobs were immediately created as a result of the expansion, but Brandt said he expects staff number to increase over time as sales grow.

As beef cuts moved down a conveyer Monday, Nor-Am line workers pushed meat into 50-pound cardboard boxes. Peters said a second line soon will be added in the production floor, which boasts about 40 percent more space than Nor-Am's previous plant.

The spacious room also features multiple entrances, a major improvement over Nor-Am's former site, which had just a single doorway.

"We get a much better product flow," Brandt said.

Another big attraction of the former Harker facility, he said, is a large blast freezer, which can store up to 450 pallets, or 30

truckloads. Kept at minus 20 degree Farenheit, it freezes meat solid within 48 hours.

"It's better for the product to get boxed and put right in the freezer," he said. "We want to freeze it as soon as possible."

The plant also features a "temper" room, a storage area where frozen meat that arrives at the plant is thawed, before being sent to packers for additional processing. That saves packers the time and work of thawing the meat once it arrives at their plants.

Meat packaged at Nor-Am ultimately gets shipped not only throughout the country, but around the globe, to such countries as China, Mexico and Vietnam.

In addition to repackaging, Nor-Am stores products for various food service companies.

Company milestone

Nor-Am has come a long way since Brandt and his wife, Janna, and some other investors launched the firm 10 years ago this month. It started in Le Mars with just 12 employees and 85,000 square feet of public refrigerated space.

Greg Brandt, a Galva, Iowa, native, who today lives in Merville, Iowa, had previously worked in the cold storage business with then-IBP inc. beginning in the mid-1980s.

In 2005, Nor-Am opened its first U.S. Department of Agriculture-certified packaging, trimming and boning plant in Le Mars. The family-owned company later has since expanded into three other states -- Nebraska, Minnesota and Texas. Late last year, the company acquired a plant in Detroit Lake, Minn.

Altogether, the business has about 150 employees and about 450,000 of cold storage.

Le Mars serves as the world headquarters for the firm. The recent move to Harker's former offices created a better working environment for Nor-Am's eight-member corporate staff, which were spread out on multiple floors in the company's previous 21st Street offices.

In its new administrative offices, once home to dozens of Harker's office staff, Nor-Am finds itself with more room than it currently knows what to do with, Brandt said. The complex includes a media room, full kitchen and conference room.

An adjacent building, which onced housed Harker's R&D department, is currently vacant. Brandt said he envisions someday making the building available to promising start-up ventures.

In addition, the CEO also wants to invite small packers to set up in unused portions of Nor-Am's Le Mars plant.

"I certainly believe there's good potential there," he said.

Nor-Am

Type business: Meat refrigeration and packaging

Headquarters: Le Mars

President and CEO: Greg Brandt

Plant locations: Le Mars; Schulyer, Neb.; Detroit Lakes, Minn.; Plainview, Texas

Employment: Around 150