

Packing & Shipping Facility Does the Robot



NEWTON, Kan. (AP) — After months of enduring detours, demolition and construction, residents of Newton have had a chance to see what the work was all about — the upgrade of the central Kansas town's old flour mill into a state-of-the art operation.

Horizon Milling held an open house last week to show off the new packing and shipping facility, complete with robotic arms that do the loading and lifting of sacks of flour.

Bought in 1974 by Cargill, majority owner of multistate Horizon Milling, the Newton plant — parts of which were built in 1918 — grinds 850,000 pounds of flour a daily, mostly from regionally grown hard red winter wheat, *The Wichita Eagle* reported.

For years, much of the Newton-milled flour was shipped to Horizon's Topeka mill to be bagged for sales in grocery stores. But the Topeka plant was even more antiquated, and Cargill announced last year it was closing the 128-year-old mill in the Kansas capital in favor of expanding the Newton mill to include a bagging and shipping operation.

Newton offered local tax incentives and gained 30 jobs, doubling the mill's work force. Residents attending the open house applauded and thanked the company for choosing to expand in the city.

"We truly appreciate your presence," said Newton Mayor Willis Heck.

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Flour milled in the older building on one side of Broadway near downtown is now piped across the street to giant bins on an upper floor in the new building.

The flour flows down to machines that pour it into 2-, 5-, 10- and 25-pound bags. Three robotic arms speedily lift and load the sacks onto scores of pallets, each bearing thousands of bags that are combined and sorted for shipping by rail or truck.

Horizon officials said the new shipping operation is so productive it can process more than the Newton mill produces and might, one day, pack bulk flour from elsewhere.

Dan Dye, Horizon Milling's president, said the investment in the Newton plant was crucial for the future of the city and the company. "To be able to grow in Newton when times are hard, to be growing and creating jobs, we feel fortunate to be able to do that," he said.

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