



## Two Companies—One Goal

Truax and Sharp Brothers are two names in the industry that have a long-standing history and dedication toward improved range and pasture lands.

**Editor's Note:** *Truax Company and Sharp Brothers Seed Company have been two long-standing advertisers in Rangelands magazine. With this 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the publication, we recognize and thank both companies for their support. Following is a brief summary of each company's history and their present and future goals.*

### Truax Company

By Jim Truax

Located in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Truax Company manufactures and markets equipment for drilled or broadcast seeding of most types of seed used in establishing vegetative cover. The company has been in business since 1974.

As a landscaper during the early 1970's, Jim Truax experienced firsthand the frustration of trying to plant native prairie grasses with available equipment. These frustrations led to the design and development of the Truax Drill. Truax equipment is designed from the top down to effectively meter and plant grass seeds at the required shallow depth for successful stand establishment.

While the initial emphasis was planting native species, the addition of the small seed box and the optional cool season/grain box gives Truax seeding equipment the capability to efficiently meter and plant most types and textures of grass, legume, wild flower, and cover crop seed. In addition a Truax Drill will plant small grains and soybeans.

Today the Truax product line includes: the *FLEXII Series Grass Drills*, *FLEXII Series Grain Drills*, and *Utility Drills* for double disc drilled seeding; the *Trillion*, a *Pull-Type Broadcaster*, and the *Seed Slinger* for broadcast seeding. The latest addition to the product line is the *Rangeland Rough Rider* for drilled seeding on rugged non-agricultural lands.

During the first ten years the company manufactured and sold no more than ten or twelve machines each year. This scale of operation kept Jim in the landscape business, which in retrospect was to his advantage. First, it created an income stream to finance the drill business without incurring any debt. And second, it kept him in the field using and testing his own equipment. The result was many improvements to make the drills a better machine for getting the job done.

It took almost fifteen years before Jim reached a sales level of twenty-five drills a year. During these early years Jim started attending meetings and conferences including those of the Society for Range Management, Prairie Conferences, Wildlife Conferences, etc. to promote the Truax drill.

These conferences provided the opportunity to meet a lot of other people with similar interests in native plant establishment and maintenance and to



*The Rough Rider.*



*The Trillion.*



*The FLEXII Drill.*

gain a better understanding of the challenges they faced. It also provided Jim with the opportunity to keep abreast of ongoing research and new developments in working with native prairie species. Association with and support of local, state and national groups including professional societies such as the Society for Range Management, Soil and Water Conservation Society, The Wildlife Society, and other groups continues today.

Over the years Truax equipment established a reputation for doing an outstanding job planting native grasses and more importantly plantings that resulted in quality established stands. Because of this early groundwork, in 1986 when National Farm Bill legislation created the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Truax Company was able to increase sales of drills for establishing quality wildlife cover.

Truax Company utilizes a direct market approach between the manufacturer and the customer for both initial sales and service. This approach has been successful in helping keep customer costs down as well as keeping open a direct line of communication between the manufacturer and the end user.

Customers are located in 49 of the 50 US States as well as internationally in Canada, Mexico, the Falkland Islands, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and South Africa. Over the years Truax Company has relied on input from customers, employees, and a cadre of current and former Soil Conservation Service/Natural Resources Conservation Service specialists to make improvements in the product line.

The need for equipment to plant new or improve existing stands of vegetative cover is great as one looks at the potential for improving the quality of grasslands across America and throughout the world. The implementation of efforts to make these improvements depends on many factors including this nation and the world's economic and political situations.

In America, federal, state, and local programs will play a major role in what we accomplish. Truax Company plans to continue to maintain a presence in providing the tools to help implement those programs directed at establishing and improving vegetative cover for all uses.

Truax Company pledges to continue providing grass seeding equipment to meet customer's needs. *"Leading the way...for precision seed placement."* For the latest information on Truax equipment visit the Truax website at [www.truaxcomp.com](http://www.truaxcomp.com).

## **Sharp Bros. Seed Co.**

**By Mark Jensen**

You are all familiar with Uncle Sam, the mythical white bearded fellow who represents the heart and soul of our nation. If you would, place yourself in Uncle Sam's shoes as he may have felt touring the American Great Plains in the 1950's. Looking back the old man was proud of his country's many accomplishments: her industrial ingenuity and pro-

ductivity, her scientific and medical advances, her many victories in the struggle to advance human freedom at home and abroad.

But the old fellow was never content to rest on his laurels. Now that World War II and the Korean War were behind him, the old man felt it necessary to revisit the site of the Great Dust Bowl in the 1930's, a natural disaster and manmade disaster that combined into a disaster of huge proportions. He was only mildly pleased with the progress since those days.

Though many conservation steps had been successfully implemented, he was dismayed to see that huge acreages of farmland continued to suffer the ravages of erosion. The species makeup of rangelands had shifted drastically away from its original populations, now favoring less productive species. Many productive species were gone, not a remnant to be found in county after county. Windbreaks, waterways and terraces were badly needed on many cultivated acres. It was clear that some farmland had never been suited for cultivation and its marginal productivity was being further reduced by erosion. Revegetation with native species was the only solution where conditions were so severe. Once Uncle Sam identified a problem he then went to work on a solution. Conservation of natural resources was about to enter a new, more proactive era.

Now place yourself in the shoes of two brothers from the Sharp family of Healy, Kansas in the 1950's. Gerald had served in the Navy and Gail in the Army. They had both returned to Healy to put down permanent roots. An idea developed between the two that they might start a native grass seed company. The need for such a company was evident but the potential pitfalls were numerous and were mostly unknown. At that time expertise in native grass seed production was rare or nonexistent. Nonetheless the brothers decided to do it and Sharp Bros. Seed Co. was born in 1958.

Initially their efforts were focused on locating and harvesting seed from native stands of grass in locations scattered from Texas to Montana. Native grass species produce good seed crops only under specific weather patterns. Grass in any given location may produce a good seed crop only one year out of a dozen. Identifying locations with seed potential and managing harvests far from home were skills the brothers quickly mastered. Expertise in these endeavors continues to be passed on within the company to the present time.

During the early years of Sharp Bros. Seed Co. two needs converged to cause the brothers to expand on their methods of producing grass seed. First, conservationists from that period saw the value of specific varieties or cultivars of native species. Varieties of native grasses were the result of selection work done by the USDA, with many important varieties being released in the 1950's. Since these varieties had been tested for adaptation to many different environments, conservationists could prescribe their use in locales where adaptation and performance were known.

Second, the brothers knew the sporadic nature of grass seed production in the wild. Procuring a seed supply from the wild was dependent on the fickle whims of Mother Nature. Consequently the brothers decided to plant and manage single species, variety specific, grass seed production fields.

Their first grass seed field was planted to Indiangrass one mile north of their Healy, KS headquarters in 1965. They were lucky to be located at Healy, in the center of the central plains. Many varieties of native grass, both warm and cool season, could be propagated for seed production in the Healy area. Developing cultural practices for native species was a result of hard work, intuition and lots of trial and error.

Pioneering these practices resulted in many sweet successes and more than a few bitter disappointments. A bountiful harvest of seed from one field could be followed the next day with a total loss caused by something as insignificant as a few hours of strong wind which blew all of the seed from the seed heads.

As Gail Sharp put it, "At that time, we converted some of our farmland to grass seed production. I am sure some people thought we were crazy for taking good corn, wheat and milo ground and growing grass seed on it. And there were moments that I would have agreed with them."

The company managed to grow and prosper through the 1960's with added production acres and a new seed conditioning plant allowing them to package a superior product. Sharp Brothers Seed Company came to be known as the native grass seed company with quality seed and quality advice.

The professional quality of the brothers' advice was due in no small part to their active involvement with the Society for Range Management and other

individuals and organizations devoted to conservation. Gerald served on the Lady Bird Johnson Beautification Committee and had traveled to South America to assist and advise Columbian conservationists in their problems with native seed harvest and drying.

Tragedy struck in July of 1971, when Gerald Sharp and Roy Cramer were killed in a plane crash while inspecting a grass field in Wyoming. At the time Gerald was serving as President of the Kansas Seed Dealers and as Chairman of the American Seed Trade Association Conservation Committee. Gail was forced to deal with the devastating loss of a beloved brother while struggling to maintain a company that had become a major component in the economy of Healy, Kansas.

As Gail Sharp explained, "It is in a time like that one finds out how helpless we really are. I really didn't know if Sharp Bros. Seed Co. could survive. I asked my Lord for his help. He provided me with strength, understanding and the insight to listen to our friends and associates. Many of them gave help when needed. One person especially took my hand and led me through the rocky spots of the business world and I will always be grateful to him. Thank you, Bob Appleman."

In February 1972 Art Armbrust came to work for Sharp Bros. Seed Co. Gail says of Art, "He was knowledgeable and skilled in agronomy with thirteen years of experience in the seed business. He took to grass seed like a duck to water and with his outgoing personality Sharp Bros. Seed Co. was on the move again."

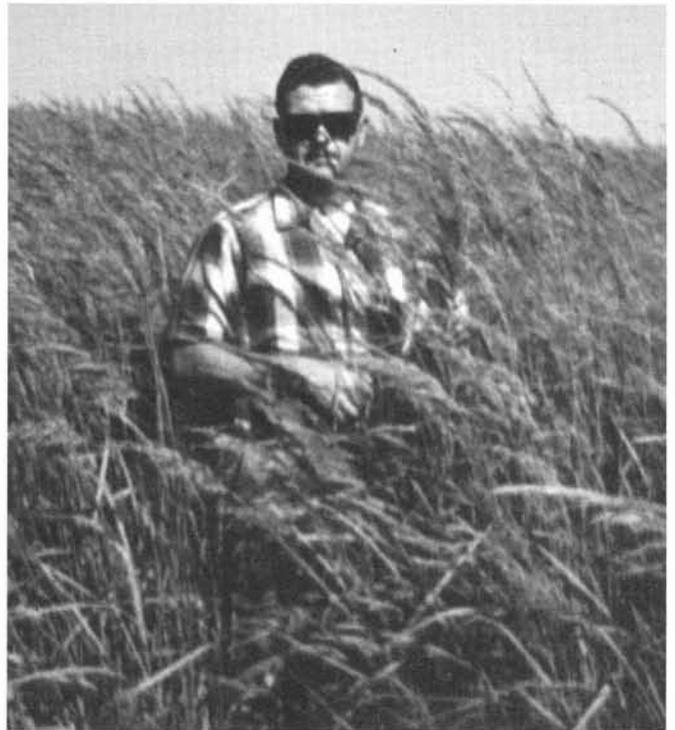
The company expanded further in the 70's, 80's and 90's adding to its acreage of seed production and expanding its seed conditioning operation with more capacity and state of the art machines which produced seed with new levels of quality, unattainable in the past.

Sharp Brothers serves as a major supplier of seed for reclamation of retired strip mines and retired farm ground as well as for forest fire, roadside and disturbed site reclamation. Sharp Brothers also supplies ranchers with native and introduced species for high management grazing lands, both dryland and irrigated.

Buffalograss seed produced by Sharp Brothers has



*Gerald Sharp in June of 1967. The field is Cheyenne Indiangrass one mile north of Healy. It is the first native seed production field planted by Sharp Brothers in 1965. Photo taken by Howard Cheney of Grainfield, Kansas.*



*Gerald Sharp in August of 1967 in the same field as above. Photo taken by Howard Cheney of Grainfield, Kansas. Mr. Cheney was district conservationist of Gove County, Kansas at this time.*

grown in importance beyond conservation applications and is now a widely planted turfgrass across the United States and beyond. Sharp Brothers has sold buffalograss seed to China where it is used in the Beijing area to vegetate the median strips along

highways and on the grounds of the historic Summer Palace.

In order to service the heavy demand for seed during the early CRP years, Sharp Brothers operated a warehouse in Amarillo, Texas from 1976 to 1993, with Clyde Sherrieb as manager.

In 1982 Sharp Brothers established a warehouse and sales branch in Greeley, Colorado to service the Rocky Mountains and northern high plains. This allowed the company to focus on the unique characteristics of that region, beyond that of the central plains where it had originated. In addition to the conservation applications of its seed, the Greeley branch grew to become a trusted supplier of adapted perennial forages and turf grasses for the region.

Sharp Brothers Seed Company of Missouri, headquartered in Clinton, was founded in 1985 to produce and market seed for the more humid environments of the eastern United States. Single species plantings of certified native species have been established at Clinton to assure reliable supplies of quality seed. The Missouri branch has led the company in pioneering new markets with parks and recreation departments, wildlife agencies, roadside development and landscape applications.

Membership in the Society for Range Management has been and continues to be an essential part of the life of Sharp Bros. Seed Co. Gail Sharp currently serves on the SRM Endowment Board of Governors. Art Armbrust has served as Kansas-Oklahoma chapter president, National Membership Committee chairman and Advisory Council chairman. Art received the SRM Trail Boss Award, appropriate recognition for a fellow with a "take charge" demeanor. Wayne Vassar, manager of Sharp Bros. Seed Co. of Missouri since its founding is past president of the Southern Section. Maurice Miller, production manager at Healy, presently serves on the board of the Kansas chapter. Staff members regularly attend SRM conferences and conventions in order to further their professional training. Sharp Bros. Seed Co. was honored to receive the Society's Outstanding Achievement Award and the Trail Boss Award.

Now, please place yourself in the shoes of Dan Sharp at Healy, Kansas, David Sharp at Greeley, Colorado, and Wayne Vassar in Clinton, Missouri. Theirs is the challenge to continue the success of the past while adapting to the future. They continue the

struggle to match production with need. It is difficult to predict the demand created by government programs and impossible to predict demand created by natural disasters such as forest fires. Demand must be satisfied by a 'factory' which must be geared up years before the first seed is placed in a bag.

Rangeland in many areas has declined in productivity since the droughts of the 30's and 50's. Ranchers look to Sharp Brothers for interseeding advice to improve those working rangelands but often they must be advised of the tremendous difficulties of such an endeavor. Sharp Brothers continues to search for solutions to this problem.

One of the big questions regarding the future direction of the conservation movement regards using ecotypes of local origin for reclamation and revegetation. This would shift demand away from the time-honored practice of using varietal seed for these applications. An efficient infrastructure has developed around the production of varietal native species seed. Because of this, large quantities of seed with known characteristics are available for an economical price.

Making seed of local ecotypes available on a similar scale and economy is in uncharted territory – it has never been done and no one knows if it can be done. Sharp Brothers will continue to work with its many associates in SRM and other conservation organizations to exchange experiences and ideas.

"Dirt on their boots" field conservationists, conservation administrators and the conservation seed industry must keep each other informed of that which is possible, practical and economical, on their side of the conservation effort. So long as the conversation about conservation flows both directions, Uncle Sam's natural resources will continue to improve in the future. SRM serves as the premiere forum for these conversations and is the key-stone to conservation's future.