

Antiques available for purchase from Dale “Brillo” Gardner at the Carthage Mill. BELOW: Anna Welch.



FULL OF POTENTIAL

Anna Welch envisions her Carthage Mill as a hub of agricultural activity

BY SHAWNDR MILLER
PHOTOS BY JOSH MARSHALL



At the corner of Walnut and Second streets in Carthage, a historic lumber mill is finding new life. Depending on the day of the week, machinery noise or the scent of cinnamon might greet those who venture through the door.

Inside, local art dots the walls of a meeting room and business center, while café-style seating invites guests to pull up a chair and peruse some mementos from yesteryear. This is where a certified organic grain mill, food hub and business incubator known as Carthage Mill is taking shape under the guiding hand of local farmer Anna Welch. In an atmosphere that feels both techie and old-timey, customers and lessees can browse the Internet on free Wi-Fi or peruse antiques assembled by local collector Dale “Brillo” Gardner.

The mill inhabits a yellow barnlike structure — one of two adjacent buildings and several sheds that at one time housed Tweedy Lumber Co. Now the roar of a “microcrusher” replaces a sawmill’s whine as grains, beans and seeds are ground into both animal feed and commercial products like grits, black bean flour and rolled oats.

But Carthage Mill is not just about these value-added commodities, Welch says. It’s also about the big picture: nourishing a robust local “farm-to-fork” food system. The mill is the go-to place for both comfort food and staples — as well as advice for new farmers.

Welch welcomes guests with offers of lattes and home-baked cornbread studded with apples and ginger. For the past eight years, she has grown certified organic popcorn, oats, flax, black beans, soybeans and other specialty crops with her husband, Keith, and their Fields of Agape cooperative partners. The mill is a separate but complementary endeavor. It’s meant to address one of the major hurdles Fields of Agape has faced: lack of infrastructure for processing and marketing alternative products.

Welch’s deeply spiritual bent leads her to speak often of “divine appointments” and

“hearing a call.” She has a certainty about being a steward of the land and sharing her journey. “I stand in the gap,” she says, meaning she’s doing what she can to manifest a more resilient food system in her rural area.

So with help from Hoosier Organic Marketing Education and funding from Rush County Economic Development Corp., she went on faith. She formed a business entity to create a launching pad for sustainable agriculture businesses.

Welch’s family had purchased the defunct complex in Carthage some years back with the intention of featuring local artists’ work there. A tourist train running on a privately owned track from Knightstown to Carthage made the location ideal for a farmers market and art gallery. The train brought 15,000 visitors annually for the first few years, and it looked like sales of flowers, produce, art, collectibles and heirloom seeds might keep the place afloat.

But then the economy tanked, the train stopped running, and the artists no longer found purchasers. The buildings mostly stood empty, except for Fields of Agape’s eight-inch stone mill, which Welch used to process small batches of organic popcorn into grits and cornmeal.

For a time, it appeared that she would be the sole user of the space. Then, at a small business seminar

last year in Rushville, the Welches met Preble County, Ohio, resident John Bihn, who’d invented a new model of grain mill called a microcrusher. They agreed to field test the prototype using 70,000 pounds of that year’s yields. Through their tests, they would relay suggestions for improvements to Bihn and help him get his invention on the market.

After demonstrating the model for them, he took their feedback and partnered with another business to incorporate a sifting system, using Indiana economic development seed money to purchase the add-on. The sifter separates outputs into four grind sizes — a critical feature for Fields of Agape’s food-grade products.

Carthage Mill

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The stainless steel prototype, now filling a room at Carthage Mill, sports red-handled clamps and a control panel like a home alarm system's keypad. Raw material goes into a funnel near the ceiling, while a four-layer cylinder attached under the machine sifts the grinds, sending four sizes of outputs through separate chutes. For example, when processing popcorn, the crusher spits out corn flour, cornmeal, grits and flakes about the size of rolled oats.

The crusher and attached sifting system come apart for thorough cleaning between lots, and this feature is an enormous advantage, according to Welch. Commercial food operations require lot control, and it's especially important when tracking gluten-free and certified organic products. (All of Fields of Agape's crops are gluten-free, and Carthage Mill is poised to serve this niche market.)

For running most types of animal feed, the prototype has proved to be an efficient and powerful machine. But a current limitation of the crusher is the small amount of fine particles it produces. "It is fantastic for the larger microsized," says Welch, "your rolled oats, rolled wheat and grits." But for every 100 pounds of product run through the mill, only 10 to 15 pounds of the two finest grinds come out.

"The amount of fine material is so small, and that's what limits me in expanding markets," she says. The current machine disproportionately produces coarser grinds. But the food market is ripe for cornmeal, black bean flour,

soy flour and other high-demand products. Bihn, who has built and tested a second unit in his Ohio workshop, plans to modify the design to address this issue.

Though she deems the crusher the "cornerstone" of Carthage Mill, Welch's goal is to create a consultation center to incubate new ag businesses. She wants to attract small farmers, those working a few acres with earth-friendly practices. She'd like to help guide them to success through referrals, information and partnerships.

"We want to mentor new producers so they don't go through the same mistakes we did," she says.

Her vision extends beyond the walls of Carthage Mill, beyond even the fields of her own farm. Welch would like to see a rural resurgence based on organic growing practices. So many properties, she says, could be turned into food-producing plots. Why not convert a portion of this average to raising food crops? Doing so would build food security while employing many more people in food-based businesses, she believes. Through connections and experience gained in eight years of organic farming, she hopes to nurture new endeavors.

"If we recruit specialty crop growers," she says, "and we have all the people and the team necessary to empower those growers to be successful, and they bring back this beautiful food, how can that not be a good thing?"

Welch envisions Carthage Mill as a place



Carthage Mill's café-style seating area.



for consultation, a place where growers can come to find out what farm equipment they need for certain crops. "If someone wants to produce flax, we know that it does take special equipment," she says. "We would identify whether we have the right equipment to help you with this."

A largely untapped possibility is pairing small farmers with neighboring large-scale farmers willing to do custom work using their equipment. Fields of Agape partners in this way with Dave Norris, a sixth-generation Rush County farmer and Pioneer Seed salesman.

She considers this arrangement a win-win, as the "big ag" farmer gets a chance to experiment with specialty crops without having to buy or lease land, and that's something Carthage Mill wants to encourage.

Helping farmers market their products is another objective. Welch notes that a major limiting factor in marketing organic and value-added products is the need for certifications, such as food safety and organic status. Organic certification alone carries an annual fee, which is often prohibitive for smaller producers. But she has set up Carthage Mill to fill this gap: It is a certified organic processor/handler facility, inspected by local and state health departments. Additional on-site certifications cover food safety and feed production.

Under these certifications, entrepreneurs processing on-site can sell private-label products through retail or wholesale markets.

In this way small businesses can get their start — or expand into new ventures — without racking up costs.

One such small business is Unique 2 Eat, a small farm in Wayne County. Proprietor Becca Selkirk raises chickens, rabbits and quail. She recently added two new income streams that she wouldn't have considered without Carthage Mill's existence. This summer she began marketing artisan poultry feed made from locally grown, organic ingredients, ground on-site at the mill, and she's now branching into the food market with her chef daughter, Jessica Selkirk. Jessica's gluten-free take-and-bake pizza crust, ready-to-use soups and other products, all made in Carthage Mill's certified kitchen, are available as carryout and through online stores like Hoosier Harvest Market.

None of this would have happened without Carthage Mill. "The (certified) kitchen has allowed us to expand into other lines to offer for people," Becca says.

Beyond the food and feed, she values Carthage Mill as a co-working space, a factor that can greatly increase her efficiency. Among the available services are printing, copying, faxing and using Wi-Fi — all of which make it possible to complete administrative tasks while using the other parts of the facility. "I can sit there and make labels, and I can use (Anna's) printer," Becca says. "Carthage Mill is a workplace environment. ... I can work on the business side while something's cooking in the kitchen." *FI

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