

‘Keeping It Cool for 50 Years’

Millard Refrigerated Services has the storage business down cold

BY EMILY NOHR | WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

As a kid, he hung out in freezers. As a teen, he trailed after his dad on the way to executive meetings. And today, as an adult, Lance Larsen is leading the way as president and CEO at refrigerated warehousing and distribution services company Millard Refrigerated Services.

“When people ask how long I’ve been in the business, I’ll say 35 years,” said Larsen, 35, smiling.

Now is an exciting time to be at the helm because Millard Refrigerated is celebrating its 50th anniversary while moving into a new Omaha headquarters. And the homegrown company is spending the milestone year reflecting on how it has ballooned from a single warehouse in Omaha to the third-largest refrigerated warehouse and distribution company in North America with 36 warehouses and about 2,200 employees.

Locally, the company’s presence is significant. You’ve seen its sprawling facilities in Omaha — one is off Kennedy Freeway near X Street and another is near 132nd and Q Streets — that combined are larger than five NFL football fields. The company employs 160 people in Nebraska and 215 in Iowa.

A week ago, about 90 employees moved from the current headquarters at 4715 S. 132nd St., which was built as a shopping center in 1963, into the new 90,119-square-foot building near 132nd and Pacific Streets in the Sterling Ridge development. The three-story structure features a 93-seat auditorium, a deck that overlooks a pond and a sun-automated shade system.

Larsen is the first to credit the business’ solid footing to the company’s founder and his father, the late Larry Larsen.

The elder Larsen, whose first love was construction, got into the cold storage business by default. In the 1950s and 1960s, he was building homes, apartments and shopping centers — his projects included a group of apartments near midtown and the development just west of the Millard Airport — when he expanded into larger commercial projects.

He landed a job to build a cold storage warehouse, which at the time was a relatively new, niche business. The warehouse’s tenant, however, hit hard times and went bankrupt. As part of the reorganization, Larsen got the building and a new job title: owner and operator of the facility.

After a successful first month, Larsen held onto the business. Early on, he was the human resources guy, the payroll guy, the guy on the dock, the guy running the forklifts, said Steve Offner, who’s been Millard Refrigerated’s in-house general counsel for more than 20 years but worked for the company even before that. And Larsen’s work ethic, he said, never slowed.

“You could not keep up with him,” Offner said. “Sheesh. You’d try to get here at 6:30 in the morning and he’d already be there. The next day, you’d come in at 6:15 to beat him and he’d already be there.”

Larsen focused the company’s growth close to home at first. He added small warehouses across Nebraska to serve the beef industry and others in Iowa for pork. He later leaped outside the Midwest to the South for poultry. In the 1990s, the company moved into bigger metro areas.

What made Millard Refrigerated unique was that Larsen maintained an internal construction crew that engineered and designed the warehouses. Still today, internal construction crews move around to build new



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Millard Refrigerated Services’ two Omaha facilities are larger than five NFL football fields. Here Jeronimo Ramirez moves frozen product at the facility off Kennedy Freeway near X Street. The other one is near 132nd and Q Streets.



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Sean Kimble, Millard Refrigerated Services’ vice president of human resources, gives employees a virtual tour of the new headquarters at 132nd and Pacific Streets in the Sterling Ridge development.



When Millard Refrigerated Services decided to build a new headquarters, Lance Larsen, the president and CEO, said Omaha was the “logical place to stay.” The new building is near 132nd and Pacific Streets.



The new headquarters is a three-story building of about 90,000 square feet that has a spacious lobby, an auditorium, a deck that overlooks a pond and a sun-automated shade system.

facilities for the company and expand others. Those facilities and Millard Refrigerated’s internal construction arm, Offner said, are in many ways Larsen’s legacy.

“He built those buildings and he expected them to be immaculate and shiny, and they were,” Offner said. “He was proud of what he put together.”

By the mid-2000s, the company had about 9 million square feet of refrigerated storage across the U.S. and Canada. Offner called Larsen’s success “kind of the classic small-town-boy-does-well story.”

As part of that story, it was Larsen’s hope that he could share that success with a second generation, Offner said.

When the elder Larsen died of a heart attack in 2008 at the age of 69, the younger Larsen had been shadowing his dad and working at Millard Refrigerated for a few years. The younger Larsen recalled not knowing if joining the company would

always be an option.

Years before, he was studying at Southern Methodist University when his dad called him up, telling him the proverbial “I have good news and bad news” regarding an offer from someone who wanted to buy the business.

The younger Larsen asked for the good news first. You won’t have to work another day in the cold environment, his dad replied. The younger Larsen wondered what the bad news could be. You won’t have a job, his dad said. His dad rejected the offer and, after graduation, the younger Larsen headed back to Omaha.

Today, with more than 9.3 million square feet of refrigerated space, Millard Refrigerated’s facilities stretch north to Calgary, Alberta, south to McAllen, Texas, and coast to coast from Manteca, Calif., to Allentown, N.J. The company also owns Millard Maritime, a private port in Alabama that has a 1,600-foot

wharf with rail, Interstate and barge access that can berth three ships.

On average, the private, family-owned company ships about 350 million pounds of product per week, providing services for major food companies. In the last two years, Millard Refrigerated has opened or acquired about 400,000 square feet of space.

Larsen’s vision for the company’s next 50 years includes sustaining its core fundamentals of focusing on customers, team members and overall operational excellence. Larsen, like his father, visits facilities every week to check on operations and get updates from team members.

This year, Millard Refrigerated bought “Keeping It Cool for 50 Years” signage for the warehouse doors and company equipment as a way to say “thanks, guys, for the tremendous work you’ve done for the last 50 years,” said Tim Smith, the senior vice president for

sales and marketing.

Larsen aims to reinvest back into the company and constantly innovate by evaluating costs often — power is one of the company’s major expenses — and installing control systems and LED lighting.

Innovation happens by better understanding grocery and retail customers and helping them by combining inventory, sending mixed loads and mastering redistribution, Larsen said. Because time is of the essence in their industries, redistribution can get products on the shelves quicker and is a sustainable effort by Millard Refrigerated to require fewer trucks on the road.

The new headquarters is also

a symbol of the company’s future, Larsen said. When the new headquarters project started about two years ago, the company didn’t look outside Omaha. Particularly for the cold storage industry, he said, Omaha is ideal because of its central location and access to strong protein markets.

Larsen called Omaha the “logical place to stay” because the city attracts talent, is friendly to businesses and has offerings like the College World Series that other cities don’t provide. It’s where his father got his start in the industry and where Larsen wants to see the company through.

“We’re well suited for the next 50 years,” he said.

MILLARD REFRIGERATED SERVICES

Location

Headquarters is near 132nd and Pacific Streets. The company has 34 cold storage facilities across the U.S. and two in Canada. Locally, Millard Refrigerated has a south facility at 2523 Gomez Ave. and a west facility at 13039 Renfro Circle.

Employees

About 2,200, with 160 in Nebraska and 215 in Iowa.

Services

Refrigerated warehouse and distribution services, plus additional services such as boxing, labeling, and blast freezing and high pressure processing, a post-packaging method of killing microorganisms that better preserves products.

Scale

Millard Refrigerated ships about 350 million pounds of product per week on average.

Leadership

President and CEO Lance Larsen took the helm in 2008. Other leadership includes CFO Brian Vinchur, General Counsel Steve Offner, Senior Vice President-Human Resources Sean Kimble and Senior Vice President-Sales and Marketing Tim Smith.



History

Larry Larsen, left, Lance’s father, was building homes, apartments and shopping centers in Omaha in the 1950s and 1960s when he expanded into larger commercial projects, building a cold storage facility. The tenant went bankrupt, and Larsen became the owner and operator.