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Sentinel of the Plains

BY RICHARD GARRITY

Cattle were quietly standing around the brimming stock tank. Their restless hooves churned the damp earth caused by the overflow. The wheel of the Aermotor windmill was slowly turning in the spring breeze, each blade reflecting the early-morning sun. Rural sound of the groaning mill and the chug of the plunging sucker rod sounded as it lifted water from the depths of earth. Windmills were a gift to the dry prairies.

When the early homeseekers staked their claims during the numerous Runs of Oklahoma, many locations were without water. Wells were dug and windmills erected to use the everlasting wind.

Windmills have been operating since the twelfth century. In Holland they were used to pump water, saw lumber, grind wheat and spices. Some of the structures provided living quarters for the miller. Massive, cumbersome, and with fixed canvas sails, the entire unit was turned by oxen to keep it directed into the wind. In 1693, the Dutch erected windmills in Albany, New York.

In the 1930's David Halladay of Ellington,

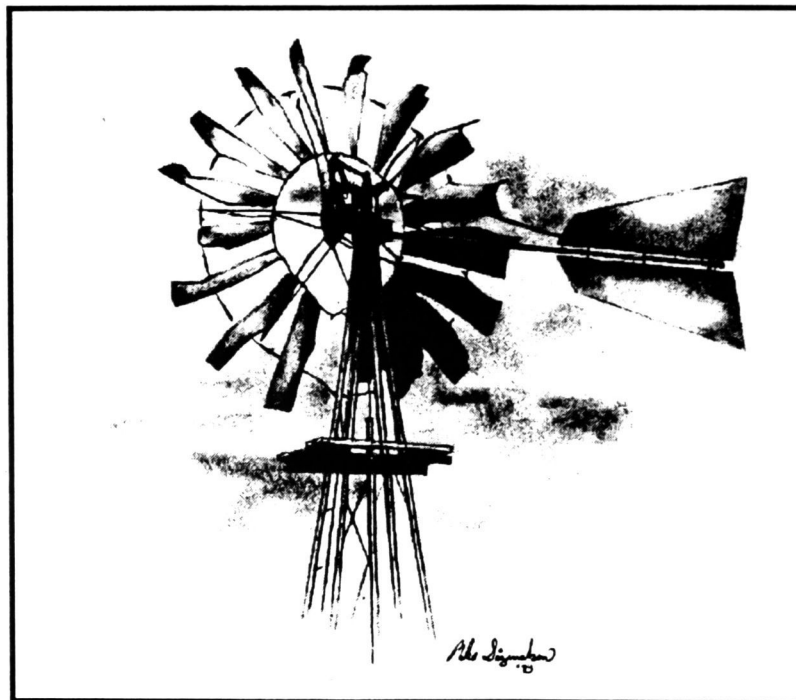


ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE SIGURDSON

Connecticut, invented the first windmill in the United States. A new principle of a wind-controlled tail determined the speed and kept the fan pointed into the wind. With their famous Eclipse of 1876, Fairbanks-Morse introduced wind power to the plains. Other well-

known units included the Perkins, Baker, and the Dempster.

The Sears-Roebuck catalog of 1902 listed an eight-foot Kenmore wheel for \$15.05 and a complete unit and tower for \$60.00. Some farmers purchased the wheel only and built their own wooden tower. After the mill was assembled on the ground, the wheel was attached. With aid of guide ropes, the entire unit was raised by horses. The wheel was tied to prevent it from turning in the wind. The legs were set into prepared holes in the ground, the sucker rod connected, the wheel freed, and the machine was ready to pump water.

The plains of Oklahoma still have many of these vintage structures. Some of them are in ruins, their usefulness ended. Others are steadily pumping, a task which they have continued for years. The wind is their companion. ■