

Computers have changed dramatically over the past 25 years. From mainframes filling entire rooms to today's pocket-sized Blackberries, technology has improved in usefulness and convenience. The GROWMARK System has long been a leader in developing and distributing new technologies through its member cooperatives.

"When I started, our ledgers were done by hand," said Jay Sales, TriCounty FS, Inc. controller. "The biggest challenge was balancing right down to the penny."

Before 1984, all FS salespeople handwrote tickets and sent them to Bloomington, Ill., where clerks keyed them into a minicomputer. Monthly invoices were printed and returned to local cooperatives for mailing and collection.

"There were some issues with accuracy, with multiple people handling the data," said Gary Braun, recently retired GROWMARK systems development manager. "In 1984, I installed and supported a new minicomputer-based application that allowed cooperatives to enter their own sales data."

The need for standardized programs and procedures was quickly recognized. GROWMARK purchased a sales information application and rewrote it to meet the needs of a cooperative.

"Sales splits, patronage, and inventory tracking are all a little different," said Mike Herzog, GROWMARK applications and administrative manager. "Once we worked those out, we put the member cooperatives in the computer business."

The program, named TicketMaker, allowed a salesperson to enter agronomy information into a portable computer linked to a central computer which printed statements and tracked inventory. At the time, FS cooperatives were the only companies in the United States to link a PC to the pumps in petroleum trucks to record gallons delivered using ACCUSystem. They were also the first in Illinois to allow card processing at unmanned FUEL 24 stations and link that sales data back to local cooperatives.

In 1995, GROWMARK developed the GreenPlan/GIS system to make agronomic recommendations based on historical needs and GIS coordinates, another first in the U.S. The program used GPS technology to determine custom application for specific field areas.

In anticipation of Y2K, all DOS-based applications were converted to Windows-based platforms. TicketMaker became AgVance, and ACCUSystem became Fuel Billing Solution for energy sales. Both programs are still used today.

Enhancements allowing Internet business are continually refined as the technology proves effective.

"We're finding more customers using our website to check their accounts, follow company marketing programs, and check company grain prices," Sales said.

The GROWMARK System just completed a five-year conversion of all member cooperatives to Microsoft Dynamics GP, a financial reporting program.