



Photos by Joel Sartore

William Nielsen (far left) is mayor of Franklin. Deb Gooder (center) walks across a nearly empty showroom at his Case International and Pontiac dealership. Jeff Strong (right), former manager of Franklin Feed Service, stands near three closed grain bins.

in Franklin . . .

his repair shop is doing well because when people can't afford to buy new, they repair the old.

Gooder isn't as optimistic as Slocum and the Mallowneys. He sees no relief, at least not for two years.

The government isn't going to step in and raise grain prices, he said. Grain prices must go up or everyone will go broke. "Our day is coming," he said. "Next year this time things will get screaming bad."

But, Gooder hopes he is wrong.

Two years ago he was debt-free. Now he owes nearly \$60,000. Gooder said he last sold a tractor in December and a combine in September. "To sell a tractor in this day and age, it's unimaginable," he said.

Gooder said he would like to sell 50 cars this year, six or seven tractors and three combines. But he knows he won't. If he sells half that many, he'll be lucky.

Yet he is concerned about his dealership. He's worried Case International will force him to install a computer. Then, he might have to drop the franchise. "I don't think I'll make it," he said.

For his dealership to succeed, the farmers have to make it. "We're so tied in agriculture," he said. "I don't know if anyone else believes it. There's an old saying 'give a farmer a dollar and he'll spend two.'"

If farmers don't have money, none of us do, he said.

It's Saturday in Franklin and George Davis works in his office. Earlier, he delivered a van to a customer. Later, he'll deliver a car to the school to be used for driver's education.

Across the street from Case International, sales at Davis Chevrolet remain low. Part sales and repair work have been up though, he said.

In the past, Davis said, his business has thrived on pickup and truck sales. That business is gone. People can't even afford to buy used pickups or trucks.

Davis remembers in 1978 when he won a trip to New Zealand in a pickup sales competition. Recently, General Motors started another contest. It cost him \$400; he said he has to participate in it.

Under contest rules, Davis needs to sell 11 trucks and five cars. He knows he won't.

Costs like these may force Davis to give up his new-car dealership. "I'll give it six months," he said. He'll still sell used cars and keep the repair shop going.

Davis has another role in the community. As a city council member he watches Franklin businesses close.

A silver chain and padlock guard the doors of the Ben Franklin 5-10 store. The windows are soaped. Next door, a large building used to be called Helen's Boutique. Like the Ben Franklin, it closed. A similar store is scheduled to open soon, Davis said, taking up half the space of the former business. At least three other businesses have closed.

Nielsen said he feels "completely, absolutely terrible" every time a business closes. "We do everything and anything we can to keep it from happening."

It's Saturday in Franklin and Jeff Strong is watching basketball. He would rather be working at the Franklin Feed Service. The business is bankrupt and Strong is physically disabled.

As manager of the feed service, Strong increased sales — gross sales hit \$1.5 million. Those were good times.

Two years ago, things changed. While on the job, a man ran a stop sign and hit Strong's truck. Then came the bad times.

Sales dropped almost \$40,000 because Strong was unable to work. Too much credit was given and debts rose.

"I suppose you could call it bad management," he said.

He strokes the sparse beard that covers his face.

Debtors stopped making payments, either filing bankruptcy or telling Strong to sue.

Sales dropped to \$480,000 last year, and the business closed, leaving Strong disabled and without a job.

Strong wants out. He attends classes at Kearney State College. He, his wife and children want to leave Franklin, but he has to sell his house first. Strong says it won't be easy.

"Watching a business you busted your butt to make a profit and then get in a wreck and watch it go to hell . . . it would have to be anything but positive," Strong said.

"It blows the hell out of the American dream."

It's Saturday in Franklin and William Nielsen is mayor of a town with an unclear future. Some see the town surviving the hard times; others aren't so sure.

A large sign welcomes visitors to Franklin. It reads: "Franklin, Best of the Good Life!" — Kevin Warneke