

The Mill is Gone, but the Memories Live On

by

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Our grandparents, Fred I. and Blanche V. Johnson bought the mill at Mazeppa in 1930 from Clarence and Suzanna Auten. Grandpa Johnson began his milling career at the age of 17, when he worked at Herbstster's mill in Glen Iron. He lived in the mill office during the week. On weekends, he rode his bicycle home to Jerseytown. For several years, after he married grandma, he rented Fought's mill in Hughesville. At that point, they began to search for a mill to buy on their own. Grandpa and Grandma bought a mill in Mainville and calamities that can happen to a mill happened. The dam, which was crucial to running the water-powered mill, went out, and later the mill burned. Grandpa wanted to quit the milling business, but Grandma encouraged him to look for another mill. They looked at a mill in Spring Mills, but Grandma didn't like the location of the mill house. On the way home to Mainville, they stopped to eat in Lewisburg, and



Fred I. & Blanche Johnson (1943)



F. Eugene (Gene) Johnson (1955)

heard that the mill in Mazeppa was for sale. Grandpa preferred the mill at Spring Mills, but Grandma liked the mill house at Mazeppa. With Grandma's Irish

input, Grandpa bought Mazeppa Mills from the Autens and so began the Johnson family milling venture at Mazeppa.

The mill ran with water power which was supplied with water from Buffalo Creek. Grandpa had a series of three dams to control the flow of Buffalo Creek to the mill race and the water from the mill pond. It was a six-acre pond that was three feet deep. The pond was fed by a gate off of Buffalo Creek. My brother Fred recalled Grandpa going out to that gate every evening to open it up to fill the pond over the night and closing off the gate to the mill's head race. In the early morning, he would reverse the operation and raise the boards to the head race to



Aerial view of the mill and adjacent buildings probably taken in the early 1960s. The mill pond is shown in the upper left of the image behind the mill, the large building on the left. The building to the left of mill was the straw shed (Dad sold straw and hay). The large building in the center was the family home. The small building to the right of the house was the smoke house. The larger building to the right of smoke house was the chicken house and wood house. The buildings to the far right side of the picture were the turkey pen, pig pen and garage with the round corn crib.

provide water for the three turbines which powered the milling equipment. A 30 hp turbine drove the flour mills; a 25 hp turbine drove the attrition mill and some older stones, and a 15 hp turbine ran some other machines. (Curt Falck, present

operator of the H&C Grove's Mill, which is the next mill downstream from our mill, recalls that his great-grandfather would know when Johnson's Mill would begin operation because a surge of water would flow on down to Grove's Mill and assist them in providing adequate flow to their turbines.) Grandpa could process a farmer's grist in about an hour. While the work was going on, the mill had a water-powered sharpening stone running in the basement. The farmer could use this stone to sharpen his tools and make good use of his time. Fred saved the sharpening stone from the mill and has it at his home where he also uses it.

Dad and Mother, F. Eugene and Dorothy C. Johnson, bought the mill from Grandpa and Grandma Johnson in 1939. Dad was about 21 when he took over the mill operations. Grandpa stayed on to help him learn the milling business. Dad ran the mill on water power until 1946, when he replaced the turbines with electric motors driven by a diesel powered generator. That foretold the end of the mill pond. But, during the years that the pond provided water for the milling operation, it also provided the area with a recreational spot.

The best things that happened at the mill pond had nothing to do with the milling business. Fishing was the attraction in the summer. We caught sunnies, bass, perch, and crappies. However, one day Fred was the catch. When a friend went to cast his rod, the hook, a deep sea hook, caught in Fred's earlobe. Ouch! Dad had to take Fred to Doctor John Arbogast, Sr., who had to slit his ear to remove the hook. Fish were not the only source of food in the pond. The pond had a host of big lily pads with resident bullfrogs. Late at night, Dad and some friends would go to the pond to catch bullfrogs for a meal of frog legs.

Winter brought a different attraction at the pond. It was the perfect spot for ice skating. The winters were cold and crisp, and the ice would freeze solid. Occasionally, on a winter evening, when mother and dad would be away, Ruthie, the baby sitter, would tuck my brothers, Fred and David, into bed. After the coast was clear, they would sneak out the back door and head to the pond to skate. One Sunday afternoon about 650 people skated on the pond. Many times, the skaters would build a bonfire which added warmth and fun to a major social event. Even Doctor John Arbogast, Sr. was a frequent skater. He not only enjoyed the skating, but was there, just in case someone fell and needed medical attention. In

1955 the banks of the pond had been riddled by muskrats and were bulldozed in. Dad converted the pond area into a cornfield.

Fred and David, and I spent many hours in the mill. Dad would open the mill at 7:00 am and close at 5:00 pm. On Saturday, he closed at noon. Sometimes after hours, Dad would have to unload rail cars of feed and many times, would not finish until 10:00 or 11:00 pm. Fred recalled a typical day in the 40's and 50's. Then, much of the business centered on small-scaled milling for local farmers. They brought their grist to the mill in the morning for grinding



The miller's house.

into chop. At the mill entrance, the grist would be off-loaded from a truck or wagon into 50 gallon wooden barrels called hogsheads. These would be lifted up to the door on the third floor of the mill by a water-powered hoist. From there, the grist was dropped through wooded shafts to a corn machine on the second floor. Here, the corn was shelled from the cob and the cobs were thrown onto a pile behind the mill. David and Fred would spend many summer afternoons shooting black snakes on the cob pile with their 22's from a window in the mill. The corn was then fed down to the attrition mill on the first floor, where the corn

was ground into grist. A typical farmer's grist would net him from 8 to 10 bags of chop.

All was not business with these local farmers. Sometimes, a good practical joke would lighten up a slow day. One time a local farmer named Hookie was at the mill. He always chewed Red Man Chewing tobacco. Well, one day he mentioned that his tobacco had a different taste. Hookie didn't know it at the time, but one of the mill hands was able to slip some meat scraps into his tobacco pouch. Hence, the different taste! Everyone also had a good laugh and Fred still has a good hearty laugh over the incident.

Grandpa Johnson and Dad also made flour in the mill. The farmers would bring their trucks loaded with wheat after hours. I have many fond memories of listening to the farmers tell stories as their wheat was being unloaded into a grain pit. Dad stored the wheat in bins. The largest bin was three stories high and held 3,000 bushels of wheat. A smaller bin was also in the mill. In order to fill the bins to capacity, we had to crawl down a ladder in the bin, and shove the grain around to each little nook and cranny. One day, Fred and David were in a bin and the wheat came in too fast and clogged the opening. They couldn't see the opening and became disoriented. Fortunately, Don Baker, Dad's helper, realized quickly what was happening and shut off the flow of wheat in the elevators to the bin. Don ran to the opening in the bin, and his voice led Fred and David to the opening so they could escape.

The wheat was made into flour by the roller mills. Dad's mill had three sets of rollers on the first floor. A big swinging sifter was on the second floor. Periodically, Dad would clean everything that would be used in processing the flour. Many times, I had to remove the stockings in the sifter, turn them inside out, and remove webs or larvae. It was always a constant struggle to keep ahead of the "bugs".

The local Pennsylvania wheat that Dad milled grew in limestone soil that gave the flour special properties that were good for baking bread, pastries, and pretzels. It was basically an all-purpose flour. Grandpa's milled flour was called Lily White and Dad's was called Bob White. Local bakeries and housewives used the flour to make pastries and bread. Dad delivered 5 lb, 10 lb, and 25 lb. bags to

local homes and grocery stores. He delivered to the store at Buffalo Crossroads, two stores in Mazeppa, and Bechtel's Dairy and Restaurant in Lewisburg. Bechtel's used the flour to bake their breads and buns. Dad also delivered flour to establishments in Laurelton, Hartleton, Mifflinburg, and Lewisburg. David, Fred and I, remember going with Dad in his trailer truck, which was loaded with 100 lb. bags of flour, to the National Pretzel Company in Scranton. Here the flour



Flour bags from Johnson's Mill.

was used to make pretzels, which were twisted by hand. On the return trip, Dad would stop at the Stegmaier Brewery in Wilkes Barre, to pick up a load of brewers grain, which he used in his feed. At times, Dad would get a batch of bad wheat. He would still grind it into flour and sold it for wallpaper paste to a company in Wilkes Barre.

Making deliveries was always a part of the milling business. In fact, even as a little tyke, Fred remembered making a delivery of corn with his little red, white and blue wagon to several trees in the yard -- his customers! As Fred and David got older, they helped Dad with the delivery of feed after school. When they were about 13, they would drive the truck to deliver 100 lb. feed bags to folks who had pigs, cows, chickens, horses, etc. They tried to drive on back roads as they really weren't old enough to drive. Thank goodness, times were different

then. One of Fred's favorite deliveries was to Mrs. Mary Roush. After unloading the pig feed, Dave and Fred would go into the house to collect the money. Mary kept her money, from the sale of her eggs, in a jar in the kitchen. She used her egg money to pay her feed bill. Mary not only paid her bill, but would usually have filled raisin cookies or cream puffs for them to eat. David and Fred not only made deliveries, but they also unloaded 100 lb. bags of feed from the railcars at the Vicksburg siding. Dad had feed shipped there by the Lewisburg-Tyrone railroad. Bagged feed and flour were stored in the two warehouses that were attached to the sides of the mill.

The warehouse to the south was built when Grandpa Johnson owned the mill. Our Grandfather Criswell, was a skilled carpenter. He built the warehouse to the north by using a 2-foot square. Using this square, he sat for hours in



The mill before the warehouses were added

front of the area that was going to be the warehouse. He figured out the amount of materials needed, and within a short period of time, constructed a pegged beam and board warehouse, just by using a two-foot square. At times, there was so much stored on the floor of the warehouse that the beams would sag from the weight. But, the beams never gave in.

In the final years of the mill operation, Dad added new equipment. The attrition mill was replaced with a more powerful hammer mill for grinding grain. It was built by Sprout Waldron of Muncy. More than once, as the farmer was unloading his grain, a claw hammer, a wrecking bar, or even a shovel would follow the grain into the hammer mill. Dad had magnets that would remove the metal, but he would have to shut down and clean it out before he could start it up again. In the early 1950's, Dad purchased a large heated tank for black strap molasses. The local housewives would come on the days that the molasses was delivered to get some for baking. Dad used the molasses in mixing feeds. My



The mill after the addition of two warehouses.

horse loved it! Housewives would also buy the flowered feed sacks to make dresses and aprons. Mother made many dresses and knotted haps from the bags. Dad sold the bags for 10 cents apiece, but Mother got hers free!

Dad closed Mazeppa Mills in 1982. He wanted to retire and enjoy some years travelling with Mother. My brothers and I grew up in and around the mill. We learned the milling business, and developed childhood and teenage memories that were formed by the day-to-day life at the mill. David and Fred had memories from actually working in the mill. For me, my memories were centered

more of just being there -- the sounds, the smells, the vibrancy of the mill, itself. It was a special environment for a little girl -- one that is hard to describe, and can't be replicated anywhere today. I was Dad's little helper. In fact, I much preferred helping Dad in the mill to helping Mother in the house. Dad had a little bag truck for me to move bags of flour and feed (one bag at a time) about in the mill. That bag truck has a special place in my heart, and it is in our home today. I must admit, I never learned to tie a miller's knot.

Finally, it should be noted here, that Grandpa Johnson extended his love for the milling business beyond Mazeppa Mills. He bought mills for his other two sons, Mac I. Johnson and J. Donald Johnson. Uncle Mac operated the mill at Light Street and Uncle Don operated the mill at Cowan. David continued the milling venture and became the third generation of the Johnson family to continue the milling operation. Dad bought him the old stone mill at Clintondale that he operated for many years milling flour and feed. Fred and I became



Fred and Beth stand with her bag truck.

teachers. Fred taught social studies at Penns Valley High School and I taught kindergarten at New Berlin and Buffalo Crossroads elementary schools, following in our mother's footsteps.

Even though life at Mazeppa Mills is no more, I sit here with tears in my eyes, recalling the nostalgia of some of our wonderful childhood memories that the three of us had in the mill. Hopefully, these memories will keep the milling at Johnson's Mill in Mazeppa, alive for future generations. Yes, the mill is gone, but the memories live on.



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