

## **The Remarkable Widow Catherine Smith**

Widow Catherine Smith settled at the mouth of White Deer Creek about 1773 on 300 acres of land claimed by her late husband Peter Smith. Catherine, mother of 10, was a small woman, about 5 feet tall, with short black hair and a pleasant expression. The Smith's, from Manheim Township, Lancaster County, operated a trading post (c. 1768 - 1773) at what is now Lock Haven. Sons Michael and Philip built a gristmill at McElhatton Run, Clinton County. Son William removed to the Ohio Territory.

Settlers at White Deer asked Widow Smith to build a gristmill to process local grains, and a sawmill to cut local timber. The location at White Deer Creek, just off the Susquehanna, provided power for the mills and access to transportation.

A boring mill was soon added. Boring mills made rifle barrels and re-bored barrels as they became worn from use. In the 1770's guns were scarce. Some settlers had muskets which were neither as accurate nor effective as rifles. Many in the militia had no guns at all.

In order to forge a rifle barrel, a bar of iron was heated and hammered into a flat shape, the dimensions of which (length, width and thickness) were determined by the ultimate size of the rifle barrel. A rifle barrel could be up to 48" long. The flattened metal was shaped around a steel rod until the edges overlapped and could be welded together by heating successive small sections. Through repeated heatings and hammerings, it would in the end appear that the barrel was made from a solid piece of iron. The interior of the barrel could be enlarged for different caliber sizes.

Gunsmiths added sights and so on to the barrel blanks to make rifles. The Widow Smith may have had a gunsmith working at the boring mill or her sons might have assisted her.

No records remain of the operations of Widow Smith's mills. It is most likely that Smith's boring mill was used to re-bore rifles of local settlers, and those who fought in the Revolution and other military actions.

Widow Smith's mills were important enough to the settlers that a fort was built in 1778 for protection. Fort Menninger stood near the mouth of the creek. Widow Smith's stone house was nearby. All were abandoned in 1779 during the "Great Runaway." The Indians burned down the fort and mills.

In 1793, Widow Smith and her family returned to White Deer and rebuilt the flour and saw mills. However, having no deed to the land, she was evicted by Mr. Claypole and Mr. Robert Morris, both of Philadelphia, who claimed ownership of the tract.

Widow Smith petitioned the Pennsylvania Assembly for the return of her property and payment for her work for the militia. Many locals supported her claims. She is supposed to have walked many times to Philadelphia (160 miles each way) to have her case heard. She was unsuccessful in having the land returned to her and others took over the mills.

Catherine Smith died about 1829 and was buried in the Old Settlers' Graveyard. Her grave was disturbed during construction of a shed some years later and she was reburied in the local cemetery.

The State Geographic Board named the eastern end of Nittany Mountain "Catherine's Crown" in the 1920's. A state historical marker commemorating her is in a small park off Old Route 15 near white Deer Creek (south of the White Deer Pike).

Widow Smith's mill stood until 1848 when it was destroyed by fire. Her stone house still stands just to the west of the Danowsky-Wagner House, just north of the White Deer Pike.

Read about Widow Smith and early Union County history in the following sources for this article: *Annals of Buffalo Valley*, John B. Linn; "Catherine Smith and her Mills," Marion Stover Wheeland, *Union County Heritage Volume V, 1976*; *The History of White Deer Township*, Arna Dersham; and *Union County: A Celebration of History*, Charles M. Snyder - available at the Union County Historical Society office.