

HISTORY OF FLOUR MANUFACTURE IN MINNESOTA

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GEORGE D. ROGERS

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BY COL. GEORGE D. ROGERS.

PROGRESS IN METHODS OF MILLING.

It is recorded, and is probably true, although it does not come within the milling experience which it is my privilege to review here tonight, that the first mill operated in Minnesota was the hand mortar of the Indian aborigines. This make of mill seems to have been much on the plan of that described in the Bible, the mortar used by Moses in grinding corn and manna in the wilderness within sight of Canaan. Speaking of Moses and milling, you will pardon me, if in passing I call attention to the fact, that this great law-giver of Bible record, the first legislator of historic repute, exempted the mortar or mill of that day from being taken in pawn, because, said he, it would be like taking a man's life to take the mill from which proceeds life's staff. But the hand mortar of Moses and the red man is no longer used in the flouring industry of Minnesota, and its further history we will leave with our friends, the apothecaries, who long since secured the monopoly for the use of this kind of milling machine.

The next step in the evolution of milling in the Northwest was the introduction of the hand-mill by the early territorial pioneers. The hand-mill was the prevailing mill in use among the ancient Britons down to the time of the Roman conquest. It is

*An Address at the Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, January 21, 1901. The author was aided in the preparation of this paper by Mr. Frank N. Stacy, who also read it at this meeting.

still in use in Minnesota by the wives and daughters and by the retail grocers for grinding the family coffee. For a full account of the milling industry and process connected with the hand-mill, you are respectfully referred to the Daughters of the Revolution or to the Minnesota Retail Grocers Association.

The horse-mill followed the hand-mill. Fifty years ago it was not an uncommon sight, on the prairies of Illinois, Iowa and southern Minnesota, to see a farmer coming in a distance of ten to twenty miles with an ox team and camping around a bonfire sometimes two days and a night, dining meantime on parched corn, while he waited his turn to get a sack or two of corn ground at the one and only horse-mill in that section. For the horse-mill we are said to be indebted to the Romans. For an exhaustive account of its modern use in Minnesota, you should apply to the farmers who grind feed for live stock.

From the horse-mill there was a broad progressive stride to the windmill as a source of power in flour manufacture. Wind grist-mills are of great antiquity, and are still operated in Europe. The crusaders of the thirteenth century introduced them into England, France, Germany, and Holland, borrowing the invention from the Saracens. In the seventeenth century wind grist-mills decorated the hills of New England, just as the water mill afterward sung in the valleys. An early historian of Minnesota, J. W. McClung, speaks of the wind grist-mills at St. Peter and Mankato, that at the latter place, in 1868, grinding 160 bushels of wheat daily, which would be equivalent to perhaps thirty barrels of flour. In 1876, Mr. A. Simpson, of Owatonna, in a contribution to the Northwestern Miller, in answer to an inquiry regarding wind grist-mills, said: "I have operated a Halliday power mill since 1867 with satisfactory results. The wind wheel is 60 feet in diameter and furnishes 45 horse power. It runs three run of buhrs with all necessary machinery in a common gale. The wheels are perfectly self-regulating and durable. I have ground in one month 3,540 bushels of wheat and over 1,200 bushels of feed. As good flour can be made with wind power as with any power and as much per bushel. The mill runs about three-fourths of the time during the year, part of the time running one run of feed. There are seven 60-foot wind wheel flouring mills in this state, two in Wisconsin, one in Nebraska, and several more with smaller wheels, all doing a good business."

This description is doubtless news to most of the milling profession of Minnesota, as well as to many of our pioneer citizens. The writer talked as though he might be an agent for the Halliday mills, and before his words are accepted as verified history it might be well to have the subject of wind-grist mills investigated by a joint committee of eloquent members of the legislature now in session.

(Nature laid the foundation for the milling industry of Minnesota when she filled the soil and atmosphere of this chief wheat belt on the globe with such a remarkable quality and quantity of food nutrition, and laid through the woods and across the prairies such a cordon of strong and reliable streams, carrying power to cheaply and efficiently convert the wheat of the Northwest into flour. After that, it was simply a matter of human energy and method; the ultimate result was assured. In 1899 Minnesota raised the largest wheat crop ever produced by this or any other state, and the largest mill-power ever got together in one state converted it, with half the crop of the Dakotas thrown in, into 25,000,000 barrels of flour,—enough to feed one-third of the people of the United States one year.

THE GOVERNMENT MILL OF 1823.

It is interesting to note that the first flour mill built in Minnesota was owned and run by the government, and that the first wheat raised was planted and harvested by the government. One of the first acts of Col. Snelling on taking possession of the fort named after him was to send a detachment of fifteen soldiers to St. Anthony falls to build a mill. Commissary Clark, father of Mrs. Charlotte O. Van Cleve, who is still a resident of Minneapolis, was the first to suggest the raising of wheat and flour to support the soldiers. That was the beginning of Minnesota's wheat and flour industries.

At the annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, twenty-one years ago this month, there was exhibited a letter, dated Washington, D. C., August 23, 1823, from General George Gibson, commissary general, as follows:

From a letter addressed by Col. Snelling to the quartermaster general, dated the 2nd of April, I learned that a large quantity of wheat would be raised this summer. The assistant commissary of subsistence at St. Louis has been instructed to forward sickles and a pair of millstones to St. Peter's

If any flour is manufactured from the wheat raised, be pleased to let me know as early as practicable, that I may deduct the quantity manufactured at the post from the quantity advertised to be contracted for.

In a second letter General Gibson said:

Below you will find the amount charged on the books against the garrison at Fort St. Anthony for certain articles, forwarded for the use of the troops at the post, which you will deduct from the payments to be made for flour raised, and turned over to your free issue:

One pair buhr stones	\$250.11
337 pounds plaster of Paris.....	20.22
Two dozen sickles	18.00
Total.....	\$288.33

Such was the infantile milling plant and harvesting outfit with which the grain and milling industries of Minnesota saw daylight and a cradle. That was seventy-eight years ago, back in the infancy of the oldest pioneer members of this society.

THE FIRST CUSTOM MILLS.

It was not until about a quarter of a century later, that the first grist mills were built for the accommodation of the general population. The wheat industry and the milling industry properly may be said to cover a half century. The United States census of 1850 credits Minnesota with a wheat product of 1,401 bushels, and a flour product valued at just \$500. In the fifty years history of our cereal industries, therefore, the wheat product has grown from 1,400 bushels to near 70,000,000, and the value of the flour output from \$500 to about \$100,000,000.

Excepting the government mill, the earliest flouring mill in Minnesota was built by Lemuel Bolles in Afton, Washington county, in the winter of 1845-6, as noted in Folsom's "Fifty Years in the Northwest." A grist mill had been built in Little Canada, Ramsey county, by Benjamin Gervais in 1844.

From 1850 to '55 small grist mills were planted on the streams of about a dozen counties of the territory. The river counties, Houston, Winona, Wabasha, Dakota, Washington, Chisago, Hennepin, Sherburne, and Stearns, were the first to build mills. Chatfield and Rochester had each a mill in 1855, and Northfield and Preston in 1856. E. P. Mills & Sons of Elk River, Sherburne county, place the date of construction of the little 30-barrel mill by the famous pioneer, Ard Godfrey, at that place,

in 1851. It was in 1851, also, that the first grist and merchant mill was erected at St. Anthony Falls, in East Minneapolis. It was built by Richard Rogers, between First and Second avenues southeast, and began business on May 1, 1851, as a grist mill with an equipment of one run of stone, all told, to grind corn. In 1852, Franklin Steele became partner in the enterprise, and the growth in the firm and capital was celebrated by the addition of a second run of stone to grind wheat as a merchant mill. This pioneer mill survived until the fire of 1857.

EARLIEST MERCHANT MILL AND EXPORT.

Merchant milling in Minneapolis made its first substantial beginning in 1854, when Eastman, Rollins and Upton erected on the lower end of Hennepin island a five-run mill, 40 by 60 feet, at a cost of \$16,000. That it was a profitable enterprise, is shown by the fact that the firm realized \$24,000 profit the first year. This mill was famous for the title, "The Minnesota," and it well earned its name. There was not wheat enough tributary to Minneapolis within the state in those days to supply the mill, and wheat was hauled by wagon 100 miles from Wisconsin, or was brought up the river by boat from Iowa.

"The Minnesota" was the first mill to ship Minnesota flour to eastern markets. This it did in 1858, paying \$2.25 per barrel freight, which is over five times the present transportation rate and is three-fifths of the present value of the flour itself.)

THE FIRST MILL CORPORATION.

New Ulm, the home of ex-Governor John Lind, lays claim to being the first town to incorporate a milling company under the laws and constitution of the state. Its articles of incorporation read: "Recorded in Vol. 1, pages 1, 2 and 3 of Incorporations." The firm name was the Globe Milling Company of New Ulm. The incorporators were the German Land Association. The purpose of the milling company was stated to be: "The business and object of this company is to manufacture lumber and flour. The capital stock of the company is \$30,000; the number of shares, 1,500. The capital stock actually paid in is \$265." The mill, which had a daily capacity of fifty barrels, was already constructed and in operation when Minnesota entered the Union as a

state. It was operated until the Sioux outbreak in August, 1862. At that time New Ulm had three mills: The Eagle, erected as a sawmill in 1856; the Globe, erected in 1857-8; and the Windmill, with "one set of buhrs for flour, and one run of stones for flaxseed," in 1859. All were burned to the ground in the Sioux attack of August 23, 1862. The Indians began firing the town to windward early in the day, burning 190 houses, including the Globe and Eagle mills. The Windmill, which held a strategic position at the foot of the range of hills, was used by the white riflemen as an outpost, during several hours of the fight, but finally succumbed to the flames.

The Eagle mill was rebuilt after the war and converted into a 4-run flour mill in 1867; again into a 225-barrel roller in 1881; and finally was enlarged by the present Eagle Roller Mill Company into a 1,200-barrel mill, being one of the best country mills in the state. As an outgrowth of the Globe Milling Company, the New Ulm Roller Mill Company, with Benjamin Stockman, president, and the veteran Charles L. Roos, secretary and treasurer, operates two mills of an aggregate capacity of 700 barrels. New Ulm has retained its early precedence as a milling town, and today boasts an annual output of 400,000 barrels of high grade flour. Brown county today runs eight flouring mills, with a total daily capacity of 3,500 barrels.

MILLING AT NORTHFIELD.

Two years before the incorporation of the Globe Mill Company at New Ulm, John W. North founded a mill and a town at Northfield. Jesse Ames & Sons bought the mill in 1864, building a new mill in 1869-70. The Ames mill was known as one of the most successful in southern Minnesota. Unlike the New Ulm mills, the Northfield mill did not have to contend with the Indians and fire; but it did have to fight the Grangers and water.

So impressed were the Grangers of Rice county with the success of the Ames mill, that they organized a company of well-to-do farmers and built another just a mile down the stream, starting up their mill in the winter of 1873-4. Spring opened with war. The Grange mill backed its water upon the Ames dam, and the Ames mill employed its tail race as a weapon of war to no avail. The result was a battle of lawsuits and newspaper articles,

which led to flowery eloquence, but not to profits in flour. It was at that time that Capt. John T. Ames achieved great celebrity, not only as a miller, but as a brilliant writer of Philippic invective. He always maintained that the Ames mill made larger profits and paid less for wheat after the Grange mill came into the field, than before.

THE FAME OF ARCHIBALD.

On the Cannon river, only three miles from the Ames mill, was the mill of the famous Archibald, the Scotchman who made Cannon river celebrated in eastern markets long before Pillsbury added fame to the upper Mississippi. Long before the new milling process was introduced in 1871, Minneapolis millers used to make trips to Dundas and peek into Archibald's mill, to see if they could fathom the secret of Archibald's flour beating Minneapolis flour \$1 or more per barrel in the New York and Boston markets. Charles A. Pillsbury had an idea that the difference in the flour was due to the quality of the wheat. So he managed one day to put in his pocket a handful of the Ames and Archibald wheat; but when he got home he found the Cannon valley wheat no better than that in his own hoppers.

The difference was, that Archibald was his own scientific and practical miller. He dressed his stones with greater care, did better bolting, and used less pressure, and more even, in grinding, so that a whiter and purer flour was produced. He was also progressive, being among the first to use the new middlings purifier in 1871 and the roller process in 1880. A staff correspondent of the *Northwestern Miller*, March 24, 1876, then published at La Crosse, spoke of Archibald as "the man or firm who takes the leading place among the flour makers of this country or of the world."

THE GARDNER MILL AT HASTINGS.

As a boy, in 1859, I drove over from Janesville, Wisconsin, to St. Paul, and I still distinctly remember stopping at the famous Gardner mill at Hastings, on my trip both ways. This was not only one of the earliest, but one of the best mills of Minnesota. Scientific milling resulted in unusual prices and large profits for