

Speedvale Mill
A Mill in Wellington County.

“Any grist for the mill?
How merrily it goes!
Flap, flap, flap, flap,
While the water flows.”

The Historical Society of Wellington County
Second Prize (adult)

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"Speedvale Mill"

I loved the brimming wave that swam
Through quiet meadows round the mill,
The sleepy pool above the dam,
The pool beneath it never still,
The meal dust on the whitened floor,
The dark round of the dripping wheel,
The very air about the door
Made misty with the floating meal.
Tennyson.

The river Speed, with its tributaries, drains a considerable area of the eastern half of Guelph Township. In the days of the pioneer, that stream was one of great volume and by its name, was swift of current. Today "Speed" is a misnomer; the volume has shrunk, often to a mere Greek, and it meanders sluggishly through the countryside. However, in the past it did make a decided contribution to the economy of the community by furnishing the power necessary for the operation of flour, feed and saw mills.

The subject of this sketch, Speedvale Mill, came into being after the purchase, on November 14, 1859, of seventeen acres of land adjoining the Speed River from the owner, Mr. William Hood. Mr. John Goldie, a miller of Ayr, was the buyer and the purchase was made for his son, James, then a resident of United States.

James Goldie was born in 1824, and was educated in Scotland, taking up a study of landscape and general gardening. In 1842, he emigrated to New York to put his training into practice, remaining there until 1860, when at the wish of his father he moved to Guelph to become a miller.

The site chosen for the mill had been previously leased and occupied by Mr. Samuel Smith, who was prominent in public life in Guelph, having been reeve of the Town of Guelph and later an alderman; then mayor in 1857. Mr. Smith had operated a stave factory and sawmill on the premises, and, for that purpose, he had constructed a dam and raceway.

Mr. James Goldie, on arrival in Guelph, at once set to work on preparations for building a mill and a dwelling house. The stave factory, situated on the left bank of the Speed and visible from the bridge at the mill, was converted into a temporary dwelling, to which the most convenient approach was by a foot path leading from the Elora Road, directly to the river.

When Mrs. Goldie arrived from New York with her three sons, Thomas, John and James, she was filled with dismay at the backwoods' appearance of the place; many times did she long for her old home. The dislike, however, passed and she grew to be fond of Speedvale, although much hard work was her lot. When reminiscing, she often told how, when the mill was under construction, she had cooked for sixteen men, looked after the needs of her family and performed the many household duties, with little or no assistance.

Work on the mill continued through 1860 and 1861. There were two sections to the building. The stone part contained four run of stone, waterwheels and all the cleaning equipment and other machinery required for the intricate process of making flour. The frame structure, equally as high as the mill, was for the storage of grain.

At the time when Mr. Smith vacated the property, a dam and raceway were in existence. The dam was located well upstream, about two hundred yards from the bridge crossing the river at, what is now, Woodlawn Road East. A long raceway extended from that point to the stave factory across the river from the east corner of Riverside Park. A branch of this raceway was also connected to the sawmill, a stone structure which, stood midway between the new mill and the river. This sawmill was later converted into a stable. Raceway and darn were discarded and a new dam, perhaps one hundred yards lower down than the first, was constructed with gates to the wide raceway. The mill end of the raceway was provided with, a flume to carry the water required for driving the waterwheels, into the mill. In 1861, the work was finished and the mill ready for operation.

Mr. Goldie's early training in landscape work was put to effective use in beautifying the banks of the newly constructed raceway. As one approached the dam from the mill, the right

hand side was planted with a single line of trees, while the left side was built up and widened into a generous pathway, each side of which was lined with trees. As these grew in size they formed an overhead arch for the pathway, which eventually was referred to as "Lovers' Lane."

The residence as first built on the premises, was a storey and a half structure of eight rooms. The first floor was built three or more feet above ground level; one might infer that this was a precaution against possible flooding. A wide veranda adorned the front and east sides. Later, a dining room

and a kitchen were added at the north side, the floor of which was only a few inches above the ground, making an early example of a split level home. Projecting from the rear of the kitchen was a cellar, dug underground; with effective insulation in the covering above ground. For privacy as well as adornment, spruce trees outlined the ground space allotted to the dwelling; the lawn was likewise tastefully planted.

It was not until 1852 that Guelph was connected with outside points by rail. After that date it became an important shipping centre. All kinds of farm products were teamed to Guelph; some for manufacture; some for shipment elsewhere. Farmers from far and near teamed wheat to Speedvale for milling. It was not an uncommon sight to see the mill yard crowded with loads of wheat, while a long queue of wagons extended to the Elora Road and beyond; all awaiting their turn to be unloaded. With the advent of the steam road, business, especially that which came from the north, rapidly declined.

Flour and its byproducts found a ready market in the neighbourhood, but most of the output was shipped to United States, Montreal and other Canadian points. Not always were these cash transactions. In one instance, a customer to whom a shipment of middlings had been made, requested by letter, on the plea of confining illness, that his payment be permitted in whiskey; offering to deliver whiskey at 22 cents a gallon, to whatever point his creditors indicated.

It was the custom in those days, when whiskey was low in price, for some millers to keep a barrel on tap for free consumption among the customers. However, in the case of Speedvale Mill, nothing stronger than water was ever supplied.

Mill feed, in those early days, was very low in price, compared with the present. Some millers found bran unsaleable and had to dump it into the river. As of October 1, 1863, bran sold at \$6.00 and shorts at 12.00 per ton; in April, 1927, prices were \$32.00 and \$55.00, respectively; and in April these had risen to \$64.00 and 68.00.

Associated with Mr. Goldie when Speedvale opened for business was his eldest brother, William, the firm being known as J. and W. Goldie. After a brief experience, William withdrew and left Guelph. The first head miller was Mr. James Hitchcox, whose daughter became Mrs. James Hood and spent her life in Guelph.

In the sixties the cheapest and most abundant commodity in the community was lumber; for this reason, barrels were used as containers for flour. At the outset, Mr. Bernard Kelly, whose shoo was on Cardigan Street supplied the barrels at a cost of thirty cents each; by 1926, the price had risen to eighty cents. Gradually flour in barrels disappeared from the market; cotton bags being used instead. A cooperage was built at Speedvale shortly after the mill was completed, several men being employed in the making of barrels.

After 1870, when the railway was extended northward, less wheat was brought to Guelph, since markets for it were to be found nearer home.

In 1866, Mr. Goldie bought The People's Mill, which had a much greater capacity than Speedvale. The latter was sold, in 1867 or 1868, to Mr. John Pipe, a man of the community, who also owned lots 18, 19, 33 and 35 of Division A, on the Elora Road. He retained the farm but moved into the dwelling at the mill, where he lived until he sold the property in August, 1883. The purchaser, Mr. G.P. Tolton, had been milling at Glen Lawson, in the Acton district.

Mr. Tolton made drastic changes in the equipment. The Mill stones were discarded and the roller system introduced. An American firm supplied the rolls which were arranged on a new plan, the several pairs being combined on one frame. This type of machine was named "The Jumbo," and the mill became known as "The Jumbo Mill," the original name being dropped. Steam power was introduced when the water supply, which had been failing for some time, would not turn the mill on full time. The change proved satisfactory.

Messrs. D. and E. Nicklin of Acton, who had been in the grain trade for "a long time, were the next proprietors, when Mr. Tolton sold to them in April, 1885. They did away with "The Jumbo Machine," which had been giving trouble. The ordinary style of steel rolls replaced it, and the mill was again designated "Speedvale Mill."

In March, 1887, Mr. D. Zimmerman bought the property from Messrs. Nicklin. After this it passed through several hands, no one holding it for long. Miss Zimmerman bought out her brother in 1893, and ran the mill for a brief period. Then it

was leased to Mr. L.L. Sage; to Messrs. Cheyne Brothers; and to Mr. Robert Kerr.

In August, 1900, it was sold to Mr. James L. Simpson, who proved to be the final owner. He bought with the idea of continuing to make flour, since the building contained all the necessary equipment.

There were difficulties to be faced. Not always was there sufficient water to turn the wheels. He tried to overcome that problem by operating during the night, a plan that was not always satisfactory. Other mills had installed roller systems and the demand for stone made flour was gradually disappearing. The expenses for upkeep were high; the stone required dressing or sharpening and experienced hands were scarce. An elderly man, Mr. Andrew Richardson, did what work was required. Silk was used for screens; needless to say such replacements or repairs were costly.

He tried to make flour, but, after a brief experience, he gave it up, finding that it was quite impossible to operate at anything but a loss. He stripped the mill of all the flour making machinery and confined himself to rolling and grinding feed for the farmers.

The frame building, which had been intended for storage of wheat, was put to other uses. There was a demand for hay and oats for the city's delivery equipment and supplies of grain and baled hay were kept on hand. After 1907, grain was purchased by the car load and conveniently unloaded at the C.P.R. (Canadian Pacific Railroad) siding nearby.

Head Millers were Messrs. David Gutting, Christopher Q. Quarrie, George Jackson, Wilbert Nesbitt and others. As well two teamsters were usually employed.

In 1926, Mr. Joseph Lang from Kenilworth, leased "Speedvale." Mr. Simpson retired and eventually moved to a house in Wellington Place, having operated the mill for almost twenty six years, the longest period of occupation in the history of the place. Among those employed during Mr. Lang's tenure were Mr. Charles McTaggart and Mr. Willard McDonald.

Fire destroyed the building in March, 1932; only the walls were left standing. Everything of value was salvaged from the interior. For years the ruins stood in mute evidence of the mill's existence. In 1944, the property passed into the hands of Mr. Wilbert Nesbitt. In September, 1956, the City of Guelph purchased the property from the Estate of Mr. Wilbert Nesbitt.

In the march of progress, a new street, Riverview Drive was opened, and, with the necessary removal of what remained of the old stone structure and the leveling of the terrain, the last vestiges of "Speedvale Mill" disappeared from the landscape.

The residence had survived the changes of years; the tall spruce trees had been removed; the kitchen addition had been replaced by a dance hall, which became the work shop of The Guelph Little Theatre, after its popularity as a recreation centre had waned. The whole was demolished in 1963, to make way for a fire hall for that section of the city.

Along with, the changes just mentioned above, there were added to the city owned Riverside Park, the seventeen acres which John Goldie had purchased for his son, James, almost one hundred and four years before.

On April 23, 1965, the Guelph Historical Society sponsored a tree planting ceremony, commemorating the founding of Guelph by John Galt, on St. George's Day, 1827. The site chosen was at Speedvale Avenue and Riverside Drive in the Riverside Park extension, where was made the initial planting of a design which is to be a copy of John Galt's plan for our city. The Galt hardens, when completed will be the Society's project for the Centennial of Canada's Confederation in 1967.

The Gardens will occupy, at least in part, the space where stood Speedvale and its raceway. Another planting has already been made; a tree marks the centre of the space once occupied by the dam. And so....

"The creaking old mill is still, Maggie,
Since you and I were young."

References

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