



**Bell's
Gristmill**
Utopia, Ontario

**The History of Utopia
&
The Bell Grist Mill**



Thanks in large part to falling asleep on the couch on New Year's Eve and being woken to experience the final 30-second countdown of 2006 and greet 2007, sleep failed me in the early hours of January 1, 2007.

And so I explored the box of past papers from our early years in the saga of the restoration of the Utopia Gristmill that were brought over by a fellow committee member and great friend, Linda Sjerps, when she and her family visited ours on Saturday night.

I was hoping that the box would contain a copy of a document that had been prepared by summer students at the NVCA in the late 1970s, whose excerpts were enthusiastically read by another dear friend and restoration visionary, Susan McCann, at our first supper and live/silent auction fundraising event, held what now seems so very long ago.

And through the goodness of great filing and excellent record-keeping, the document was there.

Who knows if there is another copy around ... and it will be beyond fortunate if we are able to get better versions of the photocopy-worn photos that are contained therein but at least now, because what was at first, not being able to sleep, and then "I've got to stay up and just get it done", the document has been typed again and rendered ready for the days of electronic placements and storage. And soon, thanks to the artistic and graphic talents of Tyrone, the illustrations will accompany the written text.

This document is a treasure for so very many reasons. It documents the life of a rural community that, in ways mostly because of the absolute smallness of our size, would otherwise never show up in history books. It holds many glimpses of our community's past that would probably never be able to be retrieved again. It contains names of folks whose families continue to live in Utopia and continue the legacies, traditions and loves of their forefathers.

And it provides so many details of the life and workings of our precious little gristmill that we will so desperately need and be so grateful for as we work towards its ultimate restoration and preservation.

An ordinary typing task, perhaps, but what a great way and a real privilege for me to start the New Year --- being able to touch the past while readying for the steps forward into our future.

*Susan Antler
5:27 a.m.
January 1, 2007*

The Restoration of Utopia Grist Mill

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Abstract

This is an informational report about the history of Utopia and the Bell Grist Mill. The report will be a useful reference to the authority and the public.

This report describes, in detail, the history of Utopia and the Bell Grist Mill. The main subjects covered are the social happenings in the Hamlet of Utopia in the late 1800's and the early 1900's. Also, the arousing life of the mill, particularly of those individuals directly connected with the mill, has been covered.

Introduction

Society is beginning to realize the destruction of our natural habitat. Hence, they are experiencing that down to earth, bare foot feeling again. Over the past few years, more and more people are enjoying the natural resources of our country. Keeping this in mind, you the Conservation Authority play an important role. That is, to protect and renew the natural resources of a watershed. The above statement applies to what this Experience '78, Heritage Conservation, is all about.

In 1965, Harold Bell of Utopia donated the Bell Grist Mill to the Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority for a water conservation project. Since then, property has been bought and landscaped. A new concrete dam was erected in 1969. The grounds are a very attractive and suitable site for visitors. Presently the mill remains with a few vital organs left within its shell. This historical factor awaits to greet the public once more.

The officers of Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority wanted the opportunity to examine the possibilities of restoring the Utopia Grist Mill. I was, therefore, authorized to prepare a report on the history of the mill and surrounding area, methods of restoration plus the costs involved.

The Bell Mill

Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority, 1979

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Introduction

History is an odd entity, its usefulness is never clear until its existence is recorded. What is useful could best be described as communicable knowledge, what is not useful could still be described as interesting, and still speaks purposefully of other people's lives.

The history of Utopia is such a creation, but it speaks more of the feeling of history that has the opportunity of becoming reincarnated in the potential restoration of the Bell Mill which was central in the hamlet's history.

This project was initiated by the Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority, which owns the Utopia Conservation Area where the Bell Mill is located. Three students have been employed in preparing this report at separate intervals over the past two years. Hopefully the people reading this project will find it as interesting as the students who worked on it.

Special gratitude is extended to the many people involved in the preparation of this booklet.

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