

The Chronicle of the Bell Mill

In 1864, Mr. James Spink established a grist and flour mill on Bear Creek in Utopia. As the stream was too small and slow-moving to provide sufficient power to operate the sawing and milling operations simultaneously, the sawmill that was in Utopia at the time, was run by day, and the flour/gristmill was run by night. Such a schedule shows how important the water-run mills must have been to the community in that era.

In 1876, Mr. Richard Bell, of Honeywood, was hired by Mr. Spink to work in his mill. He worked under Mr. Spink until 1879 when he and his two brothers, John and Manuel, took over the mill. It operated under the name of J., R. Bell and Brother. The threesome are known to have spent many long, hard and continuous hours working there.

A few years later, Mr. John Bell retired from the business, moving to Toronto with his wife to start a variety store. This mill then became known as R. & M. Bell; the two brother carried on the mill work together until Manuel decided he was ready to retire.

It was on May 29th, 1903, that the Bell Mill went up in flames. Mrs. Sarah Bell (nee: Sproule) was the first to notice the blaze; she ran almost a mile dressed in her nightclothes to sound the school bell as an alarm. The townspeople, aroused from their sleep, hurried down to the mill to assist the Bell family; buckets after buckets of water were carried from Bear Creek, but the mill was lost. An intense north wind was becoming a threat to the Bell home. The people were busily trying to extinguish the flames that were burning the wooden shingles of the Bell house, when a woman screamed, "The kids!". Everyone was in such a panic that they had forgotten about Vera and Roy. Mrs. Miller (Vera Bell) remembers George Tupling of Honeywood carrying her and her brother out of the house, laying them beside a fence, and covering them with a blanket. She recalls listening to the sound of machinery falling through the floor as it burnt; it was a night always to be remembered.

The cause of this disastrous fire was never determined. There used to be two pig barns just to the west of the mill which, at the time of the fire, were said to have burnt first; the fire spreading from them to the mill office, and then to the mill. The mill office, at the time, was a lean-to structure attached to the west wall of the mill. It contained a stove which may also have been the origin of the blaze. Many people blamed the fire upon the tramps who frequented the countryside. The

tramps were a basically harmless variety. They would ask at doors for food, sleep where they could, and after, practice some kind of minor trade, but there were also often blamed for any unexplained crimes committed in the area. When the C.P.R. line was constructed through Utopia in 1906, the number of vagrants was greatly increased.

After the fire, the neighbours grouped together at the scorched site to aid in reconstructing a new mill. Mr. Bell told the farmers to help themselves to the wheat that was not destroyed in the fire, as it would only rot if not used. It was not until the following New Year's Day that the mill was again reopened.

The original mill was not constructed upon a permanent foundation, probably it only rested on wooden beams or pilings. The new mill was built with a solid foundation of stone. Because of the quicksand where the mill sat, the new foundation had to be sunk very deeply. It is said that the foundation is 30 feet down. The stones used for the foundation were all horsedrawn on wagons. The construction of the foundation was a difficult task; it was made before the days of cement mixers and, therefore, all the cement had to be mixed by hand.

The timbers used in the mill were all horsedrawn from a forest that was 8 kilometres away, below the 25th sideroad on the 5th line of Essa, close to where a cement bridge now stands. All the timber was hewn by hand and "framed" by Mr. Dave MacFarlane. Framing was a trade that required great skill; it involved accurately cutting and notching the beams of the building on the ground so that, when a barn raising was called to lift the structure in place, everything would fit perfectly together. Mr. MacFarlane is said to have marked his beams for cutting with tobacco spit, which he could deposit accurately ten feet ahead on the timber. The mill was very important to the farmers of the surrounding area at that time, and they freely gave of their spare time to help in the mill's reconstruction. This illustrates both the need the people had for the Bell Mill and their sense of community goodwill.

The Bell Mill provided an important service to Utopia and its surrounding area by producing flour and feed for the farmers. Flour from the Bell Mill was distributed to many nearby communities such as Alliston, Everett, Ivy, Cookstown, Angus, and Thornton, under the brand names Gold Coin, Snowflake, Paracon XXX, and Bell's Best.

The mill made such grain products as shorts, bran, grits, and flour. Shorts was a very fine food used for pigs. Bran was used for horse and cattle feed, and for certain medicinal purposes, while grits was very

similar to cream of wheat. The flour sold mostly was Gold Coin Flour, used for baking bread, and Snowflake Flour, which was used for pastry.

The mill not only served just the local area, but also processed grain that came in from the western prairie provinces. The mill often brought a train carload from this region; the grain would be trucked in from the source at least once a month. There was also a grain shed at a siding on the C.N.R. line just north of the mill. This grain shed had storage bins and contained the grain brought by trains. From here, the grain was brought down to the mill with horse and wagon, processed, and often shipped back west. The grain shed was accidentally destroyed by the C.N.R. in approximately 1936 when a grass fire got out of control and the shed caught fire. When the grain arrived at the mill, it was taken off the horsedrawn wagons, bagged, taken through the small door on the south wall of the mill, dumped into a hopper which weighed it, and dumped into the bin below by means of a tap door in the bottom of the hopper. The larger door on the south wall was where the bagged, finished product was loaded back onto the wagons. In later years, a metal trough was also sometimes used for the truckloads that came in, which carried loose, bulk grain of known weight. Two cement forms were installed along the south wall that, when a truck backed up upon them, was high enough to use the trough to slide the grain into the bin.

Following the First World War, Mr. Richard Bell's son, Joseph Harold, who had returned from serving seven years overseas laying front lines with the Signal Corps, went into partnership with his father. The mill was now known as Richard Bell & Sons. Through the industry of this father and son team, the mill operated as one of the most important businesses in the community.

Subsequent to the death of his father, in 1937, Mr. Joseph Harold Bell carried on the mill business, the name being altered to J.H. Bell. Harold hired a gentleman named Mr. Gilbert McMaster to work at the mill. Mr. McMaster worked at the mill on and off for approximately thirty years, and can recall the times when there would be twenty-five teams of horses and wagons lined up in front of the mill with grain to be chopped. There was rarely an idle moment at the mill at this stage of its existence.

Mr. McMaster and his wife, Mary, presently occupy the Bell home.

Mr. McMaster recalls times when there would be twenty-five teams of horses lined up outside waiting for grain to be chopped. There would rarely be an idle moment at the mill. Mr. McMaster let out a chuckle when he recollected times when they often found money on the top floor in a cleaning screen. There were magnets on the side of this screen which picked up silver easily which provided sort of tip money to the workers.

In the late 1930's or early 1940's, the Bell Mill quit milling flour. Up until this time, the mill was operated by two water turbines which produced one hundred and twenty horse power; now it was cut down to a single turbine producing only sixty horse power, providing only gristmill services of chopping and mixing grain.

When Mr. McMaster worked at the mill, it was lighted by the Delco System. This system was powered by a battery which was situated in the basement. The battery was similar to those used in vehicles. It was charged by the running of the mill as a car's battery is charged by driving the car.

Work would begin early in the morning. The first task was to grease the belts and wheels. A days work consisted of about twelve hours. The mill was a noisy and dusty place to work. When finished work, you would walk out covered with a white film on your clothes.

Times were changing and the farmer was growing more independent as hydro reached out into the rural areas and transportation improved. The survival of the smaller mills that had previously served a local hinterland were being threatened with competition from the larger mills. This, coupled with the growing number of farmers who now had their own choppers, caused the Bell Mill to become less and less important. The store also followed this downward trend as the larger supermarkets at co-ops of the surrounding communities became more convenient and attractive. Even the tendency for people to eat boughten bread substantially decreased business.

In the end, however, it was Hurricane Hazel that decidedly changed the Bell Mill from its important role. This second disaster, on October 15, 1954, raged through the county, swelling the rivers and doing extensive flood and wind damage. Mr. Russel Coulson of Utopia remembers being in the store at the time of the hurricane, and moving to the mill after the water got to be several feet deep there. In the mill, the water was forcing itself against the east door; the men in the mill, afraid that the door would be broken in, stacked sacks of grain up

against it, but the door was forced open anyway. The water swept away the front porch of the mill, and was several feet deep on the first floor, flowing down the basement stairs out the other side. The earth in front of the mill was said to have washed away right to the bottom of the foundation.

The quality and the strength of the building was attested to, however, by the fact the mill did weather Hurricane Hazel, with no damage.

Mr. Bell, who was in the mill for part of that wild night, was taken home to the north side of Bear Creek by Mr. Gilbert McMaster. Minutes after Mr. McMaster returned across the then vibrating bridge of the dam, the dam was swept away. The water immediately receded from the mill, but the dam was never rebuilt. Though it was fairly common that a mill's dam be threatened with washout occasionally through its life, this time Mr. Harold Bell decided that to repair the dam would be too costly, and, instead, had a diesel engine installed to power the mill. The mill had to be closed for almost a year after Hurricane Hazel.

After being reopened as a gristmill, fertilizer was also sold. Business continued under Mr. Harold Bell who also was clerk-treasurer of Essa Township.

When an office was constructed for Essa Township in Baxter in 1959, Mr. Harold Bell no longer worked from his home, but from the Baxter office. This meant that a man had to be hired on to run the mill in Mr. Bell's absence; a Mr. Cole of Utopia was hired to run the mill at this time.

The mill was closed in 1965, a victim of changing times. Soon after, the mill was obtained from Mr. Harold Bell by the Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority when the land it stands on was acquired for a water conservation project and recreational area.

The mill continued on until Harold (Joseph Harold Bell) was ready to retire in 1965. He donated the mill to the N.V.C.A. for a water conservation project and recreational area.

In August 1969, a new dam was completed. By this time, Harold and his wife, Myrtle, were in poor health. The two were able to watch the formality of the official opening. The expression of joy and gratification filled the spiritless features of their faces. It was only two months later when Harold passed on and his wife the following two months.

The only surviving member of the Bell family is Mrs. Vera Miller of Utopia. She presently lives on the north bank of Bear Creek overlooking the forlorn mill. A glance out the window brings back many memories of her childhood days; some buoyant, some distressing.

In August of 1969, a new dam was completed, and the Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority held the official opening for it.

The Bell Mill found its way into the lives of many as it served a century of development in the hamlet of Utopia.