

The Mills Along the Conoy Creek

BY JACOB N. OLWEILER

Editor's Note. As a correspondent of the old Lancaster Examiner, over thirty-two years ago, Mr. Olweiler wrote about the Conoy mills. This story, in practically the original form, was read by him before the Lancaster County Historical Society, April 10, 1953.

In every section of this great county, north, south, east and west, you will find streams of water draining every valley, varying from small creeks to what in western and northern states would be termed rivers, when you consider the Conestoga and Octoraro. There was a time within the last half century when the water power from these streams made fortunes for the owners and were looked upon as an economic necessity to the community in which they existed. Granting they were considered an economic necessity then, why not now? When conservation of water power is a paramount question of our national government, why is it not of equal importance to the smaller streams, and communities through which they flow. If they were a convenience and economic value then, why should the once thriving flour and grist mills of those generations become a losing proposition and most of the mills go to decay?

Story of Conoy Creek

The writer of this article will describe just what happened along one of these small streams, perhaps the smallest of them all, located in the extreme western section of the county and, perhaps, the least known of the streams, outside of the immediate valleys through which they flow. The stream referred to is the Conoy Creek, a small stream flowing through Elizabethtown and draining the Conoy Valley from the source to its entrance into the Susquehanna below Bainbridge, a distance of about nine miles. It is unknown to most of the inhabitants of the county. The early history of these streams are practically the same. They would all have the same tale "our usefulness neglected"; you conserved our power once, why not now? Fifty years ago all were better known than at present from the fact that they supplied water which made possible the splashing of the stream over the old water wheel, once as familiar as the old oaken bucket, furnishing power to many flour, grist and saw mills, which were busy in-

dustries in their day. It was not an unusual sight to find them running day and night.

Today most of them are abandoned; many in ruin, a few in operation. The old familiar mill dam with their long races, once the merry skating rink for the farmers' sons and daughters, as well as the town youths are no more. In passing, most of the streams bear primitive Indian names, such as Conewago, on the extreme western border of the county, Conoy, Chickies, "Big and Little" Conestoga, Cocalico, Pequea and Octoraro. We read much about the government conservation of forests and conservation of river water power, by the nation and state, but nothing about the conservation of water power right in our midst.

If this conservation of water power was a factor to the communities in that early day, why is it useless today? Is it a wise policy to ship the grain to the large centers of roller mills at great distances and then have it brought back to the farms from which it came, for consumption? Would it not be wise to utilize this power in certain centers to the advantage of the communities which produced the grain?

We might also mention the social worth of these old grist mills. The boys on the farm would walk for miles to spend an evening in the offices of these mills and discuss farm topics. They were the social centers in their day. It is interesting history for the boy of today to hear his grandfather tell the stories of the old mill that used to be.

The Little Conoy

Here is the story of the Little Conoy, briefly told, of fifty years ago and more. Change and decay may be aptly applied as it relates to their history. This little stream, with its source about three miles north of Elizabethtown, is fed by two small tributaries merging in the borough, flows through Mount Joy, West Donegal and Conoy townships, and is one of the smallest streams in the county. Of the eight mills, one using mostly steam, two are in operation today.

The first of these mills is located at Elizabethtown and was erected by Samuel Groff and contained bins for flour. The mill was later purchased by J. G. Stauffer, who equipped it with modern rollers and manufactured the celebrated Silver Cloud Flour.



The Mill at Lobata
Built 1797



Bridge at the old Haldeman-Wiley
Mill near the mouth of Conoy Creek



Angle-Goss Mill
Built 1855



Nissley's Mill
Built 1816

Mr. Stauffer was succeeded by John Binkley. The mill continued in operation continuously with the exception of a few years. Two years ago (1919) J. V. Binkley resumed operations and is doing a lucrative business in flour and chopping.

No. 2 is known as Gish's Mill. It was built by John S. Gish over a hundred years ago. He lived to be ninety-seven years old and was succeeded by his son, Henry, who continued the business until his death, when his son, H. J. Gish, became the owner and operated the same until about ten years ago. This mill was equipped with the old fashioned stone burrs and contained two large overshot wheels. Twenty barrels of flour a day were packed and shipped from this mill for years when in full operation. It contained two flour burrs and two chopping burrs. The dam supplying the water for this mill was twelve feet deep when constructed and was one of the largest.

No. 3, at present used as a tobacco warehouse, was known as Rutt's Mill and was operated by two generations of this family. It was first operated by Peter Rutt and later by Christian, his son. It contained an undershot wheel. The power was used mostly for the operation for a large saw mill and in its day did an extensive business. Some chopping was done but not on an extensive scale. Nothing remains of this industry but the old mill race.

No. 4 was known as Hammacker's Mill, situated about three miles from Elizabethtown. It contained two overshot water wheels and was used for chopping purposes. It is now destroyed.

No. 5 was known as Nissley's Mill and was built by Abram Nissley, who did an extensive flour business, the mill having a capacity for putting out fifty barrels a day, which were shipped by the barrel in car load lots. The capacity was not large enough to cover the demand. Abram was succeeded by his son, Henry Nissley, who continued the business until his death. Peter Gish became the owner and operated on a smaller scale, doing mostly chopping. Ephraim Shearer operated the mill a few years when it was sold to the present owner, Phares Miller, who is kept busy chopping for the farmers, but has discontinued making flour.

No. 6 was best known as Goss's Mill and was built in 1855 by the Rev. Jacob M. Engle in connection with a large saw mill, and an extensive business both in milling and sawing lumber was

done here. Christian Goss, whose name it bears, operated the same for many years. Daniel Sipling, Nicholas Clausen and others operated the mill until a few years ago, when it was closed. Benjamin Hoffman is the present owner.

No. 7 was built in the latter part of the eighteenth century (1797), and was known as Erb's Mill. Excellent water flow afforded power for an extensive flour and feed business. During the period of its operation, Peter Hoffer and John Dougherty operated the same. The mill is closed at present.

No. 8, and the last, is located at Locust Grove, near Bainbridge, and was one of the largest along the stream. It is a



Old Haldeman-Wiley Mill

large stone building and was widely known as Wiley's Mill. It was erected in the latter part of the eighteenth century (1790) by John Haldeman, one of the early settlers of the county. In connection with an extensive milling business here, a large distillery was in operation for years and was one of the last distilleries in operation in this section. This mill was owned and operated for many years by John E. and Henry H. Wiley, who in their day did more business than any single mill on the banks of the Little Conoy. They were the most widely known business

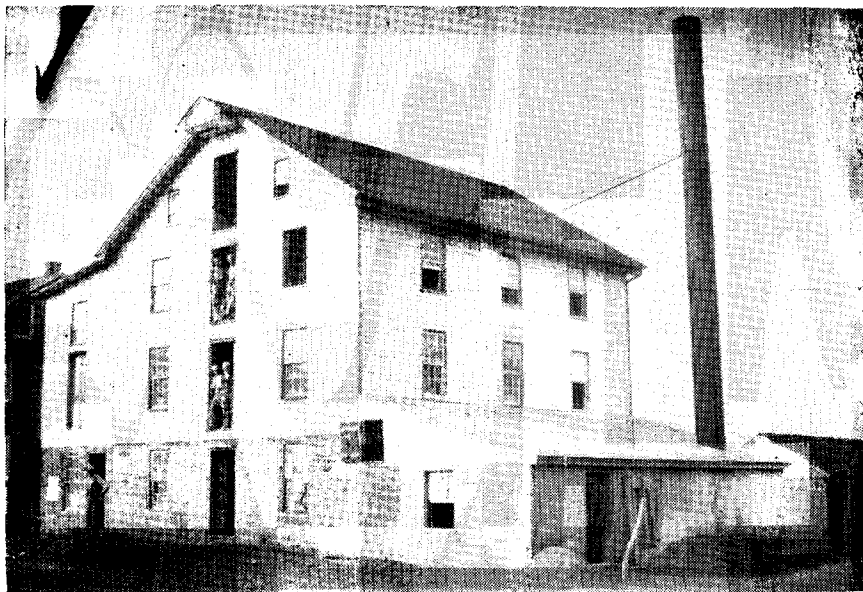
men in the western end of the county through their extensive business operations. This is a brief condensed narration of a once thriving business by eight mills fifty years ago.

THE EARLIER DAYS OF THESE MILLS

Supplementing the story by Mr. Olweiler, the editor adds notes concerning the earlier days of some of the Conoy mills.

THE NISSLEY MILL

On the site of the Nissley Mill, Philip Gloninger built a mill as early as 1740. He later moved to Lebanon Township, and was



The Binkley Mill at Elizabethtown
Erected in 1876

the father of the famous John Gloninger, officer in the Revolutionary War, and judge in the Dauphin County courts. In 1749 Philip sold the mill to Martin Nissley. In 1780 John Nissley, Sr., owned the mill, and in 1864 Abraham Nissley.

THE MILL AT LOBATA

Upon the site of the Erb-Heisey Mill, Melchior Brenneman II, built a mill of logs in 1751, the land having been given to him by

his father, the pioneer Brenneman. Jacob, son of the younger Melchior, succeeded to ownership, and there built a stone mill in 1797. The mill, unoperated but in good repair, still stands, and the date stone can clearly be read from the road: "Built by Jacob and Catharina Brenneman, 1797." Michael, born 1788, son of Jacob, and his wife Mary, daughter of Jacob Gish, obtained the mill. In 1816 Christian Stehman was the owner, John Erb in 1817, John's cousin, Isaac Erb in 1844, then to Rev. Jacob Reider, Peter Hoffer, John L. Brubaker, John S. Groff in 1873, Israel W. Martin in 1875, December 6, 1882 to Eli Z. Heisey, in 1887 to Jacob B. Kauffman, again sold to Eli Z. Heisey, October 15, 1887, with seven acres for \$5,000.

THE MILL AT LOCUST GROVE

At the mouth of Conoy Creek, Melchior Brenneman and his son-in-law, John Haldeman, built a large stone merchant mill, saw mill and still house in 1790. This mill was given to John's fourth son, Henry, then to the latter's son, Cyrus, who sold it to John H. Smith in 1855. The next owner was John Wiley, father of Henry H. and John E. Wiley, who had the mill about 1875-1883.

An interesting sidelight is thrown on this mill, for the stone mason was none other than the grandfather of the famous poet, author and traveler, Bayard Taylor. Bayard's father was Joseph Taylor, 1795-1885, who married Rebecca, daughter of Caleb Way, of Maytown. The grandfather, John Taylor, 1762-1850, married Anna, daughter of Christian and Veronica (Brenneman) Bucher.

About the Author

Jacob N. Olweiler, born within a stone's throw of the Conoy Creek (as was our Society's president, George L. Heiges), has been quite active in the civic life of Elizabethtown Borough. Attending to business as a clothing merchant, he found time to serve as Burgess in 1941, chairman Welfare Campaign, treasurer of the Fire Company, president Chamber of Commerce, trustee and treasurer of the Park Association, director and treasurer of the Farmers Mutual Fire Insurance Company, member of the School Board for many years prior to 1910, author of "A History of the Pioneer Literary Society of 1872," former Councilman, and superintendent of Christ Reformed Sunday School.