

History
of the
Galesville Mill

Written by:
Ruth Lyon
June 1966

In the early 1850's, Circuit Court Judge George Gale of LaCrosse began searching for a site for a new village. His endeavors to establish a school of higher learning in LaCrosse had failed, and he was determined to establish his own village where he could build his university.¹ Before choosing a site for his village, it was necessary to locate a stream which would provide power for a mill. A new community could not economically survive without a flour mill.

Judge Gale, during his search, rode on horseback through the unsettled area surrounding LaCrosse. He forded the Black River and followed its shore until he came to the mouth of a large creek. He progressed up this creek until he came upon a site which seemed ideal for his village. It was not only a beautiful location for a village, but also the creek, later to be called Beaver Creek, would provide water power for the needed mill.

Immediately, George Gale bought 2000 acres of government land and in June, 1854, with the help of his brother-in-law,

¹Bert A. Gipple, The Galesville Centennial (Galesville, Wisconsin, 1954), p. 5.

Dr. William M. Young, plotted the village and chose the site of the mill.² This first site was on the south side of Beaver Creek about a quarter of a mile further downstream than the later mill site. Engineers of that time believed that there would be more current on that side of the creek.

A millwright from North Bend, Augustus H. Armstrong, was brought to Galesville to supervise the construction of the mill. Construction began, but progressed very slowly. Judge Gale was not satisfied with the progress, and in 1855 hired William P. Clark, also of North Bend, to assume the responsibility of supervising the construction and Ebenezer Batchelder to serve as millwright. The construction then progressed rapidly and in 1856, the mill was ready for operation.³ Later in the year a sawmill was added, thus, the mill served a dual purpose. The flour mill was operated by a turbine and the sawmill by an overshot wheel.⁴

After the completion of the successfully operating mill, Judge Gale sold his interest in the mill to Mr. Clark, who, in turn, took Samuel Harris as his partner. Later, Harris bought complete control of the mill.⁵

In 1861 the Clark and Harris mill dam in Galesville gave way, destroying equipment valued at \$800 and flooding the lower

²Ibid., 11

³The Galesville Republican, October 2, 1941

⁴The Galesville Republican, July 16, 1931.

⁵Ibid.

village.⁶ Damage was immediately repaired and business progressed as before the disaster.

The spring of 1866 brought with it a disastrous flood on Beaver Creek. It washed out the dam and left the mill without power. The flood had hardly subsided when Wilson Davis traveled up the Mississippi in search of mill sites. He heard of the disaster in Galesville and got off the boat at Trempealeau to look at the idle mill. Impressed, he immediately bought the site and made plans to rebuild the dam. Later, however, he changed his mind and decided to build a new mill and dam about a quarter mile upstream. Much of the old mill was destroyed, but the upper section was salvaged and moved to a lot near the new mill to serve as a cooperage shop. It is believed that the building must have reached its new location on the opposite side of the creek during the winter months while the creek was frozen.⁷

At the cooperage shop, staves and headings were assembled into barrels for transporting the flour produced by the mill. Power was supplied by an underground lineshaft connected to the waterwheel of the dam.⁸ After the barrels were completed, brand names were painted on them. A popular Davis mill brand was "Cock o' the Walk", with a picture of a rooster crowing the quality of the brand.⁹

T

⁶Ibid.

⁷Interview with Miss Edith Bartlett, April 2, 1966.

⁸Interview with Almon Hammer, April 2, 1966.

⁹The Galesville Republican, March 24, 1960.

Wilson Davis completed construction of the mill in 1869. It was a seven-story structure with a capacity of 800 barrels of flour a week. He employed thirty men and did an annual business of \$150,000.¹⁰ The flour produced at the mill was shipped by steamboat on the Mississippi from Trempealeau. Four mule teams were used to haul the flour by wagon or sleigh, according to the season, the seven miles to Trempealeau. In 1870 Wilson Davis was the only miller in Trempealeau county who produced flour of any significant quantity for sale outside the county. This quantity, however, was only one-third of his total production. The remaining two-thirds was sold locally.¹¹ Thus, it can be seen that the Wilson Davis mill operation was quite an undertaking.

The construction of this mill in 1869 not only provided Galesville with a very prosperous industry, but also occasioned the gayest social affair in the town's history. Before the machinery was installed, a grand ball was held within the massive stone walls. A social affair such as this was a rarity, and people came from far and wide to spend a grand evening dancing and socializing.¹²

Wilson Davis operated the successful mill until his death in 1898, but was joined by his son, Ben W. Davis, in 1892 as manager. In 1894 Ben W. Davis rebuilt and remodeled the mill, only to have it burn four years later. After the fire, the

¹⁰LaCrosse Tribune, February 7, 1965.

¹¹Merle Curti, The Making of an American Community (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1959), p. 240.

¹²The Galesville Republican, August 11, 1927.

mill was immediately rebuilt with enlarged dimensions and capacity.¹³ Ben Davis then organized the Galesville Milling Company with himself as the majority stockholder. He eventually bought the remaining stock and the company name was changed to the Davis Mill and Electric Company. He had previously taken over Galesville's electric service, a utility which employed fifteen men.¹⁴

According to an article published in the June 1, 1920, issue of the American Miller, Galesville had one of the most modern and complete mills in the state of Wisconsin. It consisted of a three and a half story main building with adjoining warehouse, offices and powerhouse. The ground floor of the mill measured fifty by twenty-four feet, the warehouse thirty by forty feet, and the powerhouse forty-six by twenty-four feet. The entire plant was built of stone and concrete on a foundation of solid rock. The mill daily produced 125 barrels of Peach Blossum flour.¹⁵

Flour milling was finally abandoned at the Galesville mill in 1925, however, the mill continued in use as a feed grinding mill. In 1933 Roy Lutz of Melrose bought the mill.¹⁶ After successfully operating the mill for ten years, Lutz engaged Ray F. Anderson to assume the management of the mill. Anderson became co-partner of the firm in 1951 and was responsible for many of the improvements and additions to the mill. In

¹³The Galesville Republican, February 25, 1960.

¹⁴The Galesville Republican, October 27, 1938.

¹⁵"Flour and Power at Galesville, Wisconsin," American Miller, (June 1, 1920) p. 607.

¹⁶The LaCrosse Tribune

July of 1958 new turbines were installed and two new hoists for unloading feed were added. It was thus adequately equipped to handle all feed making operations - grinding and mixing, seed cleaning and treating.¹⁷

February 18, 1960, Ray F. Anderson became sole owner of the mill.¹⁸ The mill, however, continued under the name of Lutz Feed Mill. Business prospered until a disastrous Sunday night in January, 1963. At that time fire destroyed the Lutz mill leaving only the limestone walls. All machinery and thousands of tons of feed and grain were destroyed. The loss was estimated at \$800,000.¹⁹ After the fire, Mr. Anderson rebuilt the mill. This mill is functioning prosperously to this day in 1966.

The only remains of the first mill and dam to be found in Galesville today, 1966, are the cooperage shop and the wheel pits and flood gates of the dam. The cooperage shop, which served as a warehouse for a blacksmith for many years, has recently been acquired by Ray F. Anderson to be used for feed storage. The City of Galesville has purchased the site of the dam, the wheel pits, and the flood gates. These are still used to control the level of Lake Marinuka which feeds into Beaver Creek.²⁰

¹⁷The Galesville Republican, February 25, 1960.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹The Galesville Republican, January 17, 1963.

²⁰LaCrosse Tribune, February 23, 1965.

In the past 114 years, the Galesville mill has changed from a flour mill to a modern feed grinding mill. Judge Gale founded Galesville at its present location in 1852 because of the mill site, and the mill has continued to be one of Galesville's most prosperous industries. It has had seven owners - each owner has been a prominent businessman in Galesville. It has been destroyed four times, but each time it has been rebuilt and modernized. The history of the Galesville mill is truly a success story of progress.

Bibliography

"Ben W. Davis, Dies in Hospital; After an Illness of a Few Days," The Galesville Republican, October 27, 1938.

Curti, Merle. The Making of an American Community. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1959.

Dahlgren, Mrs. Frank. "Davis Family Brought Milling Fame to Galesville," LaCrosse Tribune, February 7, 1965.

"Flour and Power at Galesville, Wisconsin," American Miller, June 1, 1920.

"Galesville Buys Dam as Addition to Park," LaCrosse Tribune, February 23, 1965.

Galesville, Wisconsin. Personal interview with Almon Hammer, April 2, 1966.

Galesville, Wisconsin. Personal interview with Miss Edith Bartlett, April 2, 1966.

Gipple, Bert A. Editor's Column, The Galesville Republican, March 24, 1960.

Gipple, Bert A. "Galesville's First Manufacturing Industry," The Galesville Republican, July 16, 1931.

Gipple, Bert A. "Galesville in the Making," The Galesville Republican, October 2, 1941.

Gipple, Bert A. The Galesville Centennial, Galesville, Wisconsin, 1954.

"Lutz Feed Mill Burns; Plans to Rebuild," The Galesville Republican, January 17, 1963.

"Mill's Picnic Draws 2,000 Celebrants," The Galesville Republican, August 11, 1927.

"Peach Blossoms from Waterfall," LaCrosse Tribune.

"Ray F. Anderson Buys Lutz Feed Mill; Previously Part Owner," The Galesville Republican, February 25, 1960.