



The Local Voice - Lancaster

Shining a Light On Issues Through Documentary Photography + Journalism

James Landis

Mascot Roller Mills

How Does a Nearly 300-Year-Old Flour Mill Help the 21st Century Environment?

With power generated by a source as old as the planet to accomplish a task that dates to the Stone Age using technology that was patented in 1790 (signed by George Washington it was only the third patent issued), a nearly 300-year-old mill has not only helped sustain local families it is also an unusual source for helping the environment.

Flour mills have been a source for food and income in this country since the early 1600s and the Mascot Mill was one of the earliest sites. A flour mill has sat beside Mill Creek in Ronks, Penn., since the 1730s. The first was thought to be built as a one-story structure with two large wooden overshot water wheels turning two traditional, lateral grinding stones. According to its website (www.resslermill.org), it was owned and raised to its current height by Daniel Groff from 1820 to 1860. Then, came the game changer.

“In 1865 William Ressler purchased the mill, beginning three generations of Ressler family ownership,” the website says.

The mill ground wheat into flour, corn into cornmeal, and grain into feed for livestock. Above the front entrance to the mill is the second-floor door where incoming bags of wheat were hoisted up and into the structure, weighed and dumped into storage bins to await the milling process.

The Ressler’s mill also served as an informal bank to help its customers; a post office was added in 1882. Around 1906, the water





wheels were replaced by a system of water-powered turbines and chilled iron roller mills.

Over the years, 16 mills sprang up within a 16-mile span of Mill Creek and each became the center of its own community.

“When you’re hauling heavy grain, you don’t want to go 10 miles to the mill,” James Landis, executive director of the Ressler Mill Foundation, said. “Where a community comes together — your church, your school, your post office, a store — you wanted it within two or three miles, or even less. So, you had a community here in Mascot. Right up the road, a mile and a half or so, you had another community.”

Landis joined the Mascot Roller Mills and The Ressler Family Home about two years ago. After a career that included a master’s degree, working the family farm, stints in technology and management, a partnership in a consulting firm, vice

president of operations for an international development agency and a variety of odd jobs here and there, retirement brought some private consulting and a lot of spare time. But, he realized that retirement wasn’t very exciting.

“I’m sitting around and not enjoying myself terribly much, and I heard about this job. I sent my résumé and they hired me,” he said. “I worked in feed mills when I was a teenager and in college so I understand mills. I understand elevator science, equipment farming, how to tear things apart.

“And, I’m curious as all heck.”

Three generations of Resslerers owned and operated the mill through 1977. When it finally closed, siblings Anna, Franklin and William formed the Ressler Mill Foundation. As a result, the mill and family home will be preserved, maintained and interpreted for visitors in perpetuity.

“There are multiple ways to look at this sort of operation,” Landis said. “It can be a museum that you can look at things or a museum that actually is still active and can do things. The Board of Directors and I said, ‘We want to make it so that 100 percent of this mill runs.’ We know it’s going to take a couple of years, but, we’re going to get this thing so that every piece of it will run. We won’t run it every day — we might run it once a month for short periods of time just to exercise it.”

A step inside the Ressler Mill brings visitors face to face with the intricate details of a milling past. Wood beams support the structure and within the four floors of the mill is a complex system of the mechanical process to mill flour and corn. Trap doors, crushers, screens and sieves, chutes, elevators, storage bins and barrels are seemingly everywhere you look.

To the right, is the office and former post office — the community gathering spot. A potbelly stove is prominently situated with a wooden rocking chair and an old office chair close by. An old copy of “Post” magazine is propped up in the chair and several faded photographs are placed around the space.

A wall made of chicken wire and a screen door delineates the post office that operated until 1934. It’s not hard to imagine the room filled with local residents talking about crops, the weather and a broad range of topics of the day.

“I’m actually fascinated by it all,” Landis said. “But, as a system not as a single unit. They put this whole thing together in such a fashion that it’s stinking amazing.

“It’s an integrated system. It’s a system of commerce, a system of salesmanship, a system of community. This became the post office and when it was running, they had a community. This was the meeting place. It was warmer in the winter and they’d go in there and they talk and chat. It was a neighborhood — a community meeting place. A lot like a bar or a diner is today.

And, none of this would have happened without Mill Creek. With no creek, there is no power to turn the mill.

“The mill wouldn’t exist if we didn’t have a healthy creek,” Landis said.

And, a healthy creek means that it isn’t choked with excess soil and silt, and it runs freely. Ideally, creeks should have a buffer from 100 to 300 feet from roads, businesses and surrounding farm lands and livestock.

A healthy riparian buffer for a creek also means healthy trees and controlling the vegetation along the banks. For Mill Creek specifically, well-meaning conservations planted more than 900 trees and shrubs in the area, but only about 30 remained. A new plan was devised to plant and maintain 200 new trees at a proper distance and with regular maintenance to create an environment that helps the creek.

“When you have trees along the stream you have shade,” Landis said. “The thing that kills streams is when it sits out in the hot sun, and fish and the things that fish eat, like bugs, can’t survive. A healthy stream means that it has a vibrant ecosystem of critters, like otters and muskrats. Everybody said they’re a pain in the neck. Well, they are, but it’s the ecosystem. And, if you don’t have it, you don’t have it.”

With the future of the mill assured, Landis hopes to restore, refurbish and maintain all of the moving parts that have kept it in operation for nearly 300 years.

“The thing that I would wish happened more is that people would know it’s here,” Landis said. “The people who [built this system] were smart. They were capable. We sometimes think our stuff is the best. But, there were



things that were amazing a long time ago. The past was not crude. I'm hoping people come away from here with a sense that, 'Wow. That was pretty fabulous and it's old. There's not a computer running that. It's water.'"

Today the Mascot Roller Mill is using the same power generated by the same source to accomplish the same task using the same technology and it is still grinding wheat into flour and corn into cornmeal. And, that is how one mill creates a community that can help save the environment.