

Indian Mill marks 200th anniversary of dam and sawmill

BY ANGELA HUSTON

This year marks the 200th anniversary of the construction of the original Indian Mill dam and sawmill. The original gristmill was built a year later in 1820.

The mills were built for the Wyandot Indians for their support of the Americans in the War of 1812. "There was an article in the treaty that called for a sawmill, gristmill and a blacksmith's shop to be built on the reservation for the Wyandots by the government. As far as we know, they were the only mills ever built for an Indian nation," said Ron Marvin, director of Wyandot County Historical Society.

The Wyandots signed the treaty with the Americans in 1816 and their reservation became official in 1818 with the original dam and sawmill being constructed the following year about 500 to 800 yards upstream from the current mill. The gristmill was located on the Indian Mill side of the Sandusky River and the sawmill on the park side, said Marvin and Robin Conley, curator of the Indian Mill Museum.

"They were both single-story mills from what we understand" and probably used a waterwheel, Marvin said. Because no real written descriptions, images or sketches of them exist, researchers of the mills are guessing, he explained.

"The Wyandots got their (grain) milled for free," Conley said. "Everybody else had to pay. When the Wyandots brought their stuff in while they were milling somebody else's, they had to stop milling that guy's stuff and mill the Wyandots'. After the miller would get his portion of the money, the money went back to the Wyandots for their school."

Charles Garret became the first mill operator. Later Jonathan Briley and Lewis Rummel were government-appointed millers.

Operation of the mills continued until 1843 when the Wyandots were moved to Kansas. Use then became sporadic until George Myers purchased the mills at an auction in 1848. He operated them until about 1860 when he dismantled both of them, salvaged the best pieces of walnut timbers and built the existing three story mill in 1861.

"We've got some of the original pins," Marvin pointed out. "Everything was made by hand and it was all pegged together." The mill was built using two different techniques from covered bridge and railroad construction. The techniques gave the mill "a lot of extra strength so that the building could shake and move with the grinding." They also helped the mill withstand the 1913 flood, which washed away the nearby covered bridge.

At the same time the new mill was constructed, a new dam was also built, complete with a fish ladder. The ladder, which is no

longer there, was like a slide for the fish to flop down or up instead of getting caught in the undertow. Today the fish can bypass the dam by swimming down, through, behind and out the mill's "garage door," said Marvin. In the 1930s Miller Foster Finkle took advantage of the fish by keeping fishing poles on hand to entertain young boys while their parents were busy. The boys would cast their lines out the window and catch catfish beneath the mill, Marvin said.

Very likely to the miller's wife's delight, the miller's office was added to Indian Mill in 1901-02, said Marvin. The miller's home was across the road and was where people went to stop and talk while they waited to have their grain milled. "The office kept the men over here," he said.

A Leffel double turbine waterwheel, invented by James Leffel of Springfield, powered the mill, Conley pointed out. "His were the most efficient of their time. From what we could find, this (mill) always had a horizontal turbine. It never had a big waterwheel because there's nowhere in the construction to actually put one, and the Sandusky River also doesn't have enough flow to make one go," she explained.

There were three turbines beneath Indian Mill to operate the grinding stones, equipment and pulleys. Two of the turbines are located at Indian Mill and the third is at Ohio History Connection.

The mill continued to be operated by different families until about 1941. Toward the end, buckwheat became the primary grain milled there "because they still used granite stones because, from what I was told, buckwheat tended to catch fire on the steel rollers" that were being used elsewhere, Conley said.

Museum.

Foster Finkle was the last miller. When he died, the mill eventually went up for auction and Ward Walton, a local property owner, purchased the building and property and donated the mill to the Ohio Historical Society in 1953. Four years later in 1957 he gave the property for the park to the Wyandot County Historical Society.

Even though the then Ohio Historical Society owned the property, for the most part it was an "old dilapidated building," Marvin said, until the mid-60s when the society decided to renovate it. The repair work occurred in 1966-67 and the museum opened to the public in 1968.

Indian Mill became the nation's first education museum of milling in an original mill structure. It showcases the history of milling as well as relating the history of the Wyandot Indians. The museum has a platt book and maps before and after the Wyandots left Ohio. A scale model of Indian Mill, donated by the Milligan family, displays the milling process

and exhibits are numbered to correlate with the model, said Conley. There is also a video that shows how the grain is milled. Water made the turbine go; the grain went through the gleaner to the storage bin until ground on the stones; the flour was then taken back up to be sifted and bagged or stored. The hoist, which was used to dress the millstone to make sure it was properly grooved and to change the millstones because different grains required different stones, now sports "graffiti," or the signatures of Foster Finkle's descendants. They have been signing it since the '70s, Marvin said. "I think we're down to the great-great-great-grandchildren."

Many of the original exhibits remained at the museum until four years ago when the state decided to update them. The new exhibits are also more open and hospitable for people with mobility issues, said Marvin.

During the update, "we worked in partnership with the Wyandot Indians to learn in part what was going on with the Wyandot Nation after they left to kind of coincide with what was going on in this mill building," Marvin noted.

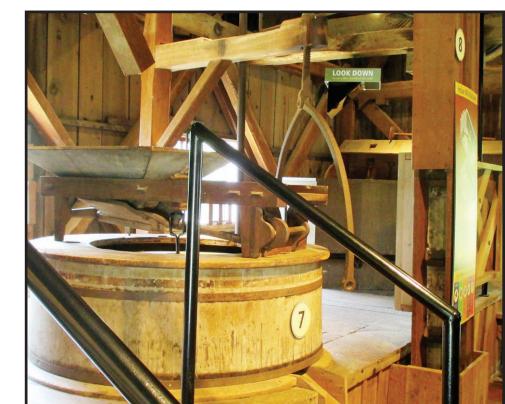
The Wyandots occasionally come visit Indian Mill, he continued. "This really means so much to the Wyandots that we're putting so much time and effort into preserving their heritage. Unlike a lot of nations, they can actually go back to Ohio and they can walk around the Mission Church. They can walk around the mill. They can go back to the cemetery and walk with their ancestors. A lot of places it's just like, well, the Indians are gone, tear those buildings down. ... We preserve this stuff and we maintain it so they have a place for their next generation."

Puffed wheat invented here?

The millers used to keep a diary based on the people who would come to visit. According to Marvin, one entry tells the story that "Foster Finkle was here and a gentleman brought in some bags of wheat. Unfortunately it had been raining so the wheat had gotten wet. ... He gave the gentleman a couple dry bags of wheat that they had ground and just traded. To be able to grind the wheat, Foster thought they would just dry it out, so Foster took some of the wet kernels and put them in a pan and set it on top of a stove and after a couple minutes they all started popping."



This year marks the 200th anniversary of the original Indian Mill dam and sawmill. Photos by Angela Huston.



Finkle sampled the puffed wheat, decided it was pretty good, and started offering it as a snack to his visitors.

One of the men who ran Reber Hotel in downtown Upper Sandusky sampled the puffed wheat and asked to try it in his hotel's restaurant "maybe even as a breakfast with some milk or something," Marvin continued. A man from Minnesota entered the story when he spent the night at the hotel in 1905. He tried some of the puffed wheat for breakfast and thought it was really good, asked the hotel owner where he had gotten it and visited the mill himself where he got a bag of it to take back to Minnesota. "And reportedly about six months later there was a cease and desist letter from General Mills who had patented puffed wheat." Although Marvin has not found mention of Upper Sandusky in General Mills' archives, "it was interesting the gentleman who spent the night was a traveling representative of General Mills Cereal Corporation," he concluded.

Another interesting entry Marvin shared from the Indian Mill diary was dated 1969: "Supposedly a man landed on the moon today," but it made no mention that that man was Neil Armstrong, a former Upper Sandusky resident.