

Reminiscences or Through A Mill Window.

Foreword.

For some years during the Depression the writer worked in a flour mill in Western Manitoba. The mill was known as a Hundred Barrel Mill. That is, the grinding capacity from raw wheat to finished flour was one hundred barrels per twenty four hours continuous operation. Converted to one hundred pound sacks of flour the mill usually produced two hundred bags every twenty four hours.

In desperation, and to eke out a living for a family of four on a half section of land during the depression of the thirties the author at first ~~hailed~~ ^{trucked} cordwood from surrounding farmers to the mill, it was operated by steam. Later he applied and got work in the mill itself. The miller-owner did a gristing job for farmers in a radius of sixty miles. They brought wheat to the mill and paid twenty cents a bushel to have it converted into flour, bran and shorts and filled into their own bags. Sometimes the gristing account was paid in cash at others the miller deducted sufficient wheat to pay the account. It was always at the customers option. Some preferred it one way, others the other.

My first initiation into milling de facto was the job of taking in the wheat from the customers, grading it, estimating the yield of flour from the grade, and the corresponding quota of bran and shorts to be returned. If the customer was paying in wheat the differential had to be figured out and he was allowed street price for the grade of wheat we gave him. As the price was scarcely ever the same two days running, normal business discussions often deteriorated into sometimes quite sulfurous epithets and snide remarks as to the amount of "hair on the millers thumb." It be in place here to state that the return to the customer of flour and feed for the wheat he brought was based on the grade of wheat. No.1 Northern returned a yield (usually) of 38 pounds flour, twelve pounds shorts and eight pounds bran. Now any grade six kid can add that up and make only the total of fifty eight pounds. Where were the other two out of a sixty pound bushel? The answer "invisible shrinkage" invariably brought a barrage of protest, sometimes degenerating into vituperation of the vilest sort. ~~However~~ References as to one's ancestors having a canine descendancy were few and far between, but they did happen. Usually the argument was settled by my pointing out twenty two elevator legs busy at their work carrying stock upstairs to sifters and purifiers and dust collectors (invisible shrinkage) If that did not pacify there were two more roaring scrubbers and scourers downstairs taking off bran dust and germ ends from the wheat. I quickly found that if time permitted, a tour with the customer through the three floors of the mill quashed many an argument and quite often a good friend.

Corresponding grade?

Reminiscences or Through A Mill Window.

During my first few weeks in the mill ~~during~~ the fall of 1932, not only did I find it was my job to be at the desk making out grading slips, counter checks for flour and feed for each grist, I had also to sweep the main ~~or~~ grinding floor of the mill and oil three floors of machinery once a day. That year the full capacity of the mill was being taken ^{out} every day. Customers teamed their grists for many miles. One old farmer of ninety years used to make a trip of fourteen miles each way with his team of horses and wagon. We made a special effort to try and get him away so that he would have time to get home before dark. That required some fast foot work at times. The odd customer returned for his grist after the dinner hour only to find it had got "mislaidd someplace." I think sometimes ~~they~~ guessed that Mr Black had started on his way home while they were at lunch downtown. The depression made good neighbors. Or helped to make them.

The day shift started work at seven in the morning when the mill ran twenty four hours. That meant rising at four A.M. ~~for me~~. Seven cows to milk, pigs and chickens to feed, meant breakfast in a hurry. Being three miles from the mill did not take too long to get there. ^{But} From seven A.M. till seven P.M. ^{did} seemed a long day. The pay was good, two dollars a day for a twelve hour day, and production was expected or get out. Latterly I found bookkeeping was added to my curriculum. When I discovered that the books were in some cases five years behind I felt companionship with Moses and his trials with the children of Israel.

anything more but what lay ahead of me. I was curious about the machinery but all my knowledge of its use was limited to the time I swept floors on which it stood.

The owner was a crack miller and millwright himself also a first class steam engineer. However due to illness he was forced to hire a miller to look after the ginding process. He was known as 'Bot'. I asked him questions about the operation of the mill but he scarcely ever woucheafed an answer that was of any help. He intimated on more than one occasion that my job was in front tending to customers and his was back of the rock.

Fondness and an interest in all machinery tuned my ears to the soft rumble of the rocks as the stock was continually being ground. If for some reason the stock ever stopped coming down from the sifter the rocks would run dry causing dire damage to the corrugations. So as things will one day it happened. I heard the song of the mill change to a high whine. Simultaneously Bot cussed around and yelled "Choke" give me a hand!" I left desk customer and scales, walked around and asked "Whats up?" "Choke in the fourth break in the sifter, get upstairs and clean it out!" He was rushing round popeyed releasing the rocks from rubbing each other steel on steel. I ran up to the sifter floor, the top floor of the

mill. All I could see was the aifter gyrating
round and for the life of me I didn't know
what or where the fault break was. While I was
trying to puzzle things out Bob came rushing up
yelling what the H is the matter with you can't you
see the stocking is off the fault break outlet
on the aifter. Well, my wife and daughters wore
stockings and so did other females of my
acquaintance, looked darn good in them too. But
the idea of a ten by four two foot
wooden box that weighed all of a ton, swinging
round at ninety R.P.M. struck me funny &
I started laughing & couldn't quit. For a minute
Bob's eyes popped almost out of his head, his face
went purple then with something between a moan
and a scream he got down beside the aifter and
started scratching bran out of a hole in a
spout. As there seemed to be little room for two
of us and my presence seemed to be an aggravation
more or less I went back down to my duties at
"the front."

However I went to Bob before getting time
that evening and asked him if he would tell
me about the mill, how it worked etc etc and that
I thought if I knew a bit about it that I could
be of more help. All the answer I got was "Is hell
with that noise, you've had two months here now and

The mill owner was elderly. A severe stroke
had slowed him up a bit but not his temper.
His ^{irascibility} ~~irascibility~~ with employees was proverbial and
unfortunately it overflowed at times on customers.
There were times that I heard customers muttering
under their breath that this was the last blanket
time they'd ever set foot in the door of the mill.
One time a customer was so ^{angry} ~~mad~~ he jumped
off the loading platform, grabbed the tongue of his
wagon and pushed it ^{backwards} a long block down the
main street of the town. Then came back got his
team tied up behind the mill, and left.

He was also a practical man. One day he came to
me and asked me if I had a dollar I produced a dollar
and passed it to him. He took another dollar out of his
pocket and passed it to me. Then passed me back my
dollar and took his out of my clutching fingers. After we
had repeated this pantomime for several passes, he asked
me what it was all about. I guess I looked very
perplexed. Then he said "You sold that fellow a bag
of breakfast food just now. You charged him barely the
cost of the material. You and I can swap dollars all
day long & we'd be no better off, only a pair of damn
fools. How do you suppose we'd run the mill & pay
wages on that basis?" I got the drift.

From the time I started work in the mill
till Xmas time of 1932 there was little time to do

If you haven't learned in that time you never
will!! I thought a bit, luckily, about the 18 hour
days I'd been putting in with mill plus farm, then
I just turned away & headed for home. However
the next night I went over to see S. the owner
and asked him if he had anything on milling that
I could study & I am eternally grateful for
the armful of books and milling journals he
gave me. With grabbing an hour before I went to
bed I learned what "stockings" were what caused
chokes & where they took place and at least some
general idea of where the wheat went once it came
into the mill.