



Buffalo Tales



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FLOUR MILLS IN BUFFALO COUNTY

Part I — The Gibbon Mill 1873-1941

The following history of the Gibbon Mills is excerpted from a book, Milling Then and Now, researched and edited for the Central Nebraska Cooperative by Kay Moffett in 1971.

An essential industry in the early decades of Buffalo County was the flouring mill. Farmers who raised wheat and corn could take their grain to the mill, have it ground into meal or flour while they waited, then the sacked flour was loaded back on the wagon for the return trip home.

The Gibbon Mill was one of the earliest, and its flour milling operation continued over the longest period of time — 68 years. Construction of the mill began in the summer of 1873. Isaac N. Davis, in partnership with his nephew, James H. Davis, built the water-powered flour mill on the banks of the Wood River along the edge of the Mormon Trail. The Union Pacific Railroad thought a flour mill in the new settlement of Gibbon was so important that it transported free of charge two carloads of machinery and lumber for its construction.

When completed in the fall of 1873, the two-story wooden building was 24 feet square and had two runs of four-foot buhrs, one for wheat and one for feed (bran and shorts). The source of the water power was the Wood River itself. Dropping approximately seven to ten feet a mile, the river was fairly swift and the construction of a dam about ten feet high was required.

1873 was a period of hard times in Nebraska. In the early years of the Gibbon Mill operation very little cash exchanged hands when the farmers had their wheat ground into flour. In order to receive something for his services, the miller got all the flour that exceeded thirty-three pounds in each bushel of wheat milled. The better the miller the

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Gibbon Mill, the first flour mill erected west of Grand Island, was located one-half mile west and one-half mile north of Gibbon on the Davis farm on the Wood River, 1873.

WITH THE SOCIETY

A Message from the President:

This year has been flying by for the Historical Society. We have many projects to look forward to in the coming months, and have accomplished equally as many in the past few months. The latest project has been the arrival of the log cabin. As you all may know, the cabin holds a great deal of visual knowledge just in the craftsmanship of its being. The work is just beginning on this latest addition on the grounds of the Trails & Rails Museum complex. The "Raise the Roof" campaign has begun. I encourage all members of the Society to purchase a shingle for a new roof on this newest addition of your broadening educational facility. Please don't wait for a rainy day.

Upcoming projects, such as the Christmas Walk and next spring's Wagons West, need your help. Attend the meetings of your choice for the events that may be of interest to you. The amount of manpower to make a good event even better is mind-boggling, but anything is possible with all the help you can give. Join in the fun of creating exhibits, lighting the train, bringing in new faces. Call a Board member for dates of upcoming meetings. Your support is immeasurable.

—Susan C. Lynch

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Memorial Gifts have been received in memory of Leonard Silver from

Mr. and Mrs. Henry Wilson, Jr.

Irene Claussen

Alice Howell

Mr. and Mrs. Henry Gembala

and from Lawrence Rohrich in memory of his wife Emma and son Marvin Rohrich.

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Help Raise the Roof. Buy a Shingle!

The log cabin has been moved on to the Trails & Rails Museum grounds. A fund drive for the first phase of the cabin restoration was kicked off on September Fun(d) Day to **Raise the Roof**. Shingles are offered at \$10, \$25, \$50, and \$100. A permanent donor board with the names of buyers of shingles will be erected on the grounds outside the cabin.

Please contribute to **Raise the Roof**. Contact Mardi Anderson or send your payment for shingles to the Buffalo County Historical Society, P. O. Box 523, Kearney, Nebraska 68848.

NEW LIFE MEMBERS

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more was his share of processed flour for each bushel of wheat. The miller also received the feed which was the by-product of flour milling.

The mill operated on a custom basis, each farmer receiving flour from his own grain. Customers came as far as 100 miles in their wagons (some pulled by oxen) to get their flour ground, and because each man received the flour from his own wheat, there was usually a waiting line. Sometimes the settlers were away from home as long as three weeks, one week to get here, as much as one week waiting for their flour, and then another week to return home. The mill not only encouraged the growing of wheat in the area, but was of financial importance to the settlers who could save the cost of the flour by growing the grain themselves, and also save the cost of freight to have their flour shipped in from other points.

In 1877 the mill was remodeled and another run of stone for grinding middlings was added. In 1884 the Gibbon Mill was one of the first in the state to introduce the roller process of grinding, which increased their capacity to 60 barrels daily. In 1889 it was again remodeled and a swing sifter system and 21 h.p. gasoline engine was installed to increase production to 80 barrels a day.

The original owners, I. N. Davis and James Davis, dissolved partnership in 1885, and I. N. Davis became the sole owner. In 1897 J. H. Davis and his son, Roy, became the owners, and changed the name to Gibbon Roller Mills.

In the early 1900's turkey red winter wheat was introduced in the area, replacing spring wheat which had been a favorite of the early day farmers. Turkey red winter wheat was of immense benefit financially to area agriculture. It was introduced in the United States in 1872 and came from an area in Russia which had the same growing conditions as the central part of the United States. It was a hardy wheat resistant to drought, heat and wind. Not only did it provide pasture for livestock, but withstood the Nebraska weather conditions to a greater degree than the old type wheat. Also, turkey red winter wheat was of extraordinary milling quality for bread. It was a hard wheat that made Nebraska flour very popular over a wide area. The new hard wheat required a change in milling equipment, and the Gibbon Roller Mills was the first mill in the state to install the necessary equipment to produce the new finer quality flour. A printed letterhead of 1902 lists some of the brand names: Sunbeam, B.B. Patent, Lily White, Silver Crown. Graham, whole wheat flour, rye flour, corn meal, bran, shorts, screenings and ground feed were other commodities available at the Gibbon mills.

J. H. Davis died in 1907 and the mill became the sole property of Roy A. Davis. With more flour produced than needed locally, Mr. Davis began shipping the surplus. In May of 1911 he signed a lease with the Union Pacific for a site adjacent



Left to right: J. H. Davis, Roy A. Davis, I. N. Davis. Child is Jim Davis, son of Roy A. Davis.

to the mainline of the railroad for a warehouse so that rail shipments could more easily be made.

In April of 1913, J. N. Ashburn purchased half interest in the flour mill, and upon the death of Roy Davis on October 31, 1914, he purchased the other half interest and successfully operated the mill on the Wood River for several years. In 1916 the annual production was about 100,000 bushels of wheat milled into flour.

One of the largest expenses of the mill was the repair of the dam. There was a layer of quicksand about twelve feet below the surface, and muskrats working in the quicksand resulted in expensive maintenance costs. Another troublemaker was the water itself. When the Wood River flooded it damaged the leather belts, which were glued together. Repair of these belts caused considerable delays.

By 1918 it became apparent that a more modern mill was badly needed. The 1873 structure and its additions had served the community well for 45 years, but there was need for more storage and new milling equipment in order to keep production up to meet the increased demand for flour. J. N. Ashburn, owner of the mill, began the new project by incorporating. The officers in 1922 were Joseph Nelson Ashburn, president; Harry B. Ashburn, secretary-treasurer; and Homer J. Mickey, vice president and mill superintendent.

The original wooden warehouse along the railroad was enlarged at both the east and west ends, and a new concrete structure was built in downtown Gibbon on the south side of the railroad. Lehrack Contracting and Engineering Co. of Kansas City had the contract for the new building, and Sprout, Waldron & Co. had the contract for new milling machinery. The new mill when completed was one of the most modern mills in the state, being a reinforced concrete daylight mill powered by electricity. The 4-story building was 32 feet by 74 feet by 62 feet high. The attached elevator building was 32 feet by 36 feet, and approximately 97 feet in height. When construction began, the cost of the building and machinery was expected to be \$80,000.00, but upon completion the published cost was \$125,000.00. The mill had a capacity of about 250 barrels per day, and the elevator a capacity of about 40,000 bushels of grain.

Brand names in 1922 were Sunbeam, Comanche and Lily White, which indicated the grade of flour: first, second and third. Because of its quality Nebraska flour was a prized flour, and a wide trade territory was served with these brand names. By this time quite a few carloads of flour were being shipped out of Gibbon. One state taking a large supply was Wisconsin, but in order to ship to Wisconsin, the Sunbeam flour had to be in a sack with a different design and designated by



Gibbon Roller Mills constructed along the Union Pacific Railroad in Gibbon in 1919-1921.

the brand name of "Kohinoor."

Flour was also exported to England, Belgium and South America. It was sold by the barrel, 196 lbs. Other size sacks, such as 10, 24, 48, and 140 lb. were sold as a portion of a barrel. Different states and different countries required different sizes, some 180 lb. and some 200 lb. sacks. In the late 1920's and the early 1930's, the mill ran 24 hours a day to keep up with the orders for flour and to ship carloads of grain. During this period of time the regular work force of ten or eleven was increased by three.

Bugs were always a problem for flour mills, and the Gibbon Mill was no exception. The bug problem was treated in two different ways, both of them not too favorable to the workers. The first method was to heat the entire building to 130°, the boiler supplying the heat. The employees went from floor to floor checking the temperature to make sure that the 130° was maintained on all floors. This high temperature was effective and killed the weevils, but was hard on the humans, also. The second method used was also dangerous, but effective. Cyanide gas was used under a carefully controlled plan. Workers started at the top of the building and worked down. After all were accounted for, the building was immediately evacuated.

The depression of the 1930's had its effect. The prevailing wage at the mill was 30¢ an hour, with 10-hour shifts, but the employees felt that in receiving \$80.00 to \$100.00 a month, they had better paying jobs than many workers at that time.

A larger problem connected with the depression, and which may have contributed to the eventual closing of the flour mill, was that every sack of flour from the Gibbon Roller Mills carried a guarantee. With so little money available, many part sacks of flour were returned as being inferior in quality, but when sampled, nothing seemed to be wrong with the quality. However, since it was guaranteed, the customer was given a new sack of flour, so the delivery trucks often returned to the mill with more flour than when they had left.

Drought was another problem during the depression years. With the increase of irrigated corn acreage, less wheat was raised locally so it had to be shipped in from the western part of the state. Freight rates were not favorable so the mill was forced to pay a premium for the shipped-in wheat.

Both banks in Gibbon had closed their doors, and finally in 1937, Mr. Ashburn, president of the Gibbon Roller Mills, was forced to close the doors of the mill. On September 3, 1937, Mrs. Hazel H. Abel of Lincoln was deeded the buildings and equipment. Under Mrs. Abel mill production resumed in October of 1937, but the future did not look bright. Employees worked only a few days a week as flour production dwindled, and finally in May, 1941, Mrs. Abel was forced to close the mill. The Gibbon Roller Mills for 68 years had played an important role in the history of Gibbon. It had been its largest business and its biggest taxpayer.

Although the flour milling production was finished for all time, a successor organization was established in 1946 and incorporated as the Gibbon Feed Mill Cooperative. In 1966 it became a part of the Central Nebraska Cooperative and continues in that capacity to this day. While all the original flour mill equipment has now been replaced, Central Nebraska Cooperative still feels a strong tie with the Gibbon Roller Mills. The old flour mill helped the community by making flour and feed available when transportation was difficult and money scarce. The Cooperative feels today that it is helping the community by making many commodities and services available to its patrons.

It has been a story of 118 years of Milling in Gibbon.

Photos: Courtesy of Gibbon Heritage Museum.

The Gibbon Heritage Center in Gibbon has a fine exhibit of items relating to the Gibbon Mills.

MUSEUM NEWS

TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM is closed for the season. We are open only by appointment. For information call 234-3041.

The flower beds at the Museum have been beautiful this summer. The plants were donated by Jack Erickson, planted by Mike Stauffer, watered and weeded by the guides and Board Members who saw a weed often stopped to pull a few. Thanks to all they have been pretty in spite of the heat.

Thanks also goes to Wilma Larsen for seeing that there was a volunteer at the desk every day this summer and to all the faithful members who said "Yes" to her and then came and helped. We have had a good summer attendance wise.

Plans are being made for the Christmas Tree Walk December 7, through December 15. Plan to attend and help too. Any one who knows of someone who would put up a tree have them call 234-3041 or 237-7327. There may be a few spaces left. We are planning a bigger and better Walk this year.

Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848. It is sent to all members of the Society. Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people. Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

- Basic Membership \$10.00
- Institutional Membership \$15.00
- Supporting Membership \$25.00
- Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

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- Viola Livingston of Gibbon.
- Term expiring June 1, 1994: Howard Kolbo, Mardi Anderson, Lois Rahmann, all of Kearney;
- Jim Cudaback of Riverdale.

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