

# Old Mills of Missouri

## Early Mills

Grist Mills (mills that grind grain into flour or meal) were often the nucleus of thriving villages and towns as parts of Missouri were opened for settlement. A General store and Blacksmith shop soon followed, and as the population increased, Schools and Churches were built.



## Water Power and Mills

On all the perennial streams of south and southwest Missouri, there is almost inexhaustible water power, and water power mills for grinding corn meal, making flour and carding wool rolls were early in use by the pioneers.

In the early settling of the country the mills were few in number and often ten to fifteen miles apart. But as population increased the number of mills increased until nearly every neighborhood could be accommodated. In the mills on smaller streams, they had millstones only for grinding grain into meal; wheat into flour or corn into corn meal.

On the small streams, the working power for the mill was secured by damming the stream some distance above the mill and conveying the water in troughs to the top of the driving wheel, which had boxes or buckets fastened to the spokes radiating from the axis which were filled by the water pouring over the wheel and turning it by the weight of the water, each box or bucket being emptied when the revolution of the wheel brought it directly under the wheel. This was a slow process, but when kept steadily going would do a good deal of work in a day and meet the demands of local settlers.

On the larger streams like Shoal River, Spring River, Big Indian Creek, and Cowskin or Elk River, larger mills were put up with more elaborate machinery for making flour, and sometimes there was power enough derived from the driving wheel to run the machinery of a sawmill or carding mill. These larger mills were run by the working power caused by the turning of an undershot wheel, a wheel whose axis had radiating from it spokes, on the distal parts of which were fastened paddles or broad boards to catch the force of the water issuing from the sluice.

But to get this concentrated body of water with such strong pushing force as was required, preparatory work had to be done; a dam had to be constructed across the stream perhaps half a mile or more above the mill, and a race or short canal cut and the water turned into it, that it might flow with a descending velocity until it struck the paddles of the driving or undershot wheel.

When the mill was not running, the water in the race, was held back by a sluice, and when it was desired to start it up the sluice gate was opened. The water above the dam was called the mill pond, for it backed up sometimes a mile or so but when the stream was high and had current from heavy rains, the water not needed in the race flowed over the dam, and when it was low, nearly all the water was turned into the race.

There are two sites which deserve mention; they are the Shoals and Grand Falls, near the city of Joplin. At the Shoals the water of the stream has cut a gorge through strata of solid rock, about two hundred feet wide at the water's edge, which descends at the rate of perhaps fifty feet in half a mile over boulders of all sizes.

The roaring of the water pouring through the gorge and over the Shoals on still evenings is often heard several miles distant, and naturally attracted the attention of the early settlers to the locality, not only on account of the picturesqueness of it, but as a suitable place for a water-power mill site.

Grist, flouring and carding mills were built there years before the Civil War. Customers sometimes from a distance of twenty-five miles or more, even the Cherokee, Seneca and Quapaw Indians from the Indian Territory came to have their corn and wheat made into meal and flour, and their wool carded into rolls.

The streams of this western slope of the Ozark region are peculiarly adapted to milling and manufacturing purposes, for they are often spring-fed, perennial and of medium velocity in their descent.

However, the counties of western Missouri north of Jasper County the streams are not perennial, or rarely so; the terrain is generally flat; the streams are sluggish and flow in deep, narrow channels, the distance from



bank to bank in some of them being not much greater than their depth.

These streams are not as much fed by living springs, but by the rains failing on the surface in the immediate vicinity and dry up nearly every summer, or become so low that the best of them do not afford water enough to run a mill. Until the introduction of steam-powered mill, many of these streams could supply their patrons with flour and meal the greater part of the year except during the dry season.

### At the Mill

The mill was a place where the men of the area met and exchanged views on domestic, religious and political subjects. While each had to wait his turn, this did not mean that every time he took his grain to mill that he waited for it to be ground. In many cases he had the grain measured and then exchanged it for the equivalent amount of meal it would make - after taking out the toll. Cash money was hard to come by on the frontier homestead, so instead of a cash fee the miller would keep a portion of the meal processed in exchange for the service of the milling. This did not necessarily consume much time, yet it might take several hours when the miller had a rush of customers and was obliged to measure the grain, the toll of each and give him his proper amount of meal or flour. Typically, mills charged a toll of about 10% to 20% of the grain brought for grinding.

Nearly everybody living within a few miles of the mill, took their grain in a sack that held two bushels, which was thrown across the back of a horse with the rider sitting on it. Anyone having time to spend a few hours at the mill on almost any day in the year except Sunday and on all the converging roads, might have seen men and boys wending their way leisurely to mill, each sitting on his sack of grain thrown across his horse, and departing from the mill in a similar manner.

During dry seasons if the small streams did not afford water enough to run the mill, then the settlers were obliged to take their grain to the larger mills on larger streams and at a distance. If a farmer had to take his grain twenty to twenty-five miles to mill, he generally took a cart or wagon load at a time, and as the miller did not always have enough meal or flour on hand to exchange for that amount of grain, the customer might have to wait two or three days for his grist.

### Wool Carding

While it was difficult for the early pioneers to raise many sheep on account of the depredations, nearly every family raised a few head, more for their wool than for their flesh. Every family had to have wool for making their clothing, stockings and bed covering, and looked after their sheep as one of the most important factors of domestic economy.

After shearing the sheep in the spring, the wool was washed and dried and put away in large sacks, and carded by hand-cards into rolls, by the mothers and daughters as opportunity afforded, and laid away for spinning into thread for the loom. Practically all the pioneer women carded their wool into rolls with hand-cards; but gradually water-powered carding machines came into use, which made a great saving in time and labor.

(This article has been edited & abbreviated from the following website:

<https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~mogeneal/genealogy/mills1.htm>)

