



Calumet County Historical Society Museum

**Open Sundays June-September 1:00 to 4:00
or by appointment**

THE OLD GRIST MILL

By Debbie Barany

This simple shape of the circle has been used to symbolize life, and eternity. So it is fitting that (2) simple stones shaped in a circle have given life to so many communities in the past. As I have done research into the history of Calumet County and its communities, I noticed one item that they all had in common. THE GRIST MILL. For any community to thrive and grow during its infancy it appears the grist mill played a vital and important role.

Although the terms "gristmill" or "corn mill" can refer to any mill that grinds grain, the terms were used historically for a local mill where farmers brought their own grain and received back ground meal or flour, minus a percentage called the "miller's toll."



Mill Stone from Hayton



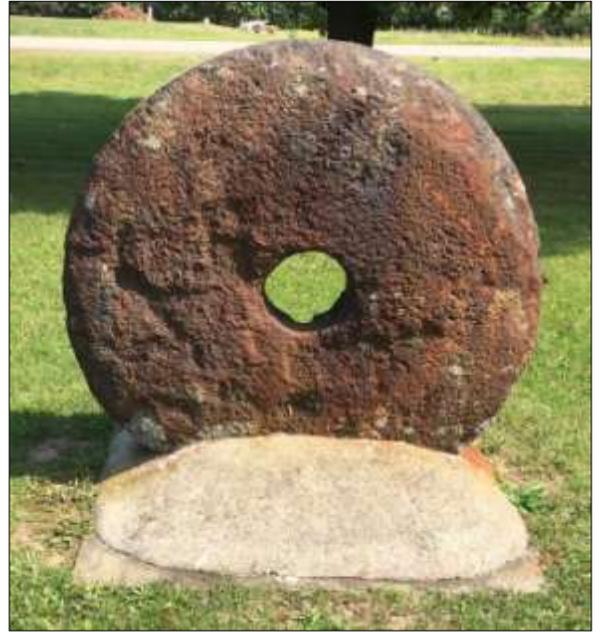
Early mills were almost always built and supported by farming communities and the miller received the "miller's toll" in lieu of wages. Most towns and villages had their own mill so that local farmers could easily transport their grain there to be milled. These communities were dependent on their local mill as bread was a staple part of the diet.

The millstones are laid one on top of the other. The bottom stone, called the "bed", is fixed to the floor and does not turn, while the top stone called the "runner" is mounted on a separate spindle, driven by the main shaft. The distance between the stones can be varied to produce the grade of flour required; moving the stones closer together produces finer flour.

The runner stone needs a good weight to it (about three quarters of a ton) if it is to work well. A runner stone starts out quite heavy enough, but as time wears it down it will become too light, at which point it is normally recycled as a bedstone.

Now that the basic stone is ready, the working surfaces must be prepared. Contrary to

what most people expect, the millstones do not rub against one another, but they do spin very close together, so the two opposing surfaces must start out absolutely flat if they are not to collide at some point in their rotation. If the stones are allowed to come into contact then there is a very real risk of sparks which, in the flour laden atmosphere of a working mill, could readily cause an explosion. Bear in mind also the fact that the runner stone will typically be revolving at somewhere between 100 and 150 RPM. The millwright achieves the required degree of flatness by "staffing" the stone. He takes a piece of timber which he knows to be truly straight and spreads red ochre paint along its length. This staff is then dragged across the surface of the stone. Any areas standing higher than those around them will get red paint on them, the millwright then rubs away at the painted areas and repeats the process over and over until he has an entirely even surface.



Mill Stone from Brothertown

The surface of the runner stone will then be very slightly dished, of which, narrow furrows are cut into the surface. The furrows are invariably cut to the "harp pattern", which can trace its origins back to Roman millstones. The reason for the name is obvious: The stone is dressed in 10 segments, each of which resembles a harp. It has always been known that this was a very good pattern for millstones, but it was only in the late 19th century that anyone actually sat down and proved it mathematically.

The mill not only provided an economic base to the community, but also became the social center. It was a gathering place where news could be shared and politics would be discussed. Businesses usually would be built around the mill, to make other services readily available to the farmer and his family. Thus the Mill became the "HUB" (circle) of the community.

To see how a grist mill would function please check out these great YouTube videos of the working mill located at Mount Vernon. It is still operated today, as it did when George Washington was living there.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6VFoPf301A>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=othUyF4f3Ww>

O, the moss covered wheel, of that old grist mill,
I can see it turning yet at the foot of the hill.
Till my grist in the hopper was flour in the sack,
Ready to be taken home on my horse's back.
Can yet see the miller, all dusted o'er with flour,
Cheerful as a lark in the early morning hour,
Ever ready, with smiles, his customers to greet.
And old grist mill, where he tolled and ground our wheat.

I visited the spot where that old grist mill stood,
But could scarce find a relic of stone or wood;
The old hill was still there, and above a bright sky,
But the place so deserted I drew a deep sigh.
I thought of the miller long since passed away,
Of boys I once met there, all so happy and gay;
Thought of the bygones, till my eyes began to fill.
And in sadness left the site of the old Grist Mill.

The above is an excerpt from a poem
by Thomas J. Trusler.