

Koenigs recall days of mill grinding

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is another article in an ongoing series featuring interviews conducted by Doris Litscher Gasser for the Walter Doll Historical Tape Collections at the Tripp Memorial Library in Prairie du Sac. The tapes are available for listening at the library.

by Doris Litscher Gasser

We were seated in the porch-like day room of Frieda and Ernest Koenig of Lodi's Mill, surrounded on two sides by windows with the fireplace as the heart of the room. Johann Strauss waltzed us into the interview with Ernest and he began by saying, "I like Strauss."

Ernest was born in Sauk City 92 years ago. He said, "When I was two years of age my father was obligated to take over Lodi's Mill. Consequently, we moved out here and it's been my home ever since. In 1918 we were married and built the house that we are still living in."

Frieda Kindschi had something to add about the beginning of their romance, "This is the kind of a story like we used to do years ago.

We went to the Fourth of July picnic and here comes these two fellows and they kept throwing peanuts at myself and another friend of mine. And, so around they came again, and we got more peanuts. By the time they came around the third time they had nerve enough to sit down and visit with us. And, by the time we finished talking they took us home that evening."

That evening's acquaintance led to the marriage of the Koenigs and later a family of three sons, Orlo, who recently died in Atlanta, Ga.; Bob, who lives in Sauk City; and Harold, a minister in Wheatland, Iowa.

Speaking of his early childhood, Ernest remembered, "To say the least it was the greatest place on earth to grow up. We had access to play around the mill until my uncle chased us out. We always had rowboats and later on mother bought us a canoe, one of the first in the state, probably, and we had the hills to climb. We had the fun to go bathing in the millstream, in the nude, of course. At that time there were generally quite a crowd. There were three neighbor boys who ranged in our age bracket. We were not compelled to work like some of the neighboring kids on the farms."

The youngsters in Lodi's Mill enjoyed being close to nature, but there were disasters, too. Ernest continued, "Early in my life when I was about four years old, we were disturbed at night by a crash and I remember mother and dad going to the window and looking out and discovered there was no mill. It was undermined by the water and the whole thing fell into a heap into the

basement. The roof was still in tact on top. It was a catastrophic thing happen because father had just taken over the property and now he was compelled to rebuild."

Ernest responded to a query about the mill material, "It was all timber, even the penstock, where the turbines were was all timber and planks. The new mill constructed after the crash was like the old mill, strictly with wood, with heavy timber framing. It was beautiful lumber. I think it was rafted down the Wisconsin River from the northern part of the state. Some of the timber was completely knot free. Eventually it was torn down and another man used this timber to build several houses in Sauk City. The houses are in the vicinity of the little parking lot that is behind the stores on Main Street."

Backtracking a bit, Ernest recalled that the history of Lodi's Mill actually begin in Leland. He said, "My father was an immigrant and he formed a partnership with a man named Pagel. He was about ready to retire and moved to Sauk City. Two years later we moved out here and that is when the Mill change from Lodi's to Koenig's. The mill had been owned by Henry Lodi, who was a brother of my mother."

Ernest's father, Henry Koenig, took over the mill, and though he was not active he had lots of hired help. Ernest explained, "We had a delivery man and a miller to grind feed. Henry Koenig retained Henry Lodi as the chief miller. At that time our milling consisted mostly of milling for farmers, who brought in possible ten, 12 or 15 sacks of wheat which represented a year's supply of flour for their family. We, of course, had a custom trade in neighboring villages of white flour, buckwheat flour, and whole wheat flour. Each flour had a separate process at the mill."

Asked about the process of grinding itself, Ernest didn't think that would be interesting, but explained, "The process is quite involved. You have a lot of sifting to do to get the fine product in the bag. The wheat, as it comes into the mill, is run through a separator to take out all foreign things, like seeds. After it goes through a separator it goes through a scouring machine, which takes off the outer, very thin coating of light colored bran, which is blown into the atmosphere and not saved. Then, the wheat goes through steel rollers, which consist of several rollers and each roller does a certain thing to the grain. Between each interval the grain is run over silk clothes and machinery and the flour sifted through this fine mesh is the finished product.

"At one time, stones were used instead of rollers. The stones were all right, but after a time they wore out. They needed attention. We



Frieda and Ernest Koenig at Lodi's Mill. Photo by Doris Litscher Gasser.

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might say they were resharpened. At least they were redressed so they had a nice, smooth surface and did a good job of grinding."

Frieda, who sat attentively listening to the explanation enthusiastically interjected, "That was interesting!"

As the story of flour goes, the next step was to sack the flour and deliver it.

Ernest had some stories about his delivery trips. "One time I delivered some flour to Marksville, and that was across the river. I went over with a team of horses and a sled that probably had a ton of flour on it and delivered it to a store by the name of Lochner. I think the Lochners in Sauk City are descendants of that family. Maybe not directly... We also had a spot in what's known as King's Corners directly across from what is known as Badger Ordnance. It was a farm house that handled our brand of flour. Incidentally, it was the only brand they handled. They would take 20 sacks and I recall stacking it into the closet, completely filled the closet, and that was the limit as to what they could buy at one time. We never had a problem of collecting in those days. People felt obligated to pay for what they bought and we got paid for what we delivered."

In answering whether or not his flour had a trade name, Ernest said, "Yes, the bags we delivered to stores were called Sauk City Roller Mills. It was quite an ornate kind of a bag and the end result of the bag was that it formed cloth for the housewives" Frieda remembered, "In those days we were more conservative about things so I made Ernest's underwear out of them. And, we made bed sheets. We sewed four of them together and that was the sheet."

There were special conveniences adjacent to the mill. Ernest reiterated, "We had a barn for people's horses, where they could tie them up and feed them while they waited for their grist. They also had a chance to get a beer or stronger things at a saloon next door. They could also get a cheese sandwich or a bologna sandwich. When they got a glass of beer for a nickel a sandwich was thrown in. It was pretty handy for people who came a long ways. Some of the people came 15 miles or more for their wheat to be ground and it could'nt be done in an instant."

Reminded of the changes in transportation Ernest remembered. "It very definitely did change. At first we had a team and sled but, later years, when the automobile came into prominence, we also had a truck. It was a Buick we used for everything. We used a couple of seats cut out from the old cars and put them on the truck box and we'd go as far as Milwaukee on trips. We had no protection. We were

subject to any inclement weather that we could imagine." Frieda added, "We went to church in it," and Ernest agreed, "Yes, that was a means of going to church until we also had a Buick sedan."

The mill business fluctuated with the economics of the nation. Ernest stated, "During the war (World War I) we operated 24 hours a day. I was exempt from the war due to the fact that I was running the mill which was considered essential. My brother, Henry and Co-Miller, who was named after my father, was drafted. Luckily, he got as far as Madison and the Armistice was signed and he never was inducted so he came back and were still millers together. During the time we operated 24 hours a day, I took one shift and my brother took one shift. We split at noon and at midnight. This operation was confined entirely to the flour and cereals because we didn't have room in the mill to take care of farmers' grist. By this time, they also had feed mills in Sauk City and Prairie du Sac, and our feed grinding wasn't essential. Feed grinding took a lot more power and we possibly would have run out of power, especially during the winter when the flowage was considerably less. After the war when the grinding kind of dwindled down a bit so one miller could handle it, I got into transportation, hauling road material for Ed Kramer and Sons, which I continued until retirement. But, in the interval, this trucking business grew up to be quite tremendous. I had at one time



50 units that needed repairs and upkeep."

And now the Koenigs are retired and still at Lodi's Mill. Ernest explained, "When we built here 69 years ago we were rather tight on cash as was everyone else. I was earning \$60 a month running the mill for mother. We scraped along. We had a large tract of land, given to us through my mother, where an old building stood that housed the miller. We tried raising an orchard but our soil was too light for that kind of a project and all of the trees died. Just about that time the right man came along. He worked for McKay Nursery in Madison and graduated from the UW in landscaping and he said, "You have an ideal spot to do something with." The landscaping project is now 60 or more years old. The yard is flanked with beautiful flowers against a picket fence in summertime. The flowers reflect Frieda's green thumb. She said, "I am kind of old-fashioned, you know. I stick mostly to zenias, cock combs and marigolds. I have a garden, but I am losing a little interest in that. My age is 93 and by that time you should rest a little."

I said, "Oh, but you aren't resting, are you?" Ernest chimed in, "Her rest periods are few and far between. She is still making coffee cake and not only that, she's pretty liberal about giving it away. Frieda and I have enjoyed the best of health all of these years and are still able to putter around. We're lucky to be around and enjoying life."