

BRAY'S MILL: HISTORIC SITE WITH A FUTURE!

By Gary Knehans

Cool, spring-fed water still tumbles down from a nearby hillside. Its merry trickling plays sparkling melody to the rustic rhythm of a tirelessly turning metallic wheel. A short distance away, motorists bound for the Lake of the Ozarks are not aware they're speeding past one of Missouri's most interesting historic sites, Bray's Mill, a structure near Iberia in Miller County that dates back to Civil War years.

This public unawareness, however, is about to end. The mill's present owners, Gary and Marge Handley, are at the midway point in a ten-year plan to restore the structure and turn it into a country inn, a place where motorists can stop, rest, enjoy a meal, and explore its many interesting features.

The Handleys, who live in the mill with five young daughters, already have accomplished quite a bit in their restoration work. They have replaced an old roof with new galvanized sheet metal roofing, insulated the structure, installed new wiring and plumbing, constructed

some new floors, and cleaned up the area outside the mill.

Their next project will be the installation of new siding and windows. The Handleys also are in the process of obtaining low cost financing through the Missouri Bucks program, about which they learned from State Treasurer Wendell Bailey. This financing will make it possible for the couple to implement the rest of their restoration plan.

The owners of Bray's Mill fully appreciate the historical significance of the site. Mr. Handley says, "Our intention with all the renovation is to keep it looking old, or in the era in which it was built."

Constructed sometime between 1862 and 1864, the mill has a lot of history to preserve. First used to grind wheat and corn, the structure later served as a woolen mill, post office, way station, and dentist office.

Its last successful business usage was as an ice manufacturing plant from 1931 to 1942. This plant was capable of

producing sixteen 300-pound blocks of ice in a 24-hour period. The mill's big 20-foot metal wheel powered an ammonia compressor that froze spring water in pits into ice blocks, which were in great demand before rural electrification came to the area.

The ice plant operators were Dr. Guy L. Smith and Isaac Smith, grandsons of Albert Arendale, one of the original operators of the mill. While the mill's construction was financed by Thomas Bray, it was both Arendale and Bray who ran the milling operation jointly.

One of this historic building's most dramatic changes in appearance came sometime during ownership by the Smiths. With no longer a use for the fourth floor that was needed for the original gravity-fed milling operation, they lifted the mill's roof and eliminated the top floor. The building's current three-story stature seems more in harmony with its environment, creating artistic balance between the main structure

and the wheelhouse.

Center focus of interest still is the huge, spring-fed wheel, which produces a curious metallic "swooshing" sound as it churns in a small man-made well. The water travels through a sluice from a pond that collects the spring water.

Three springs originally fed the mill with 700 gallons of cool water a minute. The springs still generate about the same amount. However, water from just two of these is being channeled to the wheel. Mr. Handley estimates this is about 350 gallons per minute. He eventually hopes to capture all the water and perhaps even construct a small lake in which trout could be stocked.

The Handleys' renovation of the mill already has created a breathtaking feature inside the structure. A beautiful hardwood dining room filled with antiques affords a view of the mill's metal wheel in operation. This raised area leads into a small room with an even closer view of the wheel.

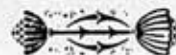
Gary and Marge Handley plan to convert this area into a scenic tea room.

Some of the antiques currently displayed in Bray's Mill are authentic fixtures. "We have a few pieces that have been given to us that came from the mill," Mrs. Handley says in an appreciative tone, "a firebox, some of the dental equipment, and a china cabinet that came out of a college here (in Iberia) and eventually ended up in the high school."

The Handley family continues to uncover artifacts on the grounds of the mill that tell of an earlier period of time. These include Indian arrowheads, horseshoes, and old glass jars, which are being collected for a time when they will become featured exhibits in a completely renovated, open-to-the-public country inn.

The Handleys are looking forward to that time with great pleasure. Mr. Handley, who is an army captain serving as chief of the clinical support division at the Fort Leonard Wood Hospital, will be retiring in about

five years, which should coincide with the completion of the renovation work. This will give both he and his wife the time to make the public more aware of the history and heritage we all share at Bray's Mill.



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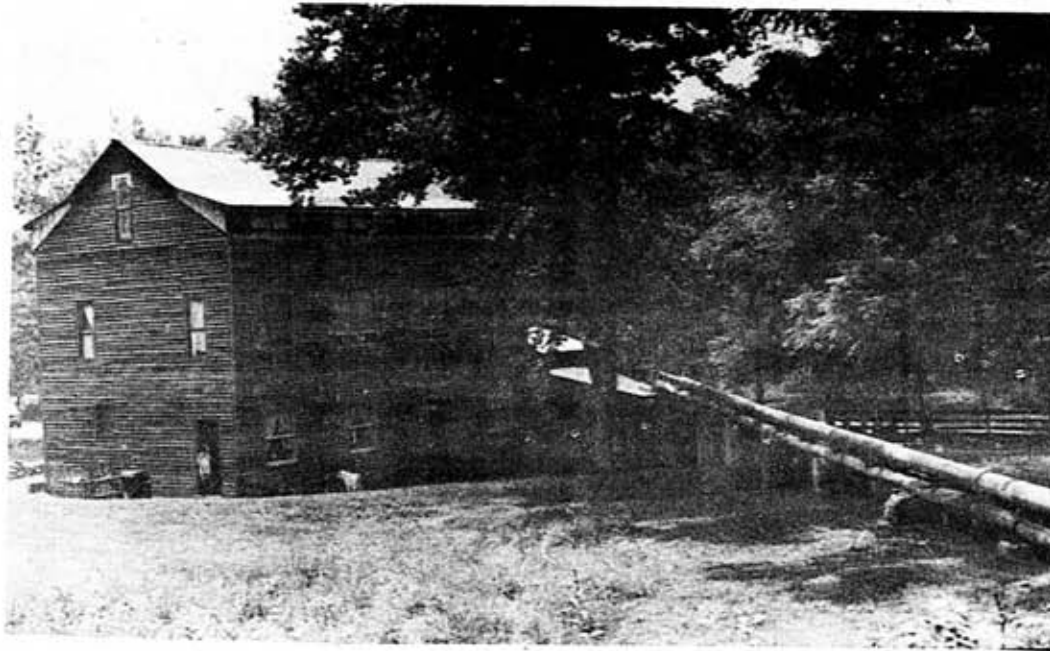
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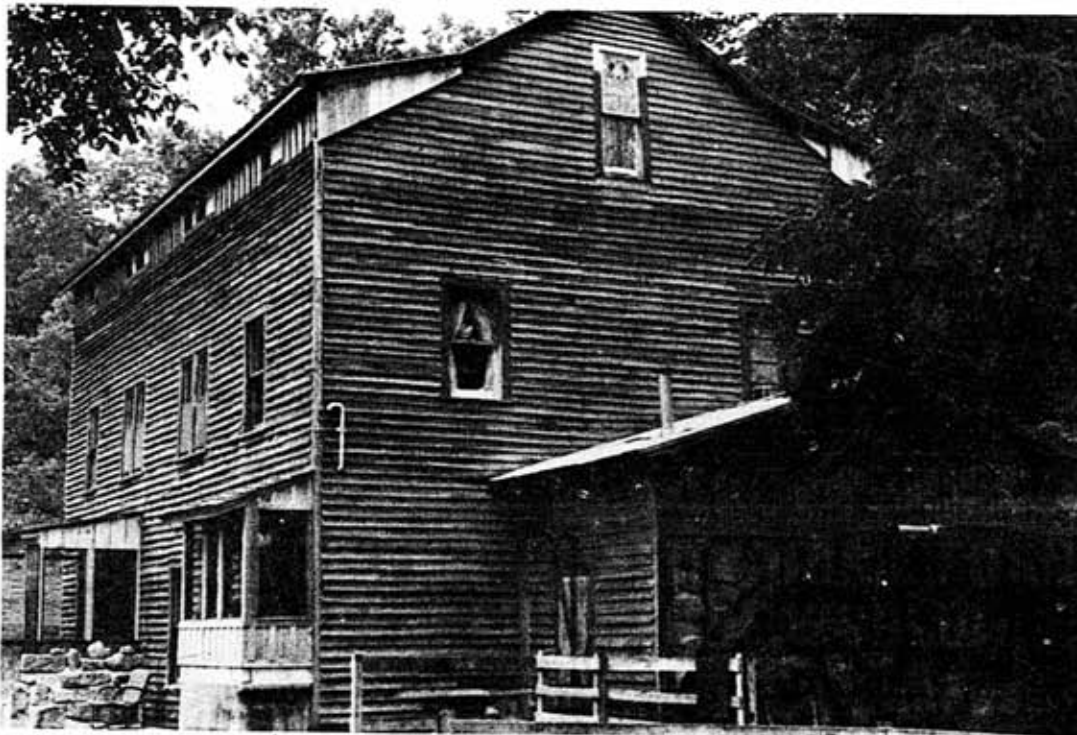
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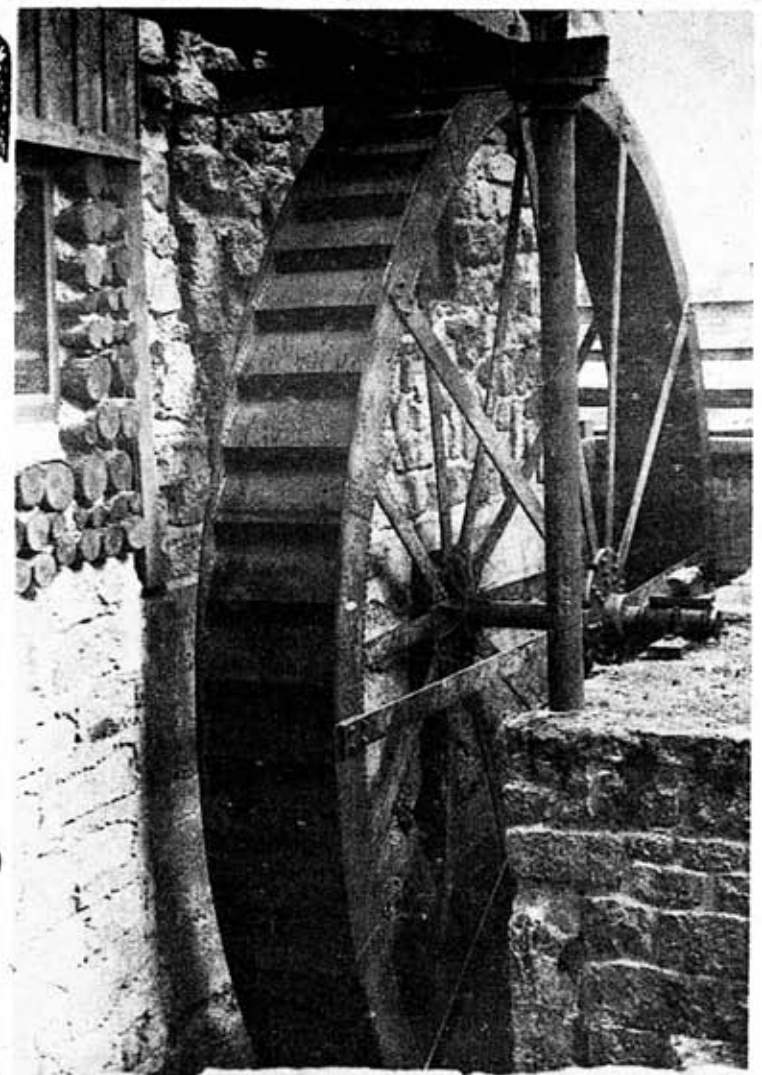
Spring water is carried by sluice from a pond in back of Bray's Mill and flows over the top of the wheel to power its operation.



Constructed in Pennsylvania, this large metal wheel was delivered by train to Crocker and hauled to the mill by team and wagon.



Dining area at Bray's Mill recreates the elegance of an earlier era.



The great wheel at Bray's Mill.



Piano and fireplace mantle are some of the many antiques and artifacts in the mill.