

# The Old De Soto Mill

By ORA WILLIAMS

Do you recollect that sunny afternoon when you sat on a wall just below where the water comes swirling from the mill race through the turbine, and your thrill as you felt a jiggle of the willow pole to which you had tied a piece of twine to hold a hook and fish bait? It was your day off after burning the cornstalks, as formerly was done. The fish bite well in early spring-time. You used angle-worms for the suckers, but occasionally you hauled in a red-horse or a pike, or maybe a catfish or sunny bass. The water was always clear and cool. In winter, a hole was cut in the ice and grains of corn were scattered on the sandy bottom, so that you could see to harpoon the unwary pickerel.

Memory enriches life. It enables one to live over the happy days. It takes one back to the smouldering coals of the stone fire-place, to hunt for the honey-bee tree, to the effort to raid the eagle's nest, to the shiny stage coach raising a big dust on the old state road, to the muskrat abodes almost hid by the rushes and lady-slippers, to Buck and Berry, patiently hauling the logs to the mill, to the hard seats of the school benches, to the berry patches at the edge of the playground, to the screech of the bob-sled on its way to a spelling bee, and to the watching of the stone burrs go round and round as they turned the golden wheat into white flour.

Or, do you remember? If not, you missed something in early life; better begin over again.

A newspaper clipping with picture of a farm house of the architecture of a century ago, starts a train of thought that may lead afar. The house is tall with narrow windows and a large porch. An elm tree almost hides its fading sides. An accompanying story says the house "once had five fire-places and now has two." This is meager. In its heydey there was more to the

house than that. The South Raccoon river runs so close that once there was fear it would sweep the house away. But there it stands almost a ghost of the fine residence that I knew sixty, seventy, eighty years ago. Then the passers by on a bridge not far away paused to admire the home.

This was the home of the miller of "the DeSoto mill," Hugo Grotius Van Meter, to which he brought his bride, Miss Damaris Dodge, and where they raised a fine family. The miller was also a farmer, and had extensive fields. This mill was called the DeSoto mill, to distinguish it from the mill of "Grote's" brother at the town of Van Meter, but it was more than a mile from the town of DeSoto. The mill is gone. Some of the stones might yet be found scattered along the 'Coon river. Once a brother of mine offered a reward for the finding of the remnants of a pair of burrs that were swept away by a flood. He was successful and had the recovered stone set in front of his house in Adel as a carriage mount. Many years later, Bert Van Meter, a son, found one of the old stones and set it at the foot path to his farm home.

#### DESOTO'S EARLY IMPORTANCE

In the days when the paint was fresh on the trim of the house and the wagon road crossed on a bridge much nearer to the mill and home than now, the town of DeSoto was quite a place. The grain and live stock of a large area was marketed there. Since there was no railroad to the county seat, there was much traffic that came from Adel to the Rock Island station in De Soto, and the judge and the lawyers went that way to go from the court house of Dallas county to that of Madison county. On one such trip the hack driver, Elmer Diddy, failed to follow the road, because the river had flooded over it, and judge and lawyers went into the deep water. Several "plug" hats were lost and coats were left muddy. Thos. R. North, an eminent lawyer, swore a little and then they went on.

But what did my brother, the beloved Dr. Wm. J. Williams, want with the washed-away burr? Well,

that's another story. That identical burr had been in a mill operated by my father, and sometimes with partners, which was near the old stage road about four miles east of Adel. It was the first joint grist and saw-mill set up west of the old Parmelee mill near Carlisle. It was the mill that, when first started, was under the direction for more than a year of a man who bore the name of Hoover and lived somewhere east of Iowa City in the 1850's. At the DeSoto mill it was used entirely for corn grinding. Often had I seen it go 'round and 'round, as I turned from the larger stones where the wheat was ground. The old mill near the stage road was dismantled and for years some of the logs lay on the hillside.

The question comes to mind, where in the world did the old folks at Posey county, Indiana, or some nearby county, find the name Hugo Grotius, as good for their boy? But a scholar of that name once cut quite a figure in world affairs. Huig deGroote, in Holland Dutch, in his day was an authority on international law and customs. His fame might have come to Hoosierdom with the high-strung dreamers who established the sociological colony of New Harmony and its "Association of all Classes of all Nations." That colony, like the old mill, went down the river.

#### VAN METERS OF DALLAS COUNTY

Anyway, the Van Meter family had much to do with getting Dallas county well started. There was quite a stir when "Grote" married Bob Dodge's sister, Damaris, of excellent family. Bob liked to see his name in the papers and often wrote letters that were printed. In an old Adel newspaper I found an advertisement of J. R. and H. G. Van Meter, dealers in real estate, in Adel. When the county had been organized in 1847, and the county seat located at Penoch, later to become Adel, the Van Meters came from Indiana and started in business. Later, when the railroad set stations along the south side of the county, Hugo started the mill near DeSoto, while his brother, Jacob R.,

built a mill at the Raccoon forks and started the town of Tracey. It was at Tracey that I saw the first "iron horse" west of the Des Moines valley, and went as a member of the Williams family to the opening barbecue, where the silver-mounted train and the cornet band from Chicago gave us entertainment. Then they re-named the town and called it Van Meter.

A third brother kept to farming and once, while I had occasion as a boy to stay at his house, I turned to his library. Julius noted my interest in books and saw that I was thumbing through a copy of Edward Eggleston's "Hoosier Schoolmaster." He disclosed that he had lived in the neighborhood of the scenes of that book. I told him I had read it when it first appeared as a serial story in the *Hearth and Home*, an excellent magazine of which Eggleston was one of the editors. He recalled the names in the book and said some of them were of real persons he knew and other fictitious. Eggleston had been a minister and once held a pastorate in St. Paul, Minnesota. His book was a sensation of the day.

There were other mills in Dallas county, nearly all run by the water power of the rivers. There was the Mitchell mill on the South 'Coon in Adams township and another on the same stream at Wiscotta. The mill at Redfield was on Mosquito creek. A mill near New Albin served the north part of the county. Then there was the Warrington mill, where my father came near to his death by a fall from the roof. The Adel mill seemed never to be popular. It was set up by a Des Moines man and sold to Hezekiah Moffatt, whose relatives used to hang around on visits and later built the famous "Moffatt tunnel" through a mountain near Denver. It was operated later by Sam Davidson and then by Bailey Brothers. The latter had a miller, John Noving, for a long time. The burrs needed sharpening. Nobody knew how to do the job. My father, who was in retirement, was finally persuaded to wield the pick and cut deeper the channels across the stone, though he had not done such a job for many years.

The old-time miller had to be an all-round mechanic as well as a competent business man.

The mills went with the wheat fields. Why less wheat, more corn? The answer is definite. The freshly broken sod of the central Iowa prairies grew spring wheat readily. But wheat depletes the soil. Winter wheat was given a trial, but it soon wore out the ground. Corn and similar crops, that require much cultivation of the soil, may be grown year after year.

The Iowa pioneers, in Dallas county and in every county, were enterprising; they adapted themselves to conditions as they were found; they sought to make each county and each community as nearly self-supporting as it well could be, and in this they were successful. The Dallas mills and the millers are gone; but I am glad that the home of one of the best of them still stands.

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### Pioneer Log Cabin Church

The first church service held in Iowa was in 1833 by Barton Randle, a circuit rider, in a Dubuque store. A year afterward Iowa's first church was built by the Methodists in the same city. It was a log structure 20 feet wide and 30 feet long, and was used by all denominations. On week days it served as a town hall and a general center for community gatherings.

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### Instruction of Presidential Electors

Only a few states by law direct the voting of presidential electors for candidates receiving the high party votes. In all history, however, the electors have done so, with the exception of only three out of over 14,000 electors serving through the years.

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