

## PIONEER WATER POWER MILLS OF DALLAS COUNTY

BY FRANK HOEYE

When Randall Parrish in his fiction dreams journeyed from the Miami Indian country in Indiana along the sand dunes of Lake Michigan to Fort Dearborn, and then across Illinois only to be halted by the "Father of Waters" he looked toward the west and saw the high and rugged timbered bluffs upon the other side silhouetted against the setting sun. It was then he exclaimed, "Surely wilderness is king." Dreamer that he was his imagination did not picture to him that the most fertile spot on earth lay just over the hilltops.

In my own imaginings I have tried to picture just what this wonderful spot, Iowa, looked like before civilization made marks upon it, so I took down my Iowa from the wall and divested it of all the sectional, township and county lines, of all its villages and cities, farms, fences and barns, highways and railways, and its colorings, and there it was in all its native nakedness; with just its innumerable creeks and rivers, its hills and its valleys, its groves and its grasses, its herds of deer and buffalo and all wild life in contentment and perfect security. In my fancy I saw a great giant upon his back with nerves and arteries exposed, his head cooled by a great stream and his feet by another. The yet unchristened creeks and rivers seemed to be the nerves and the arteries leading toward some great nerve center giving out life in their crooked courses.

After civilization had christened them there was the Des Moines, with its big bends "flowing diagonally through the heart of a wonderful land like a ribbon flung from a generous hand"; there was the Boone, the Upper Iowa, the Turkey, the Maquoketa, the Wapsipinicon, the Cedar, the Iowa, the Skunks, the Chariton, the Raccoons, the North and the Grand, the Nodaways and the Nishnabotnas and the Little Sioux and hundreds of other smaller streams, meandering in every direction, affording drainage and moisture to this wonderful land which no other spot on earth possessed to such a degree.

And then there was the great Mississippi on the east, and the

muddy Missouri and the Big Sioux on the west, marking the starting and stopping places of this wonderfully watered paradise. This was the fanciful view I got of my native state just as the Almighty had created it and before man started to mar its surface for the sake of home and family.

When I had reinvested my Iowa with all I had taken away, there it was again with its fertile farms, contented homes and prosperous villages and cities; there was its Historical Department with its competent curator, gathering and preserving valuable data and pioneer pieces that posterity might view the great progress of our state's civilization; the Conservation Board dedicating spots where runs and rocks, hills and ledges and trees were purposely placed by the Creator for a play ground; the Fish and Game Department preserving the wild life of prairie, forest and stream—all these convincing me that this view of early Iowa is not sentimental, but fascinating, beautiful and real, its transformation marvelous, and its present the peak of intelligent civilization.

The soil and the streams and the groves and the grasses are not all the charms of this paradise land. To the artistic the Iowa mirage at sunrise or sunset is more beautiful than seen or conceived in any other spot in the world. This illusion reveals mountains and valleys, trees, lakes, streams and villages in the most beautiful colorings. One writer said "It just seemed like the Almighty had taken the tail of a rainbow for a paint brush and dipping it in the sunset limned out an illimitable canvas of colors such as never came from the pallet of any human artist."

All this is more artistic than useful, but it is in Iowa and is only mentioned to impress you that all the beauty is not in Colorado or the Grand Canyon.

There were two necessary conditions to invite pioneers to settle—water and fuel—and both were abundant. No spot was more inviting than our own Dallas County, with its heavily timbered tracts along the Des Moines, the three Raccoons and the many smaller streams. Then there was the excellent water power for mills and it is the mills and the millers of the early days I had in mind to write about when this dreamy introduction suggested itself. As a youngster I loved the great prairies, and the streams

were most fascinating to me, especially in the flood times of June and September.

North Raccoon, the Middle Fork and the South Fork, afforded sites for innumerable gristmills and sawmills. There was the big mill at Adel. I believe it was built by Moffitt & Strong, sold by them to Haste Hill and Jim Noakes. Sam Davidson owned it for a while and then came the Baileys and they sold to J. R. Van Meter, and he to the Adel Milling Co. Then the Macy and Hancock ownerships followed. Moffitt was a brother of David Moffitt, who became the richest and most progressive citizen Colorado ever had. Just now they are celebrating the completion of a great tunnel through the backbone of the Rocky Mountains, the result of his dream and initiative. This man came to Adel to live with his brother, Hezekiah, but became restless and went to Denver when it was an outpost. His father later married Mrs. Jacob Frush, grandmother of the present editor of the *News*, as well as Verne and Cedric Russell. Haste Hill was the grandfather of Mayor Harry Hill. This mill was long the mecca for settlers for miles around to bring their "grist." The history of it for the last thirty years is familiar to most Adel people. The late Don McColl and myself visited this mill a few days before it burned and Mr. McColl commented upon the large amount of native cherry and walnut lumber used on the inside woodwork.

There were mills all over the county. Atkinson's mill was near Dawson, where Len Chance as a bareheaded boy helped to build the dam. He was red-headed but his hair at seventy years was jet black and his whiskers a greyish red. He said his hair changed from red to black the hot summer he put in on the dam.

There was Judge Thornburg's mill south of Perry. He was a probate judge and later a state senator. John Shiveley, a nephew, made his home there. John watched the tedious job of dressing the granite burrs by hand and later invented a machine for doing it. He refused \$10,000 for it, but held out for more. About that time the roller process came into use, and John's machine was out of date. There was also a sawmill in connection with this mill. Years ago this mill was closed and dismantled and the machinery sold to Sac City people.

Some time after the Des Moines Valley Railroad was built the Selby Bros. erected a large steam mill at Perry. This was

later sold to A. W. Otis of Des Moines, and then to Kenworthy Bros. They operated for a few years and soon after disposing of it fire destroyed it. The boiler used in this mill came out of a steamboat sunk near Vicksburg at the close of the Civil War, and afterward raised and brought to Keokuk. The old whistle came with it and Perry people complained about the loud and weird noises it could make.

There was Pierce's mill at Pierce's Point, near Minburn, and later a man named Gerber built a sawmill near it.

William Ruth had a small mill over on the Des Moines River in the vicinity of old Xenia.

Harvey's mill north of Redfield was another. At Redfield there was still another. I don't remember who built it, but J. R. Sheely owned it in later years.

There was a gristmill and woolen mill at Wescotta. The gristmill was operated by a man named Horner, a Quaker. It was swept away by a June flood. He was informed by Tom Redfield that it had fallen into the river and he excitedly inquired, "Which way did it go?" Tom still tells this story and it must have been true.

Mitchell's mill was in Adams Township and was a very successful one for many years.

The Van Meters were perhaps the most successful millers the county ever had. H. G. Van Meter owned a mill two or three miles north of De Soto. He became the wealthiest man in Dallas County. He was elected representative and was considered one of the best men the county ever had. This mill was built by J. R. Van Meter, who sold it to his brothers, H. G. Van Meter and J. J. Van Meter.

After the Civil War J. R. Van Meter purchased land at the junction of the North Coon and South Coon, erected a sawmill, and opened a stone quarry. He sawed from native timber the lumber to build a two-story house of eight rooms, also the lumber to build the mill and two large custom barns. He quarried stone for the foundation of the mill. The machinery for both mills, the one on South Coon and the one on Middle Coon, was purchased in Buffalo, New York. When the South Coon mill was built all machinery was hauled from Grinnell, the end of the railroad, to the millsite, two and one half miles north of De Soto.

The machinery for the Middle Coon mill was hauled from Des Moines, then the end of the railroad, to what is now the town of Van Meter.

When the Rock Island was built west from Des Moines the town of Van Meter was named for J. R. Van Meter. The products of this mill were popular and were sold in many parts of the state. He was one of the first millers to put in the roller process. I remember the paper sacks he used. The trade-mark was two coons standing on their hind legs (symbolic of the two rivers) and underneath, the inscription "New Roller Process Flour." I also remember that T. J. Boak was a groceryman at Adel, and that there was an Irishman there named Pat Keating. Pat had heard about this wonderful new flour, and this is the way he asked about it: "Mr. Boak, have ye any of the New Progress flour wid de monkeys on it?" Mr. Boak had. He often told this incident, and it served to advertise the flour. After a successful run for many years, this great mill succumbed to a flood March 29, 1884, and was supplanted years afterward by a steam mill. This was operated a few years, but finally dismantled and the machinery shipped to South Dakota. J. R. Van Meter was always active in home and county matters and like all the millers of the early days was looked up to as a leading citizen.

All of the mills mentioned have long since ceased to operate. The day of taking "your grist to mill" has passed. Here and there you find a steam operated mill, but the water power mill is gone and the toll that was taken is paid now in cash, mostly to mills outside the state.

The earliest sawmill was operated by the Magarts just south-east of Adel. There are many houses remaining in Adel built from the lumber sawed at this mill. In fact all of the houses in Adel were built from lumber sawed at this mill up to the time the North Western Railroad reached Boone. That was about 1865. The first house to be built of pine lumber in Adel was the Sam Garoutte home. The next was the John Warford home east of the Court House, and the next the Len Chance home on the farm just southwest of Adel. My father had the contract for building all these, and hauled the lumber from Boone.

Goughnour's mill, located in the north part of Adel, was the largest in the county, and operated for many years.

The tractor or the Ford furnishes the power now-a-days for about all the log-sawing that is done. Surely our needs have changed, but all these enterprises filled a useful place in our early development.

The *Des Moines Register* has recently been printing some notes from a handbook published in 1857. Seventy years ago the water power was noticed, and more mills were needed. Here is an article as it appeared in a recent issue of the *Register*:

"Dallas County, southwest central Iowa, first settled in 1846, has an area of 576 square miles of productive soil, healthily located, and 4,000 inhabitants. It is well supplied with water-power, being traversed by Raccoon River and Beaver Creek, and is intersected by the state road from DeMoines City to Council Bluffs. There are in the county five prosperous public schools, five water and one steam sawmill, several busy stores and shops, and other indications of thrift, but flourishing mills and factories are much needed, and would well repay a liberal investment. Adel (county seat), eligibly situated on the west side of Raccoon River, 150 miles west of Iowa City—directly on the line of travel from the East to California, Oregon and Utah—has an enterprising population of 500, already supports a newspaper and several respectable stores. Boone, McKay, Uncle Sam and Wiscotta are the other post towns."

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#### TO DRY TOMATOES

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Scald full ripe tomatoes in hot water to get the skin off. When skinned, boil them well with a little sugar and salt, but no water, and then spread in cakes, about an inch thick, in the sun. They will dry enough in three or four days to pack away in bags, which should hang in a dry room.—*Hawkeye and Iowa Patriot*, Burlington, I. T., October 22, 1840. (In the Newspaper Division of the Historical, Memorial and Art Department of Iowa.)

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