



These Places Are Hardly Run of the Mill

Some old mills have been ground down, but others are thriving as homes for shops, offices

By DAN BENSON
of the Journal Sentinel staff

Last Updated: March 9, 2002

There's no spreading chestnut tree overhead, but Dan Nauman looks every bit the village smithy as he fashions hot metal into useful and decorative objects over an anvil in his blacksmith shop in Cedarburg.

"I'm sort of living a dream," said the bearded Nauman, owner of Bighorn Forge Ironworks. "I don't know how many people can say that."

Nauman's dream setting is an 1864 woolen mill, known as Cedar Creek Settlement, that today houses a collection of 30 shops, galleries and artisans, like himself.

The mills in Cedarburg and the rest of Ozaukee and Washington counties were key factors in the economic development of the two counties. Some today continue to thrive, like the Settlement, with shops and offices. Others have fallen into disrepair.

In one case, a Port Washington mill that is one of the oldest and most unique in the area, was demolished last year when the owner refused to sell it to preservationists.

In Cedarburg, the water wheel stood about 25 feet from Nauman's forge. It's gone today, but nearly 150 years ago it powered 21 looms and stitching machines busily making clothes and blankets for Civil War soldiers. In 1897, it generated the first electricity in the city.

Built by Dietrich Wittenberg and Joseph Trottman, the Cedarburg Woolen Mill consisted of 12 buildings by 1893 and was said at the time to be the most extensive woolen mill west of Philadelphia.

The mill closed in the late 1960s and was saved from the wrecking ball in the 1970s by Jim Pape, who also owns the Washington House Inn bed and breakfast.

"Jim was very visionary," Nauman said.

The Settlement may be best known, particularly among tourists and artists, but the Landmark Feed, Seed & Supply Co. building just a few blocks away predates it, having been built in 1844

by Frederick Hilgen and William Schroeder. It is the oldest continuously operating business in the city.

The millrace can be seen from behind the five-story building, where a brew pub is expected to be finished sometime this year.

The lower walls are 32 inches thick.

Alan Lewis has owned Landmark Feed for nearly five years, having worked 10 years before that for the previous owner, Lloyd Tupper.

Grafton's mill history is still fresh in many people's minds. The Grafton woolen mill was established as a branch mill of the Cedarburg Woolen Mill in the 1880s. It manufactured worsted yarns under the supervision of the Roebken family until 1980.

Shopping time

The mill complex in Grafton today consists of two large three-story buildings and a six-story tower near the Bridge St. bridge.

They house an array of shops, offices and studios today.

"I loved working there," said Betty Schmidt, who worked at the mill for 18 years until it closed.

"There was lots of lint flying around, but it wasn't dirty. I did everything from maintenance to sweeping the floor and ran every machine there was," she said.

After the mill closed, Schmidt began working for the Grafton Yarn Store in the old grist mill building to the north. It had been run by the Roebken family but once the mill closed, the yarn store was taken over by Bill and Pat Mabry, who own the building.

Schmidt stayed on after Gerard and Karen Gleissner bought the store and worked there until she retired in October last year.

Gerard Gleissner said the store's patrons come from all over eastern and southeast Wisconsin, as well as from Illinois, many having been customers for 20 years or more who remember the woolen mill.

"People love it here. Even my wife remembers coming here as a child with her grandfather. That's why it meant a lot to her to buy this place," he said. "It's really been a labor of love."

A combination lunch room-classroom at the back of the store overlooks the river, rushing 20 feet below.

"When the water level gets high in the spring, the vibrations make the lights in here flicker and the walls shudder," Gleissner said.

By the 1880s, when the Grafton mill was built, Wisconsin had more than 1,500 flour and grist mills, according to census data. The vast majority of them were powered by water-driven turbines and wheels.

A fraction of those mills - 146 to be exact - were steam-driven, including Port Washington's Stelling grist mill on Sauk Creek at the bottom of Milwaukee Ave. south of Grand Ave.

Although known as the Stelling mill, it was built in 1848 by George and Julius Tomlinson and was the oldest industrial building in Port Washington until it was demolished with little fanfare last year.

The Stelling mill reportedly produced 12,000 barrels of flour per year, was converted to steam in 1858 by the Tomlinsons and was sold to an R. Stelling in 1881.

It was sold again in 1905 to Aggen & Sons and continued to produce 125 barrels of flour a day until 1935, city Economic Development Director Randy Tetzlaff said.

On the downside

It had been vacant ever since, had fallen into disrepair and was condemned by the city in 2000, Tetzlaff said.

A number of interested parties had sought to buy the property, but the owner was not interested, said Damon Anderson, president of the Port Washington Historical Society.

"There were numerous contacts that never went anywhere. The city even tried to organize something but the owner just wasn't interested," Anderson said.

As a result, interior floors had collapsed and there was standing water in it, posing a safety hazard, Tetzlaff and Anderson said.

"It's kind of a shame," said Anderson. "I don't blame the city. They have to be concerned about people's safety."

According to county records, the lot where the building stood is owned by David Schmutzler, who also owns Jadair Inc., a business next door to the old mill. The old mill site is now a parking lot for Jadair. He was out of town and could not be reached for comment.

In West Bend, the Barton Roller Mill houses 22 offices along the Milwaukee River at 1784 Barton Ave.

Built originally to be a wooden saw mill in 1845, it underwent a number of permutations until bought in 1905 and ran as a flour mill by Wilhelm Gadow, great-grandfather to Kay Dricken, who owns the three-story Cream City brick building today with her mother, Rhea Dricken, and her brother, Mike.

It ceased milling flour in the early '60s, she said.

Meanwhile, blacksmith Nauman splits his time between his Cedarburg shop and another outside Kewaskum, which he described as "not nearly as romantic as this place here."

Tourist traffic makes it a showcase for Nauman's work, which has included gates for Villa Terrace on Milwaukee's east side and a replica of the Pabst Mansion antler chandelier, which hangs in the Von Trier tavern at North and Farwell avenues.

The Settlement building is a sentimental favorite of Nauman's, who started his smithing career in 1979 when he took a class there.

"I've always thought of this shop, the Settlement and Cedarburg as the perfect place for a blacksmith shop," said Nauman.

Appeared in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on March 10, 2002.