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Back to the Past: A column highlighting the natural history of the Watershed

The Day They Harvested The Special Wheat

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The Special Wheat had to be just the right dryness. The weather had to be just the right temperature. And absolutely no rain in the forecast. Then, we were ready to harvest the wheat for grandfather and his special customers. The year was 1938 and what an experience this was for a five-year-old girl to store in her memory for safe keeping.

Grandfather Riegel had a large grist mill in Durham, PA. In the basement of the mill was a huge water wheel. This wheel was powered by water flowing over its paddles from the race across the street. I could look through a screened window and watch the wheel as it went around and around on its endless journey. I was fascinated by this wheel. It made me spellbound to watch and listen. The water flowing over the wheel made an eerie sound as it fell back into the dark waterway below. The continual motion of the wheel kept a cool breeze coming from the window, with a dank, musty aura.

Upstairs in the mill were the various sized millstones. These stones ground the flour and feed. Dad didn't allow me in the mill very often. It was an extremely dangerous place for children to be. When I was permitted to enter the mill, I had to be very careful. Chutes crisscrossed throughout the mill. Some you could squeeze past, others were so low if you forgot to duck your head, a nasty goose egg would result. A massive system of belts and gears powered by the water wheel made the huge stones roll around and around. Underneath these huge heavy rolling stones, corn, millet, oats, rye, barley and grandfather's Special Winter Wheat were ground. As the variety of grains were crushed, a delightful pleasant aroma shrouded the mill. Wet molasses was the best fragrance of all as it was added to the cow feed.

Grandfather's flour was always in demand. He sold his flour to customers locally, and as far away as Philadelphia and New York City. You could travel for miles and miles and everyone knew of its excellent quality. Grandfather's flour was bagged in white paper sacks, with a piece of twine tying the bag shut. The front of the bag carried a picture of a young boy slicing a piece of homemade bread. Grandfather had this same huge advertising logo on the front of his mill. The young boy was sitting on a three-legged stool. He had on a big yellow straw hat and a pair of blue overalls with one strap unbuttoned. He had a bread knife in his hand ready to slice a piece of homemade bread. I loved to watch for this painting to come into view as we approached Durham and grandfather's mill.

As the owner of the mill, grandfather made frequent business trips throughout the countryside. Late in the summer, grandfather traveled to New York City, to get his order for the special flour. He traveled by train to Pennsylvania Station. There he was met by a friend who had a taxicab waiting



for them. The two traveled through the endless streets till they arrived at their destination. Here a dozen or more men greeted grandfather. They were dressed in black from head to toe. They had long bushy beards and a yarmulke covering their heads. After all the courtesies and embraces were made, everyone assembled around a big oak table. Then, the important discussion began. MATZO. Matzo was needed for the celebration of Passover in the orthodox Jewish temples in New York City. The Rabbis had to decide the quantity of flour needed to make this special matzo. Wheat had to be grown and processed. Time flew by fast and all the important decisions were finalized. Then came everyone's favorite moment: it was time to haggle over the price to be paid for the wheat. Grandfather loved these moments. The dickering back and forth went at full speed, punctuated by bursts of laughter and numerous cups of coffee. Grandfather always had new stories to tell us when he returned from his New York trip. The Rabbis were grandfather's special customers and they ordered the special wheat.

After grandfather got the order, he told dad how many acres of wheat had to be sown. Dad planted the wheat late in fall. Winter snows covered the wheat enriching the soil and plants. With warm spring rains the wheat grew tall and green.

By June the wheat developed full heavy heads. As the wind blew gently over the wheat I could hear the rustling, crackling sound. The sun turned the bobbing heads to a kaleidoscope of browns, yellows, and golds. Sometimes the heads bent as if bowing in prayer. What a wondrous sight, to watch the wheat sway back and forth in the breeze. The heads toppled from one side to the other, giving the effect of fairies dancing a ballet. The wheat moved in a continual, rhythmic motion. We all prayed for perfect weather, for gentle rains and sunshine to grace the landscape. The beautiful performance could end in a matter of moments if harsh winds or hail storms flattened the crop.

During the last days of June little black gnats penetrated the air. These bugs got into your nose, eyes, and ears. When the gnats came, grandfather knew the wheat was almost ready to harvest. He excitedly grabbed for his telephone, yanking it from its hook. He turned the crank handle round and round, making a terrible racket. He kept cranking away until Miss Margaret at the operator's office in Springtown answered, "Number please?" Grandfather asked impatiently, "Please, Miss Margaret, ring the Rabbis in New York City for me." Twenty or thirty people were always on one phone line in 1938. A few nosy people always listened to private conversations. Secrets weren't kept. Grandfather's good news was broadcasted – "The wheat was almost ready for harvesting."

The Rabbis in New York City waited for grandfather's call. With satchels packed, they were ready for the train trip to Durham. They came to the mill first to see if grandfather fumigated the mill properly. No mold, varmint, cat or dog was allowed in the mill at this time. Once they knew the mill was properly prepared, the Rabbis came up to our farm. We all marched out to the various wheat fields. The wheat had to be checked thoroughly, making sure of its dryness. The weather conditions had to be discussed. Hopefully no rain would be in the forecast. Not a drop of rain dared touch this wheat. It would be late afternoon till every field was checked. Everything was on hold for the next day, but evening chores had to be done and dinner eaten.

The Rabbis never ate meals with us. Their food had to be kosher. Our family was not Jewish; therefore, mother didn't have the proper food to feed our guests. Mother drove the Rabbis to Easton in the evening. Arrangements were made for the Rabbis to stay in the homes of orthodox families. Very early the next morning, mother returned to Easton and brought the Rabbis back to the farm.

Before the Rabbis left for Easton, they waited for dad to milk the cows. They loved to drink the fresh warm milk. First, they would go to the chicken coop and get an egg. They took the egg and broke it into their own tin cups and waited for dad to finish milking a cow. Dad was a fast milker and always had a lot of foam in his bucket. When dad poured milk into the Rabbis' cups, some of the foam would go in too. The Rabbis drank the milk and raw egg in one big gulp. They smacked their lips, and said, "aaah," and looked at us. Foam covered their mustaches and beards. We all laughed at their appearance except mother. She got goose bumps running up and down her arms when she saw the Rabbis drinking milk right from the cows. Even though the cows' udders were washed, there was a

chance of dirt falling into the milk pails and sometimes even a fly or two. I was always amazed with these men. I stood there in quiet awe until I was bade to go to the house.



In the morning dad would hook the combine to the tractor. The combine was a new machine for us. It cut the wheat and shook the grain from the stalk. The grains of wheat went up the auger and spilled into a waiting bag. My brothers stood on the machine's platform. As a bag filled with wheat the boys would quickly tie it. Our hired man Milt took the full bag away and put an empty one in its place. When the platform was full they stopped the equipment to unload. Our team of horses, Dan and Maude, pulled a wagon over to the combine and the men transferred the full bags. The straw fell from the back of the machine. It laid on the ground for a day or two to finish drying. Then the straw was taken to the straw mow to be used as bedding for the animals. It was fun to watch the combine but it was hot, dirty, dusty work. By the end of the day my brothers would be black from head to toe. As dad got the equipment ready, the Rabbis went out to the wheat fields. As they waited for the dew to dry, they constantly prayed. When the moisture dried off, it was time to start cutting. The Rabbis yelled and waved, "The wheat is ready. Come on, hurry, no rain must touch our wheat."

What a grand sight! Dad slowly drove the combine up and down the fields, row after row, the Rabbis walking right behind, their heads bowed, continuously blessing the wheat and thanking God for the bountiful harvest. As hot as it was, the Rabbis never took off their long black, heavy wool coats. They had a prayer shawl around their shoulders and big black hats on their heads. We were all so hot but the Rabbis didn't seem to mind the heat or tire. When the day's work was finished, the wheat was taken to the mill. At the mill the Rabbis took turns resting or praying over the wheat. The wheat was never out of their sight day or night. The next morning all business ceased. This was the day set aside for grinding the Special Wheat. The Rabbis blessed the wheat as it went through its milling process. The flour was put into bags. These bags of special flour were loaded onto a train and shipped to New York City. The Rabbis rode in the boxcar with the flour. A specific bakery in New York City made the flour into Matzo or unleavened bread for the Passover celebration.

My family felt so privileged to grow the wheat and grind it into flour for the Jewish people. Our farm attracted crowds the day the Special Wheat was combined. People came from afar and near. Cars and buggies were parked along the side of the road. People walked into the fields to watch. The Rabbis were never distracted from praying. I think they enjoyed our company and inquisitiveness. Our friends and neighbors also felt great pride for having a crop grown in our valley for such a special occasion.

Exodus 12: 14 And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the Lord throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance forever. . .