

Alta Mills: A Mill, a Community, a Memory: 1876-1949

Harvey County, Kansas

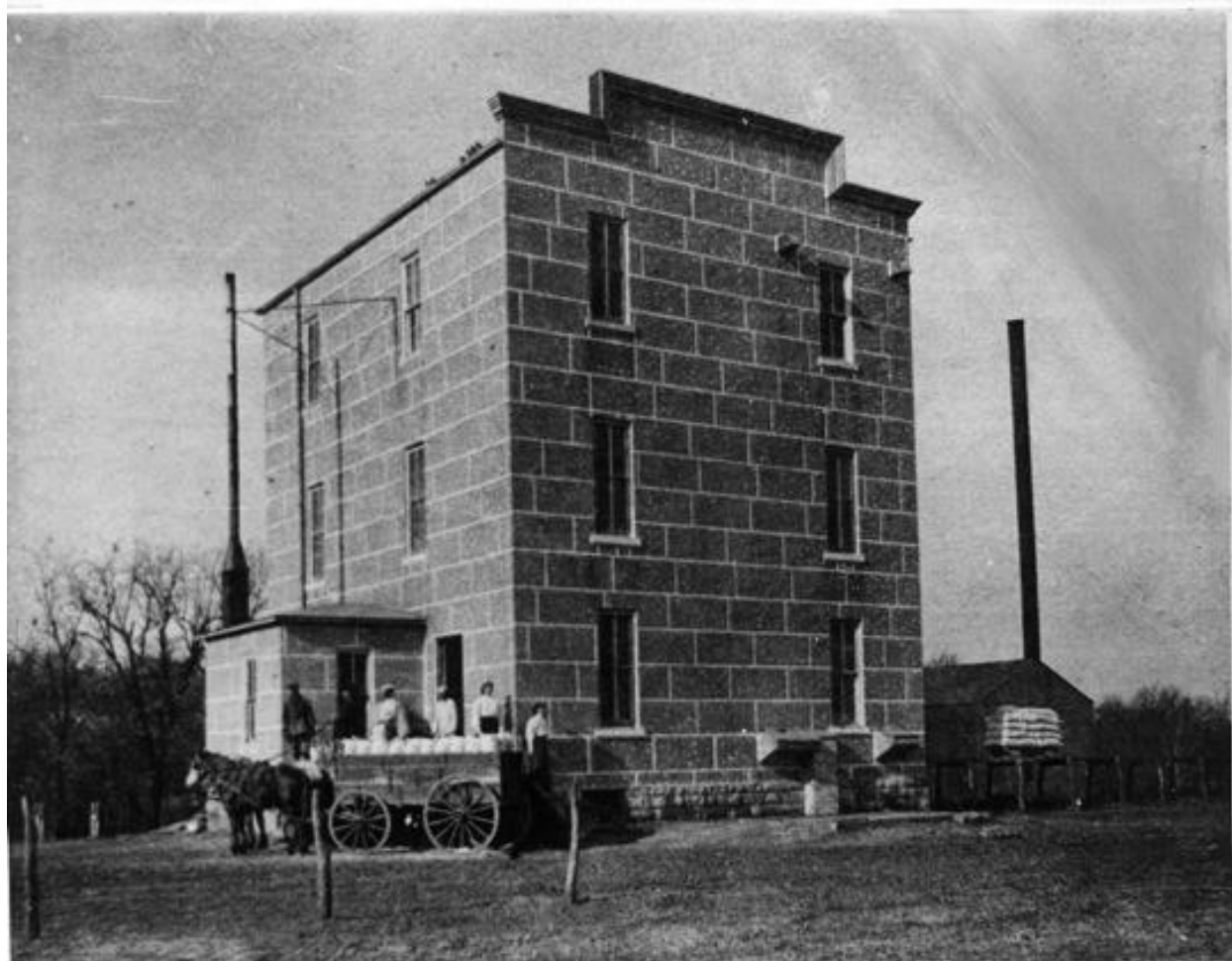


Figure 1. Alta Mills, circa 1898. SOURCE: www.Altamills.org

Grant Peters

Chapman Center for Rural Studies
Kansas State University
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Dr. Morgan

This study is about the small Alta Mills community in Alta Township, Harvey County, Kansas, and the history of how it came to be. The long journey and migration of Mennonites to Kansas and the cooperative rural spirit they brought made Alta Mills the community center it was. Included are maps, photographs, and interviews.

Alta Mills

Today, all that can be found of Alta Mills is the remains of the mill site foundation, several buildings in ill-repair, and the remnants of a dam in the nearby river bed. It seems as if the mill has faded from the present and is no longer thought of. However, the memory of Alta Mills and what it was to the surrounding community is far from gone, enduring longer than the original site. Alta Mills, started in 1876, was more than just a mill where farmers brought their wheat to refine into flour; it was a community center for everyone in the surrounding area. Farmers bringing their wheat would pass the time chatting, waiting for their turn at the mill. For others, there was a park in the nearby woods along the bank of the Little Arkansas River perfect for picnics and camping, while the creek itself (Turkey Creek) drew those interested in fishing, boating, and swimming.¹ Alta Mills had a blacksmith shop, general store, and many other features that made it a focal point for the surrounding farms.² This community grew from a desire for freedom and opportunity, but bigotry and ill-will surfaced in its history.

The site for Alta Mills lies just off the Little Arkansas River and the North River Park road. Situated in Alta Township, Harvey County, the setting itself is about four miles west and six miles south of Moundridge. Today, the site has been covered by trees and shrubbery, obscuring most of the remnants. If one wants to get a better view, he must trek into the woods. Rusty debris is strewn across the ground and what few buildings are left are in poor conditions. The river itself is currently a small stream now that the dam is gone. Time seems to be against this place, with each passing year wearing more and more away. But it does not go without a fight. Brian D. Stucky, a descendant of the co-operator of the mill, has taken up the job of keeping the

¹ Brian Stucky, Alta Mills. n.d. <http://www.altamill.org/>.

² Ibid.

memory of Alta Mills safe. His family had a long history of ownership of the mill from 1904 to 1949.³ The mill and former community mean a lot to him and his family. He remains active in the local surviving towns and Harvey County Historical Society to help keep the memory of Alta Mill alive in the minds of residents.



Figure 2. Mill site foundation at Alta Mills. April, 2013. Photograph by Grant Peters.

³ Stucky, Brian, interview by Grant Peters. April 5, 2013.



Figure 3. Abandoned house on site at Alta Mills. April, 2013. Photo by Grant Peters.

While Alta Mills as many people know it began in 1876, the site long had previous occupants. Indians from the Wichita tribe were known to have made camp in the area along the river banks for 500 to 1,500 years. However, the first permanent white settlement in the area was French, when a colony of ten persons settled in Alta Township on Turkey Creek in 1869-1870.⁴ They were soon followed by others in the fall of 1870. The deed record lists Palmer and Daniel Heath, D.W. Woodward, Joseph Schrag, Jacob Gering, and Peter Classen.⁵ However, it wasn't until 1876 that the first mill was built. Joseph Schrag and Jacob Gering bought the twelve acre mill site and constructed the first early mill on the east side of the river. Soon following, in 1878, they constructed a brush dam and millrace, making a channel of water pass closer to the mill to

⁴ Yoder, Ida Plank. "Story of a Mill." *Mennonite Life*, January 1, 1956, 21-24.

⁵ *Ibid.*

provide power for the turbine water wheel.⁶ Next, in 1898, Peter M. Classen constructed the recognizable three-story mill building; he built this over the smaller first mill. However, the first flood struck the mill site in June 5th, 1903. Fourteen inches of water covered the floor of the miller's home, and the barn was swept away. In 1904, another flood visited Alta Mills, causing boats to evacuate people left stranded in their homes. This was too much for Mr. Classen, and he sold the mill to a group of twenty farmers. So on May 23, 1905, a group of stockholders formed the Alta Milling Company. In this group were the Stucky brothers, Jacob C. and John.⁷ This begins the Stucky heritage of Alta Mills.

Alta Mills was originally a water powered turbine mill. A trough directed a stream of water onto a 'twenty- three turbine' to turn it and its connected machinery. The basic idea for turbine power is to first have a dam on a stream, creating a reservoir of water. Water is diverted from the reservoir to the mill turbines by the millrace. A flume is where the water accesses the turbine. A grate separates the race from the flume to catch debris (trash, limbs, ice) from entering the flume. Gates are used to control the flow of water to the turbines to regulate power. An operator turns a wheel on the main floor to adjust the gates to produce the proper power requirements. As the gates open, water flows to the blades of the turbine. The weight of rushing water can be surprising: water weighs eight pounds per gallon / 64 pounds per square foot. This force propels the blades, causing them to spin. A vertical shaft is connected by gears to the line shafts in the basement of the mill. The line shafts distribute the power to the milling equipment.⁸ Such gear and turbine technology was relatively new to the rural Kansas world, as it was only in 1844 that the first American mill used such a technique. Turbine power was quick to catch on as it was

⁶ Stucky, Brian, interview by Grant Peters. (April 5, 2013).

⁷ Yoder, Ida Plank. "Story of a Mill." Mennonite Life, January 1, 1956: 21-24.

⁸ Stockdale Mill. n.d. <http://www.stockdalemill.org/turbine.htm>.

more efficient than previous milling methods.⁹ Later owners would upgrade the mill with a steam engine in 1898 and then a gasoline engine in 1907, always keeping the mill at peak efficiency.¹⁰

The Stucky family arguably saw the saw the mill through its golden age in the early 1900s. The family had roots in the area and found much support from the local farmers. Several cultures came together in this unique area which was a crossroads of four distinct communities: Moundridge and the Swiss-Volhynian Mennonites, to which the Stucky family belonged; Halstead with South German Mennonites and English-speaking citizens; Burrton and its non-Mennonite and anti-German groups; and Buhler with Low German General Conference and Mennonite Brethren church groups.¹¹⁻¹² Each group was distinctive from the other and all had a long tradition in Harvey County. However, the Mennonites had the greatest impact on Alta Mills. But who were the Mennonites and where did they come from? The short answer to the question is that the Mennonites were religious immigrants from Europe seeking a better life in America. However, this answer does not convey the harrowing tale of their journey.

All stories have a beginning. The Mennonites take their name from Menno Simons, a Dutch priest in the 16th century who converted to the Anabaptist faith during the Reformation. The Mennonite church emphasized service to others as an important way of expressing one's faith. Among other beliefs, Mennonites had a practice of strict pacifism. Many of the first Mennonites came from Swiss and German roots, with minor branches in the Netherlands and Holland.¹³ However, their radical beliefs and refusal of any military service caused widespread persecution

⁹ Fox, William, Bill Brooks, and Janice Tyrwhitt. *The Mill*. Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976.

¹⁰ Yoder, Ida Plank. "Story of a Mill." *Mennonite Life*, January 1, 1956, 21-24.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Stucky, Brian, interview by Grant Peters.

¹³ Roth, John D. Mennonite Church. n.d. <http://history.mennonite.net/>.

and torment. Salvation for many came from Catherine the Great, who in July 22, 1763, issued a manifest for the Mennonites. Offering up lands in the fertile Ukraine, Catherine promised freedom of religion, exemption from military service, complete local autonomy in political and economic affairs, and the ability to teach German in school.¹⁴ This offer was perfect for many Mennonites and thousands soon flocked to the Russian Ukraine. They were known as the Volga Germans, since many hailed from the Volga River valley in Germany. Life went well for the Mennonites who had chosen to emigrate. They were basically a state within a state, almost foreign from the rest of the country. Sadly, this would not last. In 1870 the Russian government announced a 'Russification' plan that would end all special privileges enjoyed by the Mennonites by 1880. It was clear for many that their time in Russia was over.

The problem was where to go when you were poor and seeking cheap land. Again, salvation fell into their laps. It came in the form of the Santé Fe Railroad Company (also known as the ATSF, or Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe). In order to encourage the spread of railroads across the nation, the U.S. government had cheaply sold or granted vast tracks of land to many railroad companies, including the Santé Fe. The problem for the companies was that most of this land was unsettled and essentially worthless until it became developed. The company offered a package deal to Mennonite representatives: cheap land and cheap transportation to wherever they wanted as long as they settled in the area around the railroad. Once again, this offer was too good for many Russian Mennonites, and in the 1880s, thousands emigrated to Kansas from Russia and Europe.¹⁵

¹⁴ Pantle, Alberta. "Settlement of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren." *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, February, 1945, 259-285.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Sadly, even in America, the Mennonites could not find peace from their persecution. Alta Mills was no stranger to such anger and violence throughout its life. The Anti-Mennonite town of Burton often served as the center for this harassment. When WWI began, Mennonites refused to buy war bonds to support the war effort, believing that this violated their pacifistic beliefs. This was the third and last strike, according to Brian Stucky. "They already had two strikes against them. They were pacifist and they were German." One such story was of John Jay Schrag. He had repeatedly refused to buy war bonds to support the war from the salesman from Burton. He was given one last chance before the war ended on November 11, 1918. He once again refused. So the salesmen and others took him on a trip to town. They said "You are going to give us a parade!" and forced him to march down Main Street with an American flag in his hand. Somehow, the flag was knocked out of his hand and fell on the ground. Cries of "He stepped on the flag!" were heard, and the mob turned ugly. A noose was put over his neck and the other end strung over a light pole. Only at the last second was he saved by the town deputy, who said "To kill him, you'll have to kill me."¹⁶⁻¹⁷

Yet despite these challenges, Mennonites came in droves to the New World. Mennonite farmers were renowned throughout the world as some of the best wheat farmers, and they brought their expertise with them. In addition to their skills, they carried with them a new strain of wheat called Turkey Red. Many a family tale tells of Mennonite clans loading up kitchen crocks and traveling trunks with Turkey Red wheat seed before leaving Russia. This new wheat proved well-suited to the Great Plains. The wheat berry contained more protein (producing the best flour), demonstrated more resistance to disease, and survived the harsh winter conditions

¹⁶ Stucky, Brian, interview by Grant Peters.

¹⁷ Yoder, Ida Plank. "Story of a Mill." *Mennonite Life*, January 1, 1956, 21-24.

following fall planting.¹⁸ However, many believe this tale of the arrival of Turkey Red wheat is just that -- a tall tale told by old farmers to young listeners. It is hard to disprove passed down stories, and sometimes, people will believe what they want to, no matter what.

Alta Mills would prove to be a successful adventure. It experienced a boom in business in the 1930s, despite the Great Depression. This was largely due to the bartering system the owners put into place. With wheat prices as low as 26 cents a bushel, the millers would instead trade ten bushels of wheat for seven sacks of flour. Using this method, the Alta Mills Corporation prospered, averaging a dividend of over 20 per cent from 1931 to 1934 with a high of 35% in 1931.¹⁹⁻²⁰ However, it was WW II, with its increasing gas prices, which sounded the death knell for this mill. Gas rationing greatly reduced the business of the mill; farmers could no longer drive from fifty or more miles away as they once did. In addition, floods were an ever present problem for the mill. Aside from the floods of '03 and '04, there was high water mentioned in diaries in 1939, '47, '48, '49, and '50, with major floods in 1944 and 1945.²¹ The last nail in the coffin was the mill's lack of railroad access, limiting its ability to export flour. So on June 14, 1949, the Alta Mills Corporation dissolved. The Stucky families stayed until the mid-1950s and then moved to Moundridge to retire, selling the mill site. In 1960, the mill building and equipment were torn down, leaving only the foundation and its memories. The challenge to remember the mill for what it once was is still ongoing. Brian Stucky has hopes to buy back the land and create a park or memorial to Alta Mills as a unifier of diverse communities. He hopes to preserve and share the history of Alta Mills for future generations.

¹⁸ Martin, Rebecca. "Cool Things - Turkey Red Wheat." Kansas Historical Society. March 2011.

¹⁹ Yoder, Ida Plank. "Story of a Mill." Mennonite Life, January 1, 1956, 21-24.

²⁰ Stucky, Brian, interview by Grant Peters.

²¹ Ibid.

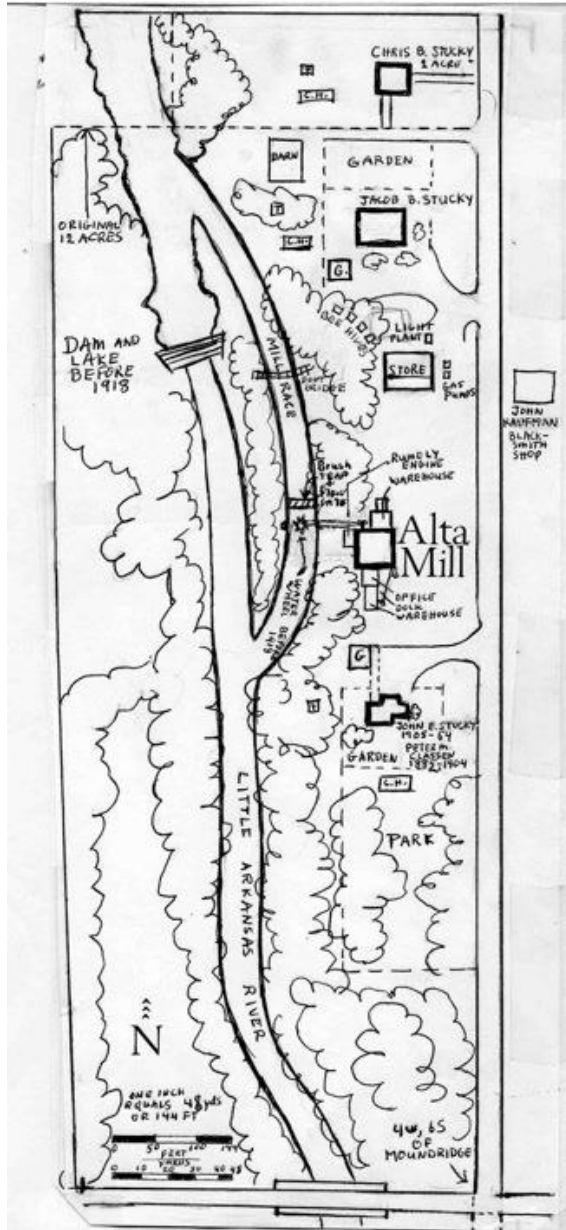


Figure 4. Hand-drawn map of Alta Mills site by Brian Stucky. SOURCE: www.Altamills.org.

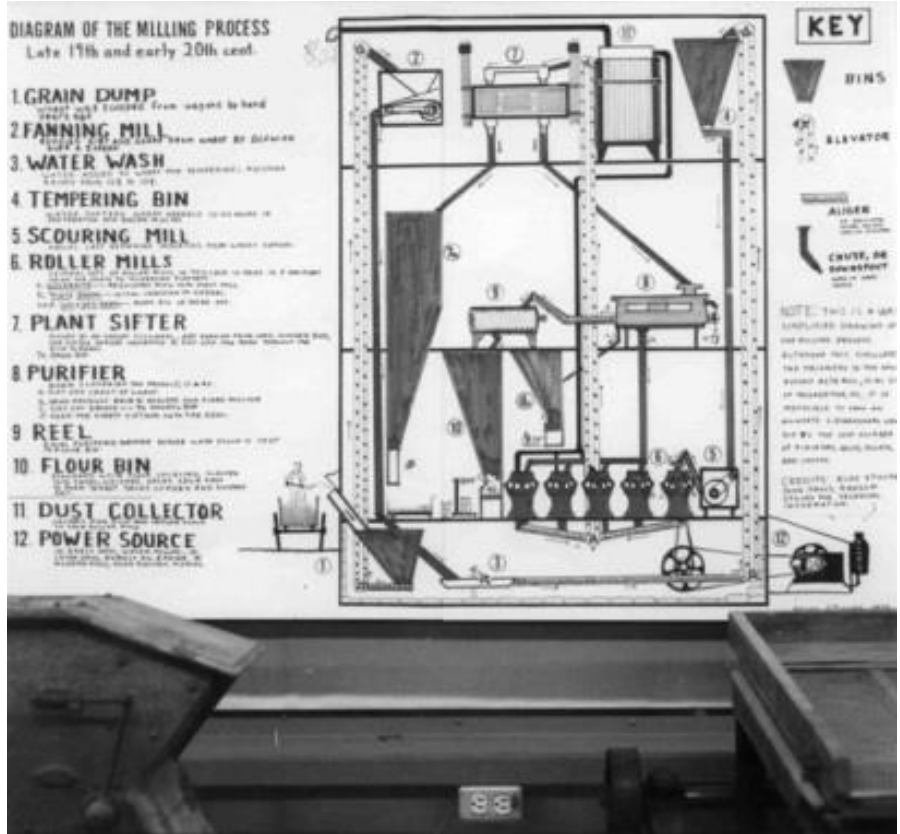


Figure 5. Diagram of the Alta Mills turbines. SOURCE: www.Altamills.org.

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