

Solano Treasure from 1850s: Dingley's Flour Mill

by Nancy Dingler

Hidden in the depths of the picturesque hills of Green Valley, lies a true historical treasure. During the early pioneer years in Solano County, George Dingley constructed two water-wheel-driven flour mills. A site has been located where the very first water-powered flour mill in Solano County stood.

However, it is Dingley's second mill that is so fascinating, for most of it still stands today as a monument and testament to early pioneer fortitude.

Dingley arrived in California from Connecticut sometime around 1850, when he was first listed in the Solano Country records for the U.S. census. At the time of the census he was living in Benicia and listed his occupation as carpenter.

Benicia was a bustling new town, having been established only three years before Dingley's arrival. George energetically went about the business of constructing buildings and acquiring building lots, culminating in the purchase of a 64-acre mill tract in Green Valley, where he constructed his first water-powered flour mill.

He chose a site near the beautiful Green Valley falls to be assured of water to power the water wheel needed to turn the grinding stones that ground the wheat into flour. In spite of being near the falls, during the summer months, there was not enough water to power the wheel.

Dingley set about moving his mill site farther downstream and damming the creek, then named Dingley's Mill Creek (now called Wildhorse Creek). George hired a stone mason to construct a three-story mill building with a 40-foot water wheel, which would be the largest to date in the state.

While the new mill was under construction, Dingley had a road constructed so that farmers as far away as present-day Napa, could bring in their raw wheat to be converted to flour. To further ensure the year-round operation of his mill, he ordered iron pipe from the Benicia Pipe Works to pipe water in from the dam.

Traces of where the pipe lay can be seen today. The pipe brought water in over the top of the wheel, such as the flume on the famed Bale's mill in St. Helena.

Dingley's mill in Solano County was the only one for miles. During the years of 1852 and 1855, grain output nearly tripled. Dingley's mill and its importance to the economic growth of Solano County cannot be overstated.

Unfortunately for George Dingley, legal costs sapped his fortune. He was embroiled in a couple of lawsuits of minor but costly consequence.

An A.M. Comstock, a San Francisco money lender and real estate broker, along with his associate Frederick Repenn, started a suit to foreclose a mortgage on the mountain and valley land in upper Green Valley that a John Bristol and another speculator, Cyrus Eastman had separately acquired. This lawsuit affected Dingley's mill because Bristol had sold the land that the new three-story stone mill was on, without disclosing to George Dingley the mortgage liability.

A decree of sheriff's sale of Dingley's mill property was issued by the trial court on Aug. 15, 1863. To delay the loss of the property, Dingley subverted the foreclosure sale with the apparent assistance of his close friend, Sheriff John M. Neville.

This strategy was countermanded by the court. Then Dingley convinced the judge to order a special survey to examine George's objections. The court-ordered survey of September 1865, however, disproved Dingley's arguments.

On Dec. 21, 1865, Dingley lost his mill to Frederick Repenn. In the May 4, 1866 issue of the Solano Herald, the new owners, Repenn and his lawyer and new partner, James B. Townsend advertised their installation of "a first class Steam Engine and Boiler . . . The substitution of steam for waterpower will enable the mill hereafter to run constantly without interruption."

Dingley moved to Yolo County, where he proceeded to build another mill with the financial assistance of Jabez Hatch, a close friend and Benicia merchant. He built this mill in Cacheville (Yolo City) of brick with a steam-powered grist mill.

Just two years after leaving Green Valley, Dingley died

in Cacheville on Sept. 12, 1867. In November, the Green Valley mill was completely gutted by a disastrous fire of unknown origin. Only the three-story stone walls remained.

There is an opportunity in the here and now to acquire the small amount of acreage the mill sits on. It would be a shame if subsequent landowners were to let the mill fall to anymore ruin, or worse yet, destroy what is left.

In 1977, in an attempt to identify historical and archaeological sites in the county, the Central Solano County Cultural Heritage Commission designated George Dingley's mill as an "excellent" historical site to be saved. The mill was listed on the State Inventory of Historic Resources.

The example that the dedicated people who saved and restored Gomer school, which just celebrated its 100th anniversary, demonstrated, is certainly inspiration that the same could be done for Dingley's mill. I alluded to Bale's mill in St. Helena, which is a three-story structure as well, but of wood, not of stone quarried from local quarries, as was Dingley's mill.

Those imbued with a sense of history took Bale's mill down, board by board and then rebuilt it as a museum and operating grist mill. Bale's mill can be seen right off Highway 29 in St. Helena with its "overshot" flume to its 36-foot wheel.

Dingley's mill had a 40-foot wheel that stood out from the building about 6 feet. The building is 60-by-40 feet and stood originally at 31 feet tall. The walls for the first two stories are 2 feet thick, the third story, which is now missing, had walls 18 inches thick.

Obviously, Dingley's mill is of superior construction material, but as we sit here, it is deteriorating. A group is spearheading a drive to acquire the mill so that it might be saved and preserved as a valuable and important historical site. For more information, please contact M. Clyde Low of Green Valley. This would certainly be a marvelous achievement for Solano County, and Green Valley in particular.