

RECEIVED
C.W. B. J.
FOR *adw/*
~~Apr 33~~ 9 56 AM '82
May 3rd

The History of Forbes Mill

Jennifer Bowman
184 Belvue Drive
356-7485 *Los Altos 95030*

Leigh High School
adviser
Gail Long

CALIF
979.473

1982
3RD PRIZE
HIGH SCHOOL

SAN JOSE PUBLIC LIBRARY

"On June 10, 1950 the California Centennial Commission commemorated the mill's contribution to the state's rich past by designating it as State Historical Landmark number 458. It is entirely fitting and appropriate that this museum established on the site of the Forbes Mill be a place where the fascinating ambience of that past can be remembered, studied, and appreciated for what it is-our common yet exceptional heritage of local enterprise."

"Forbes Mill-The Mill, the Man and the Times"
written by
Dr. Frank L. Beach
Department of History,
University of San Francisco

Nestled in between Highway 17 and the bluff along the former channel of Los Gatos Creek sits the remainder of the once grand Forbes Mill. This existing structure is all that is left of the first commercial building of Los Gatos. This building was the starting of a settlement, first called Forbes Mill, then Forbestown. It was quite a while later when the village came to be called Los Gatos. The Mill was kept in running condition, of one sort or another, for almost 100 years after it was built. It went from grinding flour to an electricity producing power plant. Since the mill has been closed down it has experienced several cases of use and misuse. The remaining portion of the Mill, the Annex, was saved and has become a museum of the Santa Clara Valley. The Forbes Mill has much history connected to it. Forbes Mill is a link to the past of Los Gatos.

The founder of Forbes Mill was James Alexander Forbes. He was born in 1804 in Scotland and educated in Spain. He made several trips out to California to find his fortune. Forbes was familiar with trade and fluent in Spanish which enabled him to find employment as a attorney and a manager for Mission Santa Clara in 1831. Later, in 1842, Forbes was working as a business agent for the Hudson's Bay Company post when the United States Navy seized Monterey unnecessarily. The British became concerned with the United States' eagerness and appointed Forbes as Vice-Consul for San Francisco to watch the British interests in California. However, the Bear Flag Revolt broke out in Mexico because of a jumbling of ideas about who had rights to California and what should be done with it. Forbes

made the suggestion that England take on a protectorate over California with help from certain "influential natives". He felt that this kind of union of California and Britain would help both territories immensely. However, the response from England was very nasty and accused Forbes of "meddling". As a result, during the war the American take-over of California progressed quickly, and Forbes eventually decided that it would help to quiet California down again if he would side with one side, and he sided with the Americans. What actually did happen was the 1849 gold rush. Forbes quickly saw the opportunities open to him and grabbed hold of them.

J.A. Forbes began a costly investment in the New Almaden Quick-silver Mine, which was located southwest of the city of San Jose. This investment proved to be only trouble for Forbes. He lost time, effort, and a good deal of money in the mine. Even this, though, did not slow down Forbes' pace. He turned to a new investment-a gristmill.

While California was still in its early stages of formation, much of Santa Clara county was a huge grain field. But there were no flour mills in the area to produce flour for the quickly-rising residency of California. All flours were being imported from foreign countries, mainly in South America, at a great cost to the consumer. Forbes conceived the idea of building a mill in the center of these grain fields in 1850. His biggest problem was a source of power, which he soon solved. The Los Gatos Creek ran directly in the path

of an area which Forbes felt would be a perfect spot for the mill. He decided to try and make arrangements for materials to build a flour mill which he hoped would make even better flour than that flour which had ever been made in California or anywhere. And this he did do. The following is a quote from a letter from Forbes to his business agents in New York in 1852: "The agricultural resources of California have received some impulse, by reason of the great rise in the price of breadstuffs caused by the combination of capitalists in San Francisco and in Chile. This evil so far as regards grain, will soon be remedied for the soil of California is quite as productive as that of Chile, and as soon as the price of labor shall permit, all the cereal grains will be extensively cultivated here. As to mills, California does not afford great facilities for water powers except at great distance from her agricultural lands.

In view of this fact, I have secured the only available mill seat for a merchant mill in this part of this valley, where I propose to erect a mill of considerable cost, and of the class of machinery that shall do all the work of grinding etc. I shall therefore, be obliged to obtain the machinery in England or in the Atlantic States. As you are in a position to obtain all the requisite information upon this subject, permit me to ask you to ascertain in your city what would be the cost of all the machinery of a merchant mill to be driven by a twenty foot overshot water wheel, five feet buckets to run two pairs of $4\frac{1}{2}$ of 5 feet stones, mill of course, double geared with all the apparatus of screens, elevators for grain and flour, bolts, etc., and in a word, everything appertaining to such a mill complete, for putting into the building here, together with a

specification of the size of such building, all on board a clipper ship in the port of New York, ready for shipment to San Francisco." After waiting for the responses from New York on his many letters which he sent to New York (it took approximately two months to get an answer to a letter) Forbes decided on a plan. Taking the advice of his associates, Forbes decided to build the mill according to the plans of a mill just outside Rochester, New York. This mill had a unique feature, this being that it had two power wheels to power two runs as opposed to the usual one power wheel. Forbes bought 3,000 acres of land for the mill. The mill was a four story building which was completed in 1854. It cost over \$100,000 to build the mill. After making sure that everything was fine, it was decided to order two wheels twenty feet high with eight foot wide buckets in the wheels to catch the water. The mill was soon under way under these building requirements. Several months after work had been started, however, Forbes received a letter stating that the two sixteen foot wheels would soon be ready. This, of course, was very wrong and Forbes refused everything unless it was according to the plan. So what had been completed on the mill had to be redone. This delayed the mill's operating ability by one year. This happened in 1855, when the demand for flour was quite high because of the high price of importing. The profit loss was great. But, when the mill finally began to produce flour in December of 1855, many other foreign countries were also bringing in flour because of the high prices. This caused an overstocking^{and prices} dropped. Forbes ran the mill part-time and kept all excess flour stored from the years 1856 to early 1857, when his stock reached 18,000 barrels of flour. Finally, Forbes went to San Francisco to try and bargain for his flour. Upon his return, he found everything

in pretty bad shape. He declared bankruptcy in 1856. His twenty foot water wheels did not give the mill enough power. Poor management, poor power, and poor flour prices caused the closing of Forbes Mill.

The next owner of the mill was Gustar Touchard who got the mill by foreclosure in 1857. In 1862 a French firm, V. Marzion and Company got the mill but failed to make it work profitably. A. P. Fister and Company of San Jose rented the property for a while. They tried to improve the working conditions. Then Samuels and Fanner raised the water head from 20 to 30 feet. The last owner was in 1866 where W.H. Rogers and Company bought the property and made many improvements, namely changing the type of wheel for more power by raising the water head to 65feet. In 1870 this company merged with W.S. McMurtey and J.W. McMillian who raised it to 200 feet, ten times higher than the original wheels. They finally had enough power and the mill began to function properly. But while Forbes Mill was being built and while it was functioning under J.A. Forbes it was the beginning of the town which would become Los Batos. When Forbes Mill was started, a group of houses began to cluster around the area. Soon, the cluster grew. After a while, these houses had established a small town consisting of the Mill, a blacksmith shop, a stage depot, a lumber yard, temporary school house, a hotel which was also the post office. The year for this was 1868. This is when the town, which was then known as Forbestown, really began to prosper. And the town owed its beginning to a flour mill, which was really the first commercial building in the area. Actually, it was the first of twenty nine mills in the valley.

Forbes Mill continued to be the center of the town's industry even after Forbes' bankruptcy. Once under the split ownership of W.H. Rogers and J.W. McMillan and Dr. W.S. McMurtry in 1870, the mill received many major changes which came to a cost of \$20,000. They changed the name of the Mill to the Los Gatos Manufacturing Company. This, and several other changes enabled the Mill to become "the most complete mill of its size on the Pacific Coast." By 1881 the mill had hit an all time high in flour and production. The Los Gatos News in its August 13, 1881 issue said: "While other cities and towns may boast of a larger population than ours, for the manufacture of the finest grade of flour known to the markets of the civilized world, Los Gatos Flouring Mills stand pre-eminent. Between the grim iceburgs of Alaska to the rugged headlands of Patagonia, and from the muddy waters of the Missouri River to the ocean-laved shores of this sunset land, it has no superior, and well may our little village be proud of its wonderful Flouring Mills, whose name and fame have gone abroad and are now becoming more familiar in the countries beyond the sea." The mill, with a capacity of 100 barrels a day, produced the Los Gatos Water Mill Flour. This flour was sold in the east and elsewhere "because it has no superior." The farmers used to bring their wheat and have it ground at the mill. The mill would take one tenth of the flour ground and the farmer would get the rest of it.

The Los Gatos Manufacturing Company soon extended into other fields. They built another building in 1869 which was to produce wool, but the building burned down in 1872 and that was the end of it. But the mill had more power available than it could use, so

the company began to sublet some of the power to other companies. In 1885 A. King and W.D. Tisdale organized the Los Gatos Ice Works in another building which was located near the mill so that it could use its power for this new company's power. At first the freezing methods were not very efficient or successful, but soon the methods were improved and the business began to produce more than 25 tons of ice a day. In January 1887 the Los Gatos Manufacturing Company merged with the Central Milling Company of San Jose. All of the machinery used in the milling processes were sold to the Pacific Coast Milling Company and the local flour mill was no longer in existence. For a while the building was used as a brewery because of its easy access to the railroad and the ice plant. But, that company too was soon out of business. The mill stood abandoned, alone and forgotten for more than seventy years. But it had served its purpose; it ground flour, produced ice and made woolens. But, most importantly, it formed the foundation for a town.

The old Forbes Mill stood abandoned, a reminder of the good-old-days in early Los Gatos, until the early 1970's. The only part that remained of the mill was the Forbes Mill Annex. The main part of the mill had been destroyed in 1916. The remaining part was used to house a PG&E substation. There were many attempts to preserve the old mill, but all were abandoned. The attempt made in the early 70's was the most successful. The Los Gatos Youth Unlimited tried for almost two and a half years to make the old mill a usable meeting place for teenagers. The efforts of these young people were ended because of several reasons. First, the youngsters who were doing this renovation began to use drugs on the premises, and the Los Gatos Police were called in more and more frequently. By 1972, the town

called in a consulting structural engineer, who surveyed the building and its surroundings. He declared that the old Forbes Annex was not earthquake safe, therefore it was unsafe for human occupancy. The building had remained vacant until it and the land surrounding the mill was bought by Enshallah Developments and Prometheus Development Co., who are the joint builders of the Forbes Mill condominium project on East Main Street. The agreement when they bought the land to put the condominiums on that they would have to do something with the mill; put units in them, make a recreation hall, or restore it for some other purpose. The agreement with the town was, to say the least, very definitive. The Forbes Mill Annex had to be preserved. So, Enshallah and Prometheus Development companies decided to dedicate the building to the town of Los Gatos. This was very acceptable and the mayor in 1977 appointed Mardi Gualtieri Bennett and fellow council member John Lochner "to foster preservation of Forbes Mill-and to find a tenant." Bennett finally got the County Historical Heritage Commission and the County Parks Commission to put up \$55,000 in matching funds to make the buildings earthquake resistant. Now the ball had finally began to roll. Next, architect Goodwin Steinberg volunteered his professional services to the reconstructing of the 127-year-old building. The money from the two commissions was given to the town of Los Gatos, who would not pay the architect or the builders unless the job was satisfactory. The building passed inspection and was given to the town. Now, the town had to find a tenant.

Eureka Federal Savings was the perfect candidate for the tenant. Actually, the agreement that was made by Bennett and Alessandro Baccari, curator of the Northern California chain of nine Eureka museums, was perfect.

museums, was perfect. The agreement between the town and Eureka Federal Savings opened the door for a museum in the mill, one that would change exhibits every six months, changing with the other Eureka museums. In exchange for the lease, Eureka Federal pledged to invest \$60,000 towards the restoration of the Mill. The total restoration estimate was in the area of \$192,000. The Enshallah and Prometheus builders did their part and fixed the building itself, but in order to put a museum inside, the entire inside of the building had to be rebuilt. They had to completely redo the inside of the building, actually building another building inside the Forbes Mill structure. The Forbes Mill Museum was opened in March, 1982. The Mill had completed a cycle. First, it was the beginning of a town. Now, almost 129 years later, it is the living history for the town of Los Gatos-its link to the past.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bruntz, George G., History of Los Gatos, Valley Publishers, Fresno, California, 1971, 5-7, 19-20.

Detlefs, Charlene, Gristmills in Santa Clara County, 1798-1900, p.3

Stell, Jose, "Forbes Mill conversion to museum under way", San Jose Mercury News, Wed. January 21, 1981.

Stell, Jose, "Restoration of mill continues in L.G.", San Jose Mercury News, April 1981.

Pamphlets courtesy of Forbes Mill Museum, 75 Church Street, Los Gatos, CA 95030