

OLD TINCH GRIST MILL RESTORED BY KENNETH KING

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In the year 1928, property located 5th Civil District of Overton County in a community known as Union Hill was sold by W. L. Oakley and wife Alafair Oakley and T. M. Oakley and wife Cardia Oakley to Eddie Richardson and wife Georgia May Richardson. Included in the property was what was referred to in the deed from the Oakleys to the Richardsons as "The Laycock Mill tract."



Old Tinch Mill.

In the years to follow, the property was owned by M. G. Wells who sold it to Herman Wells, and he in turn sold it to Rupert Wells. Eventually the property became known as the Tinch Mill after it was purchased in February 1961 by Thurman Tinch and wife, Roxie.

Information in the handwritten history prepared by Charles Tinch, son of Thurman and Roxie Tinch, is as follows: In 1820, the area where the mill is located was known then as Union Hill. Before being called Union Hill, it was known as Buck's Corner. By the

early 1900s, Union Hill was a small, self-sufficient community, one that had its own grist mill, general store, school, and church. John Matthews and William Billbrey built the first grist mill at Union Hill around 1820. A grist mill was a very important part of life at one time, the only means of obtaining cornmeal and flour which were much needed and relied upon staples. The power source for the mill was and still is provided by a tremendous spring gushing out of the mountainside. A story has been told about how the water source for the mill comes across from Highland Mountain, a distance of some 10 miles away, and the reason this fact became known was that while a little ole lady on Highland Mountain was doing her wash in the creek, a pair of overalls floated away, and these same overalls were found sometime later in the spring at the old mill.

Around 1840, a saw mill was built on the property, and in 1861, James G. West ran the mill. When Dock West, son of James G. West, was a small child, he fell into a sinkhole near the mill, but was rescued by his father. The fact that the pressure of the water holding the small boy against the bank made it possible for this father to pull him out, otherwise he would not have survived. During the time James G. West operated the mill, he ground mill for the public, and he also sold meal to a licensed governmental distillery located not too far from the mill site.

Another story told by Charles Tinch tells how a relative of tinker Dave Beaty who last name was Hammock from the Highland community came to the mill and asked the owner, James G. West, if he could buy meal on credit. When his request was refused by Mr. West, and the news of this refusal reached Tinker Dave, Beaty made it known that he

would go to the mill and kill West. A warning of Tinker Dave's intentions was passed on to Mr. West by Josiah Bilbrey. While awaiting the arrival of Tinker Dave, West hid in the chimney corner at the old mill house where he stayed until he learned that Beaty's trip to the mill had been interrupted when he (Beaty) encountered Josiah Bilbrey in the Hartsaw Cove area and was given a good beating. Evidently the beating was enough to make Tinker Dave reconsider his threat to kill Mr. West after all.

Some other names that either owned or just operated the mill over the years include Andrew Bilbrey, J. B. Ledford, J. J. Laycock, G. W. Wilson, Sam Cannon, Jasper Laycock, Eddie Richardson, William Ashburn Hammock, Void Hammons, and Moody Wells and sons, Herman and Rupert.

In 1961, Thurman Tinch bought the mill and property from Rupert Wells for \$700. By that time, everything was in pretty bad condition, and through the efforts of Thurman Tinch, a lot of restoration work was done. He built a museum where antiques were on display, and for a while, the famous Buckeye family, which had been hand carved by Joseph Cummings Lee, was also on display there and in the general store too. No one could have know at that time that these very same carvings would become so valuable and would later travel all over the country on display at several museums along the way. It has been told that the amount of money exchanged for the carvings by the present-day owners was well over \$1 million.

In 1962, Mr. Tinch restored the old store and built places for picnics and recreation, and the mill site was opened to the public for a 25-cents admission charge. The mill stayed in the Tinch family until 1971 when it was purchased by Robert and Carole Wahler. The Wahler family had a antique business in the old store and stayed in the mill during the summers and on weekends. Mr. Tinch was also an excellent craftsman and was well known in this area for the handmade chairs and other items he sold at the mill.

In 1994, the present owners, Kenneth and Anne King, along with Kenneth's sister, Helen Cummings and her husband Harvey, bought the property which had again become quite rundown. Immediately after the purchase of the property, Kenneth began a restoration project that continues today to be an ongoing effort. The overgrown property was cleaned up, and the miller's cabin was rebuilt for use as a residence. The museum was also restored into a residence, and the general store, which was the only original building on the site, was repaired. Kenneth tore down the mill structure because of it's poor condition and rebuilt it with old hand hewn logs on the original foundation. In Fentress County, he located an old 20 foot Fitz waterwheel that once had powered a mill in Manson, Tennessee. This wheel was rebuilt by Bill Derossett in his metal working shop at Hardy's Chapel. The wheel was transported in sections and assembled on the site. Kenneth also added pipes to carry water to the wheel, and for the first time in a long while, the mill wheel began to turn once more.

In 1996, a large dogtrot log home was built by Kenneth for Helen and Harvey Cummings. Other additions that were made included adding refurbished machinery for the purpose of grinding meal. A gazebo was constructed from an old well house that

once stood in White County. The beautiful log home the Kings now reside in was built by Kenneth in 2001, and that same year, the old Union Hill school that stands not too far from the mill site was purchased by Anne and Kenneth, a school where an aunt of the writer, Mrs. Christine (McCormick) Winningham, once taught. Stick ball was one of the favorite games played by the children who attended school at Union Hill.

The mill site was the location beginning in 1998 for what became an annual event. A community wide egg hunt was held, and grew in the number attending with each succeeding year. This tradition began as a family event, but was later opened to the public. Both children and adults always looked forward to the Saturday before Easter each year, the date the egg hunt was held. Because of the growing numbers who attended each year, preparations for the egg hunt had to be made months in advance, and eventually, it became too much work and was discontinued.

Near one of the buildings on the property stands what is called the "blue bottle tree." The story explaining the tradition of placing bottles on a tree is that in rural areas, people have been known to hang bottles on their trees, especially blue bottles, to keep 'haints' or evil spirits away. The wind blows across the top of the bottles and make a noise the spirits do not like.

The rich history of the old mill site can be seen and appreciated though just one visit there. The restoration and repair that Kenneth King has done has been tremendous since the purchase of the property in 1994. What surely must have looked like a hopeless sight at the time the property was purchased by the Kings and Cummings has been turned into a setting that allows visitors to catch a glimpse of a way of life that not only once existed there, but part of which can be still appreciated today.

*See Cumberland Tales at <http://www.ajlambert.com>