

JOEL ROBINSON'S OLD SAWMILL

The local folks called it a thunderstorm mill. It probably took a thunderin' good shower during a dry summer to fill the little mill pond. And even then, once the waterwheel started turning, the pond didn't stay full for long.

To the long time residents of Calais, the small weathered sawmill tucked neatly into a small hollow at Kents Corner was once quite important to have around. Not that this little mill, so typical of those found in about every New England village, had any appreciable effect on the economy of the state or even on the village. It just provided the folks around Kents Corner with a service much in need - a place to get their logs sawn into needed lumber.

It took plenty of Yankee ingenuity to fashion those original village mills, and recognizing this, the original town fathers would sometimes grant a free parcel of land to one who would build such a needed mill in a specified time. No such a grant was needed at Kents Corner, however, probably because the Town of Calais already had a small sawmill, built in 1792, and because the many streams in the hilly town offered a tempting challenge incentive.

Kents Corner doesn't have much of a stream, but in those days it didn't take much to get the small wheels of local industry turning. The settlement had its beginning in the spring of 1789 when a certain Abijah Wheelock built a log cabin at the location to house his family. One of the earliest residents, Remember Kent, was responsible for building the settlement and becoming the progenitor of the family which soon gave the four corners its designated name. The original Kents were merchants, postmasters and farmers; it took a Robinson to give the settlement a mill.

Joel Robinson was the son of Captain Samuel Robinson, one of the original surveyors of the Town of Calais. It was in 1795, only six years following the original settlement, that Joel Robinson moved north from Charlton, Massachusetts, looking for a site to homestead, and happened on a vendue sale which attracted him. The town had previously assessed a tax of one cent per acre to raise money for building roads, but a certain Jonathan Rich had let his unpaid tax of 15 shillings remain on the books too long. Town official Peter Wheelock declared a vendue sale, and Joel Robinson acquired the property on February 24, 1795. He built his log cabin that year, though he had to wait a full year to get a warranty deed for his new homesite. His family moved up from Massachusetts in 1799.

Four years later, in 1803, Joel purchased a small strip of land from Remember Kent that adjoined his home farm along the little brook that flows through Kents Corner, and on this land, in 1803, he built his little sawmill.

The saw machinery was what was commonly called an up-and-down mill, a straight saw blade mounted in a frame that moved up and down vertically. It was a slow way to chew a board off the log, but a lot less laborious than the hand operated pit saw of not many generations previous. It is said that the sawyer of an up-and-down sawmill would set the saw going in a new cut and then go off to pile lumber or perform other chores until the saw finally finished its cut.

Power for Joel Robinson's new sawmill was probably an overshot waterwheel, set up just below the dam. The little brook that flowed through his property, the nameless outlet of Curtis Pond, carried little water in normal season, but the deep pond behind his newly built dam held a good reservoir that would last for quite a few saw cuts before draining. Then Joel would just have to close up until his pond filled again.

A good brook flow or a good thunder storm would fill the pond by the next morning, but a dry summer flow might take a few days to build a head of water. However, nobody fretted much; it was just one of the variety of tasks that Joel and his sons mixed in with the farm activities. There was no overhead or high labor costs that had to be satisfied by a continuous daily production.

The main bill of fare for Joel's little sawmill was custom sawing. About every resident had a woodlot, and there was plenty of large timber available that could be logged cheaply with ones own team of horses or yoke of oxen. The mill owner's wages for sawing out his neighbors logs was a share of the lumber or else about \$2.50 per thousand board feet of lumber sawn, plus the sawdust and slab wood.

Most of the lumber used to build the older homes at Kents Corner and Maple Corners was sawed in Robinson's mill. When Lovell Kelton framed Calais's famed West Church in 1823, he used lumber sawn out by Joel Robinson. The 36" pine boards still found in the building bear witness to the magnificent white pine that Joel once pryed down the rollway and onto the rack and pinion fed carriage to feed his upright saw.

After the death of Joel Robinson in 1832, his son Elon continued the small mill operation for a few years. Another son Levi also sawed out some lumber from trees he cut on the home farm and sold a little locally. It's interesting to note that in 1830 Levi sold spruce boards for \$5 per thousand board feet, but the choice hardwoods sawn into 3" or 4" thick "felly" plank (used to make the fellows or circular segments on wooden rims of wheels) would bring \$30 to \$40 per thousand.

When Elon Robinson sold the sawmill plus three acres of land in 1837 to Ira and Abdiel Kent, it brought a price of \$470. After 34 years of occasional but steady operation, the Robinsons gave up the sawmill business. Elon was still farming the home place, and he reserved the right to continue watering his cattle on the west side of the small mill pond.

Abdiel Kent was quite a businessman for little Calais. He owned a number of small sawmills in town as well as other businesses, and kept the little Kents Corner mill operating sporadically, custom sawing for the local farmers and merchants.

In the mid 1800's the circular saw was developed and made available for small sawmill operators and because of the much faster sawing speed was readily adopted by Vermont's sawmills, small as well as large. The Lane Manufacturing Company of Montpelier became the leading manufacturer of sawmills in the northeastern United States.

Of interest in this new industrial development that was soon to affect the Kents Corner mill is the fact that Julius S. Wheelock, grandson of Abijah Wheelock who first settled Kents Corner, was instrumental in building the first circular sawmill. He became an apprentice of Dennis Lane in 1852 at age 18, and assisted in building the prototype circular sawmill that was patented by Lane in the early 1860's. Wheelock went on to become a local industrialist in his own right.

Abdiel Kent went about supplying his sawmills with the new circular saw machinery replacing the up-and-down sawmills, and in 1876 he made the big improvement in the Robinson mill at Kents Corner. A new Lane "00" mill was purchased and set up in the mill that year. It was customary in those days to saw long timbers for barn construction, adding a detachable section on the log carriage to accommodate the long spruce or hemlock logs. Although Kent's new Lane mill was a small one, it had such an extra unit for the carriage which enabled the mill to saw timbers 40 feet long.

Kent also provided the little mill with a Lane shingle mill, a popular item in those days of producing building materials from local resources, and a "bolting" saw and rig to saw short logs or bolts.

At some point in history, possibly at this 1876 revamping date, Abdiel Kent converted the power system. Water remained the energy source, but the overshoot wheel was removed and a turbine installed in its stead. Encased in a box to channel all of the water onto the metal blades, the turbine was a much more efficient means to capture the stream's energy.

As with his other machinery, Abdiel Kent turned to local manufacturers to purchase his turbine. Smith, Whitcomb and Cook of Barre was making the "improved Barre turbine waterwheel" in the mid 1870's, and Kent purchased one of these. He kept his mill in good repair, as testified by the 1882 description of the mill in Hemenway's Gazetteer.

Abdiel Kent died in 1887, and his sons continued sporadic operation of the small mill before selling it in 1897 to Darius Hawkins for \$600. This culminated 60 years of operation and service to the community by Abdiel Kent and his sons.

When Irvin Robinson purchased the mill in 1906 for \$475 at public auction, the thunderstorm mill once again came back into the Robinson family. Irvin was the great grandson of the original builder, Joel, and like most other local residents, depended upon farming and related activities to feed his family. But also, like the previous mill owners, Irvin just enjoyed going down to the mill and listening to it run, when he had enough water and a few logs in the yard.

Irvin wasn't particularly happy with farming life, and thus the little sawmill became an escape from his frustrations, knowing that he had good hired men at home to do the farm chores. It was a common sight to see him making the long trek to the mill from his farm on the hill west of Maple Corners, sometimes walking but more often driving his yoke of black oxen to move the logs in the yard over to the mill or take off some freshly sawn lumber in the high-wheeled cart.

Most of Irvin's mill activity was custom sawing for the local residents who would bring in the logs themselves and be responsible to haul the lumber off when ready.

The owner of the logs might even have to pitch in and help do the work, but that was to be expected. Irvin kept his accounts on the face of his reject shingles, and when it came time to bill the neighbor for sawing done, Irvin would pass him a broken shingle with the amount due written on it; that's all that was necessary.

Irvin had two or three local sawyers who would often come in to operate the mill for him. Old Oscar Ainsworth was a school teacher who lived in North Calais, and he would walk all the way over to Kents Corner, carrying his lunch in a ten pound lard pail, saw out a log or two and walk back home. It is said he was a very precise sawyer and would always give an honest measure for all lumber sawn.

There were five girls in Irvin Robinson's family, and he particularly enjoyed taking one or two down to the mill to play outside while he worked. But they weren't the only children to enjoy the mill grounds; the pond became a delightful swimming hole when nobody was around. A couple of old sap pans made a dandy little boat. Young Edwin Kent and a friend once had the bright idea of driving a few large spikes into a log sitting on the log deck. But sawyer Ed Lamphere took a number of teeth out of the main saw as a result, and when the culprits eventually confessed, Herb Kent had a few facts of life to explain to his son.

Old mill ponds have a way of filling in over the years as the water borne silt settles out in the calmer water, and by the time Irvin owned the mill, the water capacity in the pond had decreased considerably. This meant a lot less water available for turning the turbine, except during periods of high stream flow, but there was always tomorrow or the next day that would be available to saw out a few more logs after the pond had filled.

The owner of this mill was dependent on the outflow of Curtis Pond for his water supply, but there was another small mill above which sort of had first choice. Back in 1847 Joel Robinson's son John had built a grist mill and machine shop a short ways below the Curtis Pond dam along with a small storage pond. Elgin Mann operated the shop in Irvin Robinson's day, sometimes holding back the water needed

by the little sawmill when thunderstorms were scarce.

When Reuben Parker bought the mill in 1920 the price had gone up to \$600, although the reason why the then deteriorating old mill should go up in value must remain a mystery. It was the same old machinery installed in 1876, and the pond was still ever so slowly getting shallower. But Parker had sort of retired from the farm life, and he also enjoyed puttering around the little mill. Herman Carr rebuilt the water box for him and the old thunderstorm mill kept on operating.

By this point in time the rate for custom sawing had gone up to \$5 per thousand board feet, plus slabwood and sawdust, but Reuben Parker enjoyed running the mill alone, not in any particular rush to empty the shallow pond. However, Parker had only run the mill for a few short years when he was found one day in the late 1920's, slumped over the planer he had been running, hit with a stroke at the age of 80. He died a week later.

Parker's heirs tried to keep the mill active, leasing it at times to some of the local folks. Dennis and Elton Lawson were producing railroad ties on the little log carriage, and they installed something that the water power purist would consider quite degrading - a gasoline engine. The mill pond had little storage capacity by this time, and the old Barre waterwheel was just not big enough to power the saw at normal speed through the hardwood logs. A Studebaker automobile engine was set in the lower part of the mill and belted on to the old drive pulley.

When Dwight Lawson bought the mill in 1935, the Studebaker motor was either gone or about to go. Lawson fixed up the dam and used water power again, buying softwood logs locally to produce lumber for retail sales. The yard was often filled with spruce, hemlock and pine sawlogs. It is claimed he sawed one spruce log that had about one thousand board feet of lumber in it.

Like so many of his predecessors, Lawson was also to die while in possession

of the little thunderstorm mill, and his widow sold it in 1945 to Richard Lamphere. By now the mill was really feeling its "old age," possibly the reason why Lamphere couldn't make a successful attempt at sawing lumber. Even when he put an old Chrysler engine in for power, the success or satisfaction attained by the Robinsons or the Kents was just not there. And he gave it up after a short try, the old sawmill now going idle for the first time in its 143 years of existence. For ten years it did nothing, gradually deteriorating with the lack of attention.

But it wasn't dead yet. Bill Borland of North Calais bought the little mill for \$400 in 1956, and although he had never before operated a sawmill, set out to find a little of the satisfaction that the former generations had found at the foot of the old mill pond. However, it wasn't easy. Repairs needed were almost overwhelming, and the foundation had to be bolstered by a cement wall to keep the sagging structure from collapsing into the brook.

Borland sawed a little off and on for a couple of years but never did run by water power. The belts were gone, the wheel wasn't rigged up, the turbine needed repair, the old Chrysler motor wouldn't start, and thus Borland dragged out the old motor and set up a 100 horsepower GMC Army truck motor. However, what satisfaction he could find was soon dampened by the maintenance headaches, and in 1958 the little old thunderstorm mill was retired forever. After 155 years of service to six generations it was finally getting a much deserved rest.

Kent heirs Howard Kent and Laura Cooley bought the retired mill in 1958 and repaired the dam with the hopes of preserving the mill, though making no attempt to start the mill. But in 1961 they turned it over to the Aldrich Memorial Association, the present owner comprised of a handful of dedicated aspirants of preserving the Robinson mill. James Aldrich was a well liked teacher who tutored many of the children in town and who many wanted to remember by choosing him as namesake for the non-profit corporation formed to own and preserve the little mill.

The fact that the mill is in such good condition even today is credited to some other helping hands which by strange circumstances appeared in Calais a few years ago. A small group of Peace Corps trainees were about to depart for Turkey, but while studying the language they stayed for a spell in Calais where instructor Fred ^{Latimer} ~~Litamer~~ had some roots. While looking for some daytime activity they volunteered to repair the old mill and put it back into operating shape.

This they marvelously did in 1964. The old engine was disposed of first of all, removing any links with the modern internal combustion era. The building was then shored up and sills strengthened. The water turbine was dug out of the mud that had settled around it and the joints loosened up. New wooden cogs were put into the bevel gears, and the wheel once again put into motion to power the saw and log carriage. A couple of logs were sawn out just to prove that Abdiel Kent's old Lane machinery could still do the job though 88 years old.

Now, the most amazing thing about this little gem of a mill is not in its construction or its function over one and three quarter centuries. There were hundreds of such mills, found in about every village where the water flow offered power privileges. The amazing thing about this mill is that it still stands while the hundreds of others have succumbed to decay, to washouts, to fires or just to progress. In fact, there is only one other existing circular sawmill in the state known to be older, a sagging mill tucked away in an obscure spot with machinery built in 1870 but not in operating shape as is this Robinson mill.

The networks on the carriage still work about as good as the day the machinery was new. The hand operated receder on the carriage still functions well, a mechanical feature which dates the machinery as being built in the 1870's. If one looks carefully on the pulley end of the main arbor, he can still find the original millwright's initials and builder's number and the manufacturing date of 1876.

That's not too far removed from Dennis Lane's original patent date of 1864. Unfortunately, the machinery has not been periodically limbered up since the noble efforts of the Peace Corps trainees ten years ago, and the turbine once again has stiffened up for a restful retirement.

The log carriage extension, once used to saw the forty foot timbers, rests on the mill floor behind the carriage tracks. In a lower room sits a small 24" single surface planer, made by the Wright Company in Wrightsville, Vermont many generations ago.

The well seasoned siding and roof frame timbers are obviously of later construction, but the 12" by 12" sills and other framing are the original timbers hand hewn with a broad axe by Joel Robinson in 1803. The mortise and tenon joints fashioned by Robinson still hold tight in the building frame, secured by the wooden pins driven through the joint center.

The wooden pulleys, made from pine and basswood back in 1876 when the circular mill was installed, are still sound and serviceable. One can still find, with careful examination, the place where the old up-and-down saw frame had apparently been attached to the building frame prior to 1876. Bill Borland still has the "pitman rod" which he found under the mill years ago, the vital rod which carried the motion from the drive shaft to the up-and-down saw frame.

The little thunderstorm sawmill must have had good care taken of it during its 171 years of existence; without such care there would be no mill today. Unfortunately, however, the years have again taken their toll, and with no operating activity, maintenance has suffered. The dam leaks badly again, the roof leaks, and the corners of the building are sagging menacingly toward the brook.

Now, this is not to imply neglect on the part of the association set up to own and preserve the building; it takes funds to accomplish what must be done. The handful of association members join up annually with the Maple Corner Community

Club to hold a corn roast at the mill site, and the profits are used in part to give the old mill the care it needs to stay upright. But it appears that these funds are not quite enough to keep up with the slow sag. A new roof has just been installed and more work is contemplated.

Gregory Belcher, current president of the Aldrich Memorial Association, retired professional forester, and proud resident of Kents Corner, says there's an opinion locally that Calais is the finest place on earth and that the western half of the town is even finer than the eastern half. Some might contest Greg's boast, but there's one asset of the western half that none can dispute. Tucked away in a hidden recess at Kents Corner is a real historic gem, Joel Robinson's little thunderstorm mill.