

Cries of ghost entwined with fate of mill

By Nancy Dingler

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The remains of Dingley's flour grist mill stands forlornly vacant, almost hidden from view by the century and a half of wild overgrowth. Trees are attempting to obliterate the abandoned stone building with their entwining branches, one firmly planted in the second-floor stones. The vacant windows stare out at a world that has passed the grand old mill by.

The old mill building appears haunted, and if you wait a little while, you might be able to hear the forlorn cries of the ghost of Mary Eliza Parker, said to be inextricably entwined, much as the trees are, with the fate of the mill.

In its hey day, Dingley's mill was a bustling industrial complex, grinding the locally grown grains into flours for baking and shipping. In 1864, the mill was well-known and famed throughout the region. Farmers not only brought their grain to George Dingley, but people came as visitors to marvel at the machinery and the giant 40-foot overshot water wheel that drove the gears to turn the grinding stone.

Mary Eliza Parker was just shy of her 18th birthday when she came to gape at the wonders of Mr. Dingley's mill with her mother. The Solano Herald reported the tragic story, Aug. 5, 1864: "Accidental Death - Last Friday afternoon, by one of those unfortunate accidents which by their very isolation shock the community more than tidings from the bloody battlefield (referring to the Civil War), or of the march of a dreadful pestilence, a young lady of great beauty and remarkable intellectual endowments was hurried into the Great Unseen, while in the flush of hope and bloom of youth.

"A number of visitors were at Dingley's Mill in Green Valley, amusing themselves in inspecting the machinery and its operation, when Miss Mary E. Parker passed between one of the hoppers and the perpendicular shaft by which the motive power is supplied to the stones.

"While leaning over the hopper and handling the barley that was being chopped, her dress stuck to the grease on the slowly revolving shaft, and soon wound round so as to become fast.

"She did not seem to realize the extreme peril of her position, and said to the miller near by, in a half-laughing tone, 'My dress is caught!' The miller cried out, 'My dear

girl - you will be killed!' and sprang to her aid while orders for the stopping of the machinery were instantly given; but it was too late; losing her balance, by the irresistible motion of the shaft, she was thrown down with great force, her head striking the cast iron boxing of one of the stones so violently as to break the iron in, spattering her brains all around and killing her in an instant.

"The girl's mother was in the mill, and frantically sought to seize her child, but was forcibly prevented from placing herself in danger. It was a horrible sight to witness, but the bystanders could not do anything for several minutes to rescue the body.

"The mill is carried by waterpower, having a wheel sixty-five feet in diameter (slight exaggeration - it was 40 foot in diameter) - the largest in the United States (this is probably true) and no mortal power could stop the machinery in season.

"If the girl had known her danger, and had retained her presence of mind so as to clasp the shaft with her hands and go round with it until speed was slacked, this calamity would not have occurred."

The tragically fated Miss Parker was visiting a family friend with her mother and five brothers and sisters. She was planning to be married shortly.

The family had arrived from San Francisco and were partaking of the local famous sites. Compounding the tragedy, according to Susanne Rockwell, who told of the Green Valley ghost as a correspondent for the Vacaville Reporter in 1976, Mary's fiancé, a field musician for a company stationed at Fort Alcatraz, had obtained a furlough to join the family in Green Valley.

Upon his arrival, he learned of her death. "The family . . . expected to return to San Francisco in a day or two with Mr. Eugene Lehe . . . to whom the unfortunate girl was to marry on her eighteenth

h birthday - the eighteenth instant.

"He (Eugene Lehe) obtained a furlough for that purpose and came up on the 'Princess' on Saturday afternoon and was suffered to reach the house where the dead body lay, before receiving any indication that anything was wrong."

Since the terrible tragedy, many reports have been made over the years of hearing eerie screams, much like those of Miss Parker when she became entangled in the slowly turning water wheel and was beaten to death, calling out frantically to her mother, "Mama, Mama!"

It is said that on quiet evenings in Green Valley, Mary's ghost can be heard. According to Rockwell, some families even moved from the valley, after the cries became too insistent.

Dingley's mill is certainly an important historical site, ghost and all, that needs to be preserved. It would be wonderful if it could be restored as the Bale's Mill in St. Helena was. Dingley's mill is built of locally quarried stone, and was originally a three-story structure. The 40-foot wheel stood about 6 feet out from the mill building and was turned by waters from an overshot flume from Green Valley and Wildhorse creeks.

When Mary visited the mill, it stood at 31 feet high. The walls for the first two floors were 2 feet thick, the third floor's walls, which have collapsed, were 18 inches thick. The building is 60 by 40 feet - a good-sized structure.

It is really a shame that the remains are 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, contact M. Clyde Low of Green Valley. This would certainly be a marvelous achievement for Solano County, and Green Valley in particular.

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