

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, May 30, 2016

The Snuff Mills of Yorklyn: The brick snuff mill buildings across Red Clay Creek from the NVF fibre mills, unlike the fibre mills, have had many uses over the years. Originally built about 1800 by John Garrett Jr. to expand his fledgling snuff manufacturing business, they were owned and operated in turn by his son Levi, his grandson William E. "Billy," and his two great grandsons Walter and William Jr. When William Jr. died in 1901, the company passed out of the Garrett family. Only John Jr., however, lived in the community, where he built a small stone three-story home on the hillside above the mills. There he died about 1805.

John's son Levi was a marketing man who moved to Philadelphia in the late 18th century to promote the snuff products produced in his father's mill. Presumably he would make infrequent trips to Yorklyn (then named Auburn) to check on the expanding manufacturing capabilities, but city life must have been to his liking. His son "Billy," however, while continuing his father's management style, liked Auburn in the summer months to get away from the heat and stench of a big city. In 1831, he built a fancy stone barn for riding horses, and in 1850 he attached a fine stone mansion to his grandfather's old home above the mills. The walls of the stone barn are still standing, and the mansion still graces the hill, although considerably modified on the interior.

Billy Garrett greatly expanded the Auburn snuff operation, and about 1846 he built a second, smaller facility ½ mile downstream that was called the Lower Snuff Mill. A new wagon road, following the route of the present-day Yorklyn Road, was opened in 1863 to connect the Garrett Snuff Mills with Old Wilmington Road. With the arrival of the Wilmington & Western Railroad in 1872, a wooden trestle over the creek connected the new tracks with a maze of sidings into the snuff mill complex. The community's name was changed to Yorklyn. Another siding off the main was squeezed between the creek and the Lower Snuff Mill. The telegraph, arriving with the railroad, speeded up communication to the outside world.

It's unclear just when the red brick buildings actively making snuff in the 20th century were constructed -- most of them probably dated from the last half of the 19th century. The ornate building close to the road east of the bridge had an 1893 date stone. Billy Garrett's eldest son, Walter, ran the company until his death in 1895. Walter's brother died six years later. The American Tobacco Company, headquartered in Durham, North Carolina, was busy buying up independent tobacco and snuff companies all over the country, and the Garrett mills fell under its control. As a monopoly was developing, they greatly expanded the Yorklyn plant, and the #5 Snuff Mill, a large, square, six-story building, came on line in 1902. The company probably had over 100 employees in Yorklyn and was actively building four rows of houses to accommodate most of them. A man named Durham was superintendent of the local operation and lived in a large company house near the bridge that later became the Yorklyn Boarding House, standing far out in Route 82 until it was razed in 1937. It was said that Durham enjoyed cockroach and mustard sandwiches.

With enforcement of the Sherman Anti-Trust act about 1910, the American Tobacco Company was split up, and the Yorklyn operation, greatly downsized, was then owned by the George W. Helme Snuff Company of Helmetta, New Jersey, near New Brunswick. The Lower Snuff Mill was sold to the Crowell Corporation (manufacturers of gummed tape), and the big #5 snuff mill, along with about 10 acres around it, was sold to National Fibre and Insulation Co. National stored rags there for the next 30 years, and my father stored clay targets, packed in wooden barrels, in one of the first-floor rooms. On a more limited basis with about 40 employees, snuff was made in the remaining mills until 1954. A new frame house was built next to the Garrett mansion for the new superintendent, W. W. Bissett, about 1905. When he retired in the early 1940s, the superintendent's house was occupied by Philip E. Touhey, who managed the operation until the mills closed and in retirement for about 20 years thereafter. It is now the home of Brian and Linda Woodcock.

In 1921, in a gesture of community good will, National Fibre and the Helme Company built the Yorklyn Club House on Snuff Mill property for the benefit of local residents. On the first floor was a bowling alley and several small stores (I remember being taken to a barber shop in one of them), and on the second floor was an

auditorium complete with a stage and projection booth for motion pictures. My parents were entertained there shortly after their marriage, as my mother was introduced to the community. The Helme Company sold the Snuff Mill Farm, about 200 acres, including the Garrett mansion and the stone barn, at auction in 1946 for \$27,200. The purchaser, William Henry Hollingsworth of Centreville, allowed great amounts of fill dirt to be excavated from the property for the building of the Route 41 bypass around Hockessin, and he also sold roughly 50 acres between the Yorklyn School (now CCArts) and Snuff Mill Road to Elmer Dawson for residential development. In 1947 and '48, I was allowed to open the Club House Theater in the auditorium, where 16 mm. feature films were shown two nights each week (the coming of TV soon terminated this business). After the mills closed, the Helme Company divested itself of the four rows of houses, all now restored and privately owned.

The three Worth brothers of the former Worth Steel Company at Claymont—Bill, Richard, and Ed—bought the remaining mill buildings, established their office in the auditorium of the Club House building, and converted several of the snuff mill buildings to grow mushrooms. They also sponsored Armand Spitz, whose Spitz Planetariums were being sold in good number to schools and universities. Spitz built a domed building on the site for testing his planetariums and frequently invited members of the community to witness a demonstration. The Worth brothers also allowed the newly formed Wilmington & Western tourist railroad to store a steam locomotive and four passenger cars on the old snuff mill tracks in the early 1960s.

In the late 1970s, the snuff property was bought by Daniel C. Lickle. He rented out buildings and portions of buildings to the Spatz Chemical Company and to a rental firm for home, farm, and garden equipment. He upgraded some of the former mushroom buildings to become high-end shops and had the surroundings nicely landscaped. Many other buildings were fast deteriorating, however, and either fell down or had to be partially razed. Devastating floods on Red Clay Creek in 1999 and 2003 put the retail shops out of business. The big #5 Mill (owned by NVF) and another building occupied by Spatz were destroyed by fire.

Today, prospects for the snuff mill property are bright. Several of the mill buildings are again being restored for shops. Dew Point Brewery plans to open a beautiful new facility in the old power house this summer. An antique foot bridge from the developing NVF site across the creek is planned. Although the aroma of snuff will not be in the air, the best is yet to come!