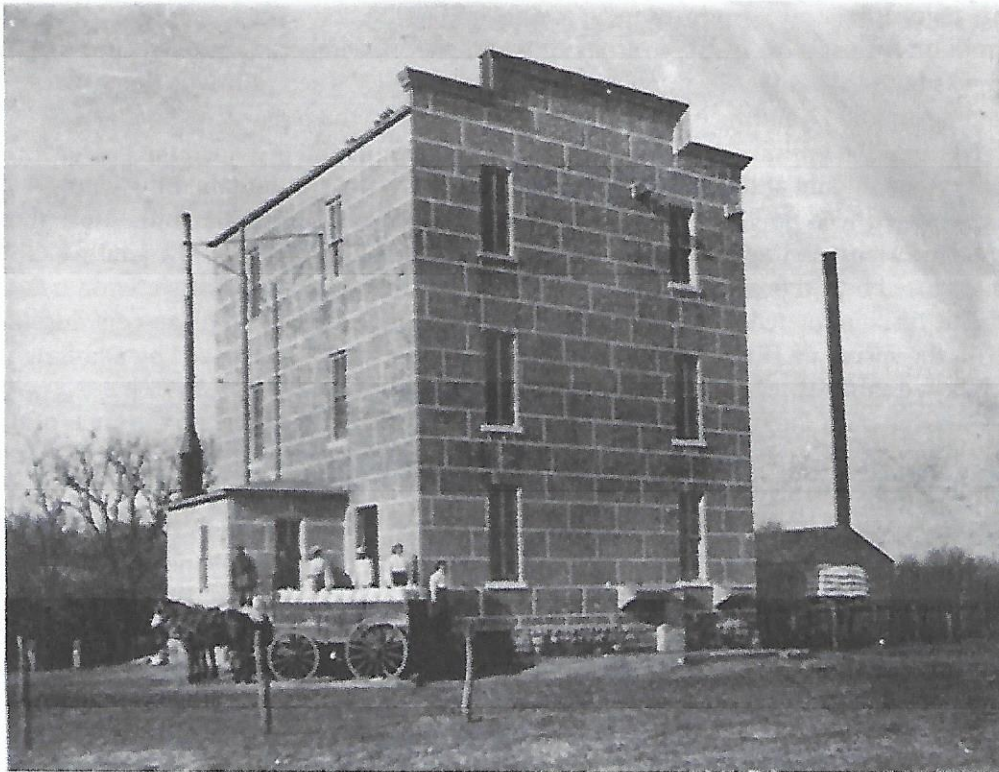


## STORY OF THE MILL

# The Alta Mill

Moundridge, KS



The story of the Stucky family---a story of Swiss Anabaptists, French Amish farmers, church elders, Russian-born Mennonite farmers making an epic ocean voyage, and the pioneers---cannot be told without mentioning their participation in one of the best-known industries in central Kansas, the Alta Mill, located 4 miles west and 6 miles south of Moundridge, which existed from 1876 to 1949.

For many years this place was a community center. It was this for two reasons. First, many farmers coming from near and far brought their wheat to this mill to be ground into flour. In the second place, the park in the nearby woods along the bank of the river were used by picnic and camping groups, while the river attracted those interested in fishing, boating, and swimming.

The first occupants of the land in the southeast corner of section 24 in Alta Township, Harvey County, were the Indians. Several traces of civilization up and down the Little Arkansas River indicate they were in existence at least 500 years ago, perhaps 1,500 years ago. One camp just across the river from the Mill on the west bank, was identified by the General Land Office surveyors, indicating that Indians were still living there in 1860. Surveyors mistakenly labeled the Wichita tribe as "Kaw Indians" and drew teepees on the survey map of Alta Township. It was said that Indians visited the area in later years. Kansas State Historical Association archaeologist, Tom Witty in the 1960s did a brief dig to confirm the location of the village.

*S of Dutch Ave on N. River Fork Rd nearly to NW 60th St.*



The first white settlers to own the land were a French colony of ten persons, who located in Alta Township on the Turkey Creek in 1869-1870. In the fall of 1870, the settlement was augmented by Palmer and Daniel Heath and others.

The deed record up until the time the Stucky family came into contact with the land read: U.S. Government; P.J. Heath; D.W. Woodward; Joseph Schrag and Jacob Gering; Peter Classen. The naming of Alta Township was "in memory of a deceased daughter of Judge R.W.P. Muse of Newton.

Early legends include the possible hanging of a horse thief along the river in the area west of the Mill. The mill has a long, colorful history. Joseph Schrag and Jacob Gering bought a 12-acre mill site in 1876 and built the first mill on the east side of the river about where the [remembered] mill was located. In 1878, a brush dam was built across the river and a millrace constructed. The millrace was dug by teams of horses pulling a drag-scoop. [A millrace is a channel dug parallel to the river. River water was diverted from the river into the millrace, which passed closer to the mill and provided the power for the turbine water wheel. A small dam at the end of the race controlled water through the flow gate]. A 23-inch steel water turbine produced power to operate the burr and the machinery in the mill. "Just above the turbine in the race was a brush trap to screen out branches and trash, and also a flow gate which could be opened and closed by a 6 ft. winch and cable. A trough directed a stream of water onto the turbine to turn it." This turbine rotated on a wooden bearing which never needed replacement during its forty years of use. In the spring of 1885, the old brush dam was removed and replaced by a hollow wooden one, which lasted thirty-three years. It was washed out in 1918.

In 1898, Peter M. Claassen built the [remembered] three-story mill east of the race, on the bank of the river. A belt transmitted the power from the turbine to the machinery in the new building. Roller mills replaced the burr mill. [There was a set of five roller mill machines with progressive grades of roller coarseness to fineness]. In the early days, a steam engine was added for additional power in the autumn when the water was too low for continual grinding. In 1907 a gasoline engine was added to the equipment.

### FLOODS

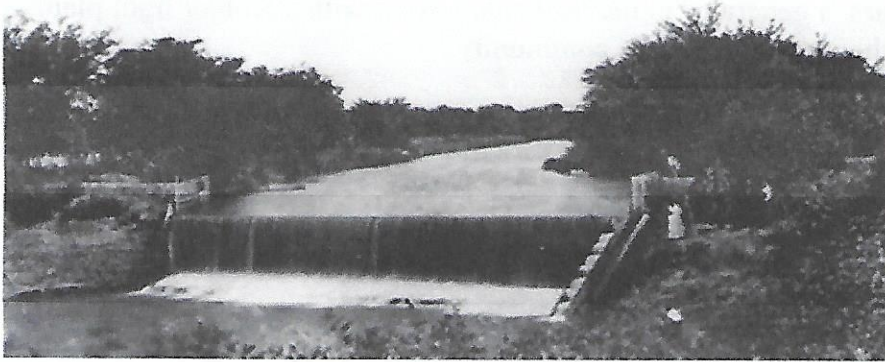
The Moundridge Journal of June 5, 1903 reported the following:

#### **HIGH WATER DOES GREAT DAMAGE ALL OVER STATE**

No serious damage is reported in Harvey County, although it is said the Little Arkansas has not been as high in 25 years. Halstead was flooded, and farms north and west of there submerged, damaging crops. Claassen's mill on the Little River in Alta Township withstood the flood. Fourteen inches of water covered the floor of the miller's home, his barn was floated off its foundation---one thousand dollars will not cover the damage to wheat and machinery in the mill."

In 1903 and 1904 floods came and high water filled the mill basement, coming into the Claassen house. the barn washed away while boats carried the women to safety. Not caring to repeat these harrowing experiences, the Claassens moved to Newton, selling the mill to a corporation of farmers formed in the Moundridge [and Buhler] communities





ALTA MILLING CORPORATION

On May 23, 1905, a group of stockholders formed the Alta Milling Co. with \$10,000 capital stock and held the first meeting in the office of the Citizens State Bank. [The charter was granted on June 2, 1905]. Frank Regier was chosen chairman, and J.J. Krehbiel secretary. There were nine directors for the corporation selected; Joe E. Goering, Frank Regier, Dan Kaufman, John E. Stucky, Jacob Lohrentz, Peter M. Classen, J.J. Krehbiel, John J. Schrag, Jacob C. Stucky. It can be noted that Jacob C. Stucky was an uncle to the Stucky brothers. J.J. Krehbiel was one of the founders of Bethel College. Others not mentioned who were appointed to adopt by-laws were Jacob P. Vogt, John Regier, and Rev. John C. Goering, Pastor of the First Mennonite Church of Christian.

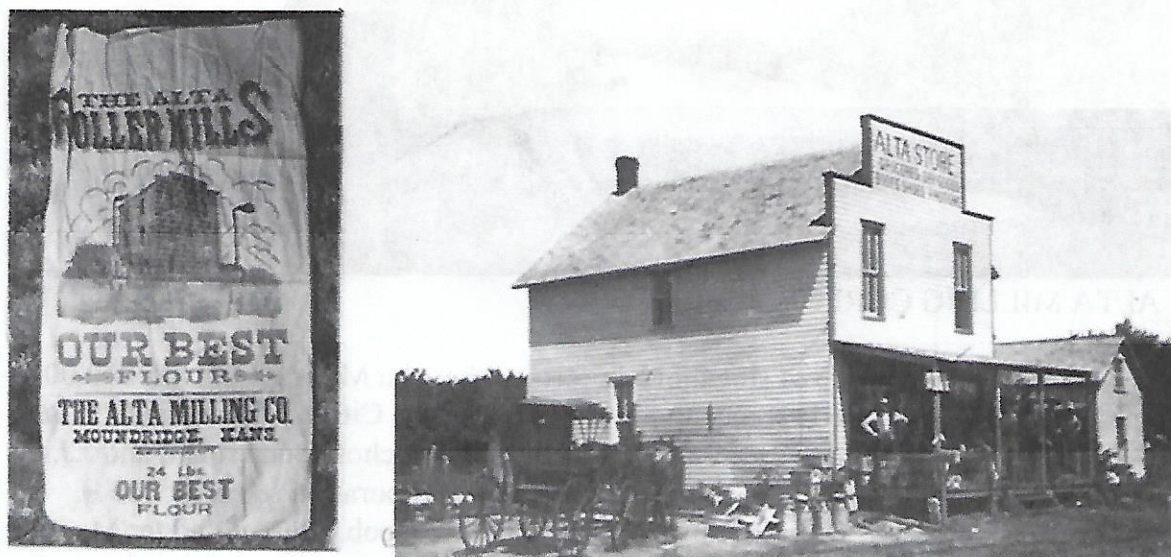
Other stockholders listed in the third annual meeting who were not yet mentioned were H.J. Regier, Jacob B. Stucky, Dietrich Neufeld, Phil H. Krehbiel, J. Friesen, Henry Dirks, C.A. Regier, J. Neufeld, P.P. Goering, P.A. Flickner, Joe J. Wedel, J.P. Becker, and H.C. Vogt.<sup>133</sup>

There were 25 stockholders and Classen retained eight shares. He agreed to manage the mill for a year while training John E. and Jacob B. Stucky for the job. They sold the grain elevator which they operated in Moundridge and each bought twenty-five shares in the Alta Milling Co.<sup>134</sup> In 1913, J.B. Stucky became president of the corporation and J.E. Stucky secretary, positions they held as long as the mill was operated.<sup>135</sup>

In the early years, a post office named Valentine served the community from a small office in the mill from January 2, 1889 to April 18, 1899 with P.M. Classen as postmaster. It is thought that it was named Valentine in honor of Valentine Krehbiel, pastor of the Halstead and later First Mennonite Church of Christian churches. He lived 3/4 mile east of the mill on the north side of the road. There was a post office called Alta, from April 18, 1899 to July 31, 1901. Also listed is a post office named Alta which is an earlier one that operated from Jan. 2, 1877 to Jan. 31, 1899 with a postmaster Alonzo P. Green.<sup>136</sup> It is believed that this was not at the Alta Mill, but rather on section 3 of Alta Township, about 6 miles northwest of the mill. Later, the post office [at the mill] was replaced by a rural mail carrier, coming from Halstead [and later Moundridge]. Telephone service, too, was brought to the community coming from



Moundridge. In later years, a generator in the mill, alternating with a Kohler light plant provided electricity for the entire Alta Mills community.



Many people remember the Alta Mill for its park and picnic grounds as well as the flour and feed that was made. There was an ideal picnic place south of the John Stucky house, and it was often in use. The picnic grounds near the mill attracted many groups from Newton, Hutchinson, and other communities. There were many who camped a week at a time in these attractive woods. Even religious camp meetings were held here and afterwards baptismal services were performed in the river. Croquet, boating, and swimming offered amusement to many young people who gathered here for their outings. Bethel College students often went out to the park for a day's outing by horse and buggy. Athletic contests were held between Bethel and McPherson College. In the spring of 1910 Bethel and McPherson held a debate contest at the mill. P.S. Goertz, later Dean of Bethel College, was a debater on the McPherson team. P.R. Schroeder was a member of the Bethel team. Many students and friends heard their lively argument that day on the subject of "The Progress of Civilization."<sup>137</sup> Dr. Axtell [of Newton] also made use of the place. Once it rained continuously and he packed up and went home in disgust. The first major operation done by this later, renowned surgeon, [and founder of Newton's Axtell Hospital] was performed on the Claassen's kitchen table. The mother in the home had an emergency appendectomy, and made a fine recovery.<sup>138</sup> [This statement is disputed by the Claassen family, as they say she died following the surgery]. [Dr. Arthur Hertzler of Halstead, author of "The Horse and Buggy Doctor" and founder of the Hertzler Clinic, also came out to the mill to treat patients]. Gypsies, too, toured the country and stopped at the homes more than once. The odd-looking wagons, traveling very slowly, were first seen off in the distance. The families quickly hid or locked up their food and possessions, and the gypsies would help themselves to anything they could, in those days.<sup>139</sup> Several cultures came together in this unique area which was a crossroads of four distinct communities: Moundridge and the Swiss-Volhynian Mennonites; Halstead South German Mennonites and English-speaking citizens; Burrton and its non-Mennonite and anti-German groups; and Buhler with Low German General Conference and Mennonite Brethren church groups.





"Those were happy days," said the sisters. Chris Stucky and his wife moved a house near the mill in 1911, and during the years there were eighteen cousins who called the place their home. They went swimming every day conditions permitted, but always one mother went along to watch. There was always fishing and for a number of years Grandpa (Cornelius) Friesen enjoyed it with the children. In winter there were skating parties for the whole community.



The Stuckys were all musical and had an orchestra which was in great demand, furnishing music on many occasions. They played for the camp meetings which were held every summer by some ministers from the east. They are known to have played at many weddings, and on

Christmas Eve in the First Mennonite Church of Christian, their home church. [The Stucky Orchestra which included several cousins played in the years 1928-1939]. 140







*From left to right: Fedora, Harold, Melba, Amanda, Nahida, Jake, Frieda, John, Lucille, Josephine, and Chris.*

One early music group had played together in 1910, and another early group known as the Alta Mill Band which played from 1921-28 included neighbors and numbered up to twenty. These included P.R. Lohrentz, clarinet; Jake Lohrentz, soprano sax; P.H. Lohrentz, baritone sax; John Lohrentz, tenor and alto sax; Gus Regier, clarinet.

The band practiced in the mill store, and often neighbors gathered to listen. they were given an offer by the Santa Fe Railroad to travel free to California and back, entertaining passengers and performing at several stops. The offer was declined, however, because of family commitments and the fact that John Stucky had recently received facial burns in a harvest truck fire.<sup>141</sup>

#### **The Stucky Brothers**

John, Chris, and Jake

The mill office was a center for news and entertainment with the arrival of the first radio in the area. Neighbors would gather around and strain to hear reports of events such as Joe Louis boxing matches, Indianapolis 500, world and political events, and hear programs such as "The Shadow," "Green Hornet," and "Amos and Andy."<sup>142</sup>

Not all the events were pleasant. Once a boy scout drowned while attending a scout camp.<sup>143</sup> Around the turn of the century (1897) two young men were drowned below the dam and their bodies were not recovered until several days had passed.<sup>144</sup> One of those was that of the German-born brother of Henry Riesen as he tried to walk across the top of the dam and failed tragically.<sup>145</sup> Another diary account of the same story describes Riesen and Abraham Dick in a boating accident.<sup>146</sup>

Flood in 1929. Mill Store on the right.

Floods have played a part in the difficult realities of life by the river. Aside from Classen's floods of '03 and '04, there was high water mentioned in diaries about 1939, 47, 48, 49, 50, with major floods in 1944, 1945, a state-wide flood in 1951, 1965, 1973, and the all-time record Oct. 31, 1979, reportedly 24" in the Classen-Stucky house. Later floods on the Little Arkansas came in 1992 and 1993. The Little Arkansas River takes water from the Blaze Fork, Turkey Creek, and Sand Creek, and so the bridge nearby is a strategic measuring point for flood predictions.



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Before the dam broke in 1918 the water in the river was high enough for only two days' grinding per week. In earlier years there had been enough water to run six days per week. Because the water level had been going down steadily the dam was never rebuilt.<sup>147</sup>

There also needed to be frequent repairs to the dam and race. Power was then supplied entirely by the Rumely Oil Pull engine, using a mixture of distillate and water for fuel, and oil as a cooling agent in the radiator.<sup>148</sup> This engine was delivered by rail to Moundridge, and then, being very heavy, was dragged on skids by teams of horses to the mill.

When the dam broke, thousands of fish were left stranded in small pools up the river. Men fished for weeks, taking thousands of pounds of fish. Eldo Stucky recalled the day the dam broke. "It was in the evening, 8 or 9, time for little kids to be in bed, when there was a tremendous crash and rushing sound of water. We all rushed out to the dam, to see it collapsed from the west side. Although there was questioning by some if it had been vandalized, this was definitely ruled out, as muskrats had burrowed under the dam and around it.<sup>149</sup>

During the World War I years the German-speaking and pacifist Mennonites were often under considerable pressure. Neighbor to the north and mill stockholder John J. ("Crickehanus") Schrag, after refusing to voluntarily buy war bonds which conflicted with his religious beliefs, was later dragged into Burrton by a vigilante mob, painted yellow, and nearly hung before the undersheriff stepped in. He was found not guilty in Wichita Federal court and later returned home.<sup>150</sup> But what did the Stucky brothers do about War Bonds? Eldo Stucky said, "They were too old to be drafted, and were never asked to buy war bonds. But one day the army just backed up a truck and started to load up sacks of flour. When the millers came running out of the house and said, 'Hey, what are you doing?' they just said, 'This is your contribution for the war.' Uncle John hated like everything to see them do that, but later when he cooled down, he admitted, 'well, soldiers have to eat, too.'"

The community was even more than a mill and a park, however. Chris Stucky had charge of the grocery store, which also handled general merchandise. Part of the building was used as a garage and service shop for the REO (forerunner of the Oldsmobile) cars which the Stucky brothers sold and serviced. [The Stuckys were the first car dealers in the Moundridge area]. Gas pumps were added and across the road was a good blacksmith shop [run by the Kaufmans]. Cornelius Friesen, father of Katie and Mary, had run a store for a time, and there were also a Rumely tractor and combine dealership, and Chris Stucky had a piano tuning service. Hired hands in the mill were Herb Dyck and John Pauls.<sup>151</sup>

#### Reo Truck at the Mill

##### A REO car owned by the Stuckys

The millers were very busy during the boom years of the 1930s, running more than one shift. This was due to the trading system used. Wheat was as low as 26 cents a bushel, but ten bushels of wheat were traded for seven sacks of flour. Their handbills state, "There is no mill that can make any better flour than this is making, and none can make it for as low a price."<sup>152</sup> They were generous, and sometimes lenient with accounts at the mill, knowing the hard times people had in the

Depression.<sup>153</sup> Understanding the tight cash situation in the Depression times, the trading system was particularly good business. In its days of prosperity the Alta Mill produced on the average of 500,000 pounds of flour a years.<sup>154</sup> The corporation prospered, averaging a dividend of over 20 per cent from 1931 to 1934 with a high of 35% in 1931.<sup>155</sup>

Farmers came with teams and with trucks from as far west as Meade County, Kansas, and south to the Oklahoma line to get a year's supply of flour and feed. They camped in the park and ate with the Stuckys. "We never knew how many there would be," said Mrs. Jake Stucky. "Sometimes twenty or more but it was a lot of fun. It was nothing unusual to bake two or three batches of bread a day." Since the store was next door, supplies were available, and if necessary, they fried a lot of eggs. But no one ever went hungry.



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Vehicles were lined along the road for a long distance, waiting their turn, making an impressive sight. No one was impatient, and the little boys loved to accompany their fathers. While waiting, people would sometimes write their autographs, home towns, dates, and do figuring on the tin siding of the mill building as high as they could reach, all the way around. 156

During World War II, Gas rationing greatly reduced the business of the mill; farmers no longer came from 50 or more miles away as they once did. 157 Changing times brought less demand for custom work. Few families buy flour in the 50-pound sack today, since it is so much simpler to buy baked goods at the store. Also, the fact that the Alta Mill was not located on or near any railroad made competition with other mills difficult.

On June 14, 1949, the corporation dissolved. The Stucky families stayed until the mid 1950s, and then moved to Moundridge to retire.

The mill was sold, and by 1960 was torn down by Jake Schrag. The foundation of the mill, old limestone blocks, still remains, with the foundation of the office. A small warehouse to the south still remains. If one can go down to the river, the millrace can be seen, which appears as a dry river bed just east of the actual river channel.

At one time, there was a plan to take the milling machinery to South America, but that never materialized. Some of the machinery and maple spouting was retrieved by Eldo Stucky, and some of it was donated and can be seen today in the Goessel Wheat Museum.

Since the mill property has changed hands, the Chris B. Stucky house (far north) has been moved to near Walton at the Marvin Regier residence. Today his daughter Sherry and Bill Unruh live in it and have restored it beautifully. The Jacob B. Stucky house (2nd from the north) has been in possession of Jake Schrag, Ed Vogts, and Jerry Critchfield. Today his son Nolan and family live there. The south (Classen-Stucky) house has belonged to Jake Schrag, Marty Moody, Ed Hall, and Marvin Teufel. It has been empty since the 1979 flood.

Even so, 60 years after ceasing operation, there remains an unexplainable affection for the Alta Mill area. Old timers drive by, wondering if you can still get gas at the mill. Sometimes they just stop at the road to remember. Directions are still given from the mill. Even today, Wichita TV stations give National Weather Service warnings by the location of the "Alta Mills."

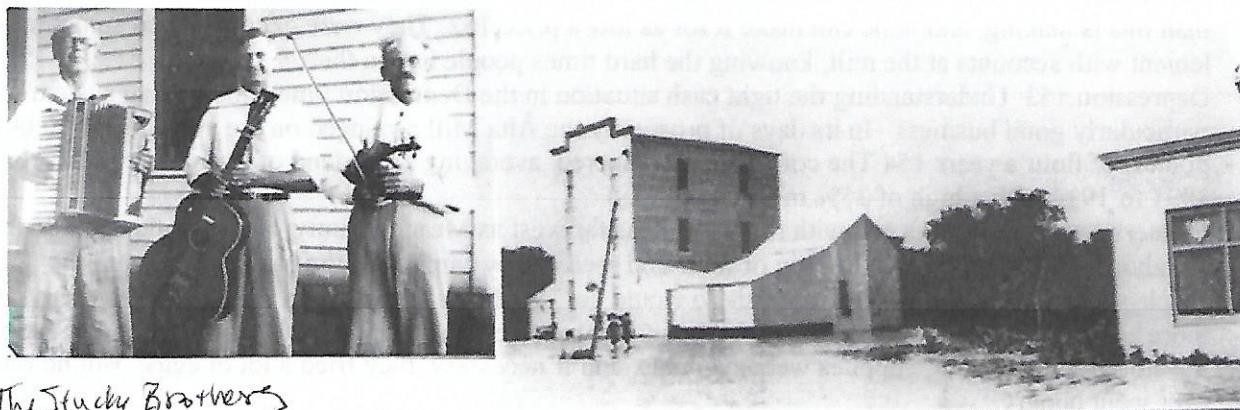
Although the Alta Mill is no longer in existence, memories of those busy, happy times are a part of many lives. Ask any old timer about the mill. Watch his or her eyes light up, and as in a reminiscent mood a story begins, "Why, yes, I remember when....."

The Alta Mill torn down in 1960

Map of the Alta Mill area in active years

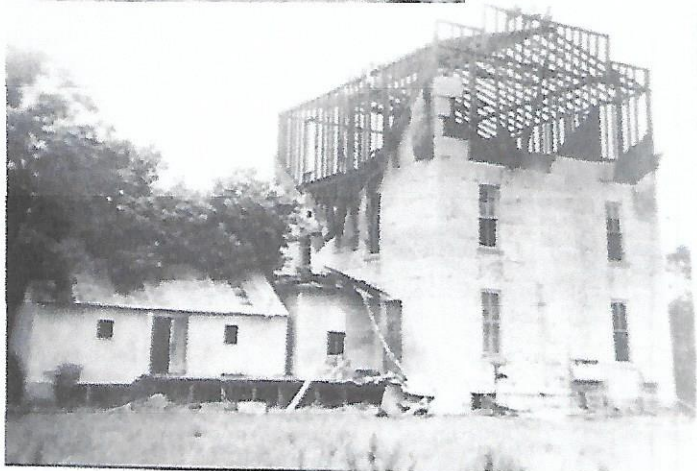
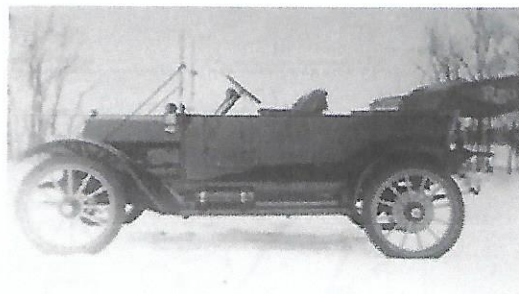
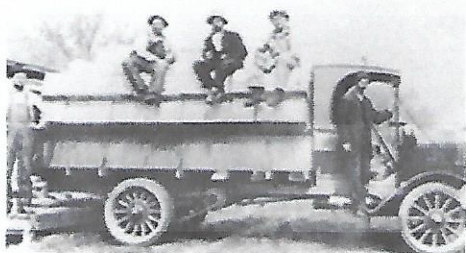
by Brian Stucky

The Alta Mill dam with fish ladder to the right. Washed out in 1918



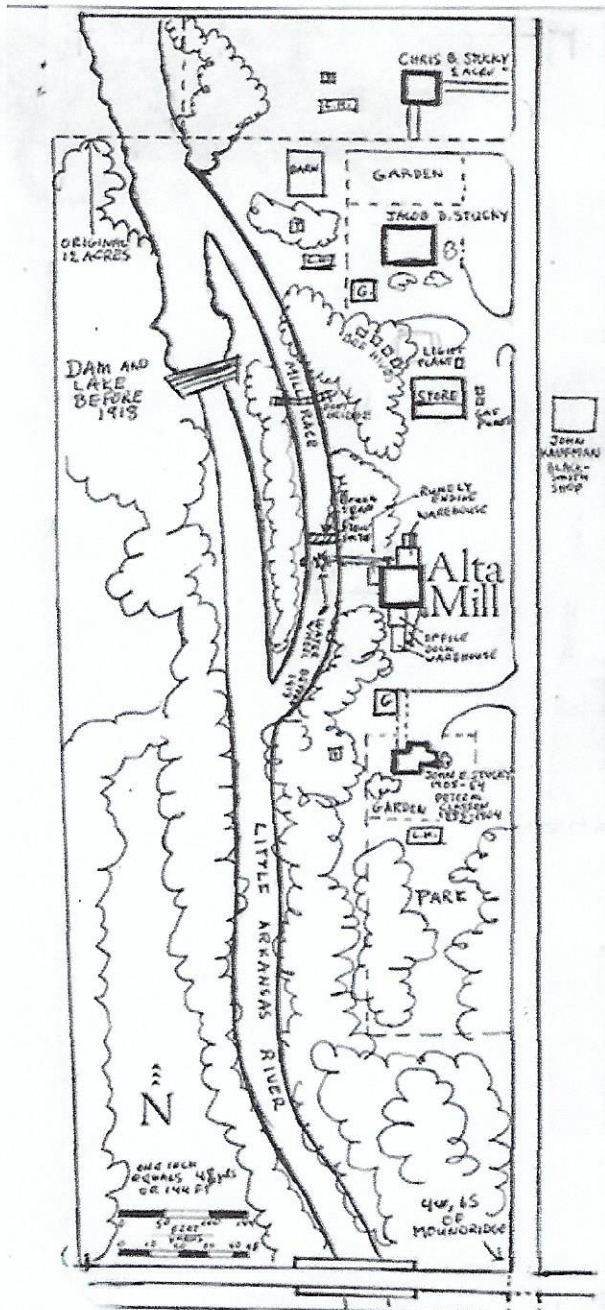
The Stucky Brothers





Mill torn down in 1960





Map of the Alta Mill area  
in active years  
by Brian Stucky



# DIAGRAM OF THE MILLING PROCESS Late 19th and early 20th cent.

- 1 **GRAIN DUMP**  
GRAIN WAS LOADED FROM WAGONS BY HAND  
WEIGHT 500
- 2 **FANNING MILL**  
GRAIN WAS CLEANED AND SEPARATED FROM WHEAT BY FANNING  
WEIGHT 500
- 3 **WATER WASH**  
WHEAT WAS WASHED IN WATER FOR APPROXIMATELY 10 MINUTES  
WEIGHT 500
- 4 **TEMPERING BIN**  
WHEAT WAS STORED HERE FOR APPROXIMATELY 24 HOURS  
WEIGHT 500
- 5 **SCOURING MILL**  
WHEAT WAS SCOURED HERE TO REMOVE CHAFF AND OTHER  
WEIGHT 500
- 6 **ROLLER MILLS**  
WHEAT WAS ROLLED HERE TO SEPARATE THE GRAIN FROM THE  
WEIGHT 500
- 7 **PLANT SIFTER**  
WHEAT WAS SIFTED HERE TO REMOVE CHAFF AND OTHER  
WEIGHT 500
- 8 **PURIFIER**  
WHEAT WAS PURIFIED HERE TO REMOVE CHAFF AND OTHER  
WEIGHT 500
- 9 **REEL**  
WHEAT WAS REELLED HERE TO SEPARATE THE GRAIN FROM THE  
WEIGHT 500
- 10 **FLOUR BIN**  
FLOUR WAS STORED HERE FOR APPROXIMATELY 24 HOURS  
WEIGHT 500
- 11 **DUST COLLECTOR**  
DUST WAS COLLECTED HERE FROM THE MILLING PROCESS  
WEIGHT 500
- 12 **POWER SOURCE**  
POWER WAS GENERATED HERE FOR THE MILLING PROCESS  
WEIGHT 500

