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Fast-food drive-thru strategy drives record profit for 200-year-old relic

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Elkhart County, Indiana (June 10, 2021) – When it was built in the 1830’s the historic Bonneyville Mill near Bristol, Indiana was state-of-the-art. But no one thought it would have its most profitable year for grain sales nearly 200 years later – especially during a global pandemic.

“This was one of the few places in the Midwest where you could still buy flour and other freshly milled grains,” says Ronda DeCaire, Director of the Elkhart County, Indiana Parks system. “Our staff adopted strict safety protocols and got very creative to make it happen.”

“This may be a tourist attraction here in Indiana’s Amish Country, but it’s also been operating non-stop since the day it was built almost 200 years ago,” added Courtney Franke, Manager of Mill. “Pandemic or not, people need to eat. So, we closed the mill to tourists. But, we never stopped making buckwheat, cornmeal and other grains.”

The staff also converted the original horse and wagon bay that farmers used to deliver freshly harvested grain into a modern drive-thru of sorts. “For the first time in over a hundred years, that wagon bay was busy again,” added Franke. “But instead of delivering grain, people were lining up in cars to get freshly milled flour and cornmeal. We used a pole with a bucket on the end to accept payments. And then we delivered packages of flour and other grains right back to their car windows – kind of the same way a modern fast-food chain does it.”

“This is the oldest, continuously operating grist mill in the entire state of Indiana,” said DeCaire. “People come for the fascinating stories, to picnic and to hike the nature trails. We’ve got a lot of great county parks, but this one may have some of the best stories you’ll ever find.”

“Kids and adults love to see the mill in action,” added Franke. “It’s an elaborate mechanical contraption that’s run by water power from the Little Elkhart River. When all the wheels and pulleys are working, it’s a sight to behold – kind of a real-world Willy Wonka grain factory. It’s educational, but it’s also entertaining.”

The record year of grain sales in 2020 is just the most recent chapter in an endlessly intriguing story of Bonneyville Mill. The mill, built by a man named Edward Bonney, was to be at the center of a town he imagined would sprout up around it. When that didn’t happen, it’s said that Bonney, who remains an enigma today, became an outlaw and alleged counterfeiter. In fact, the cast molds for his counterfeit coins are said to be buried somewhere along the Little Elkhart Riverbanks.

While the molds have never been found, Bonney was indeed arrested for counterfeiting. But, on his way to trial in Indianapolis, he escaped.

“If you’ve ever heard the phrase ‘it rings true,’ that comes from the kind of counterfeiting that Edward Bonney was accused of,” added Franke. “Fake coins could be made with cheap metal and simply covered in real silver or gold, so to verify if they were truly worth their supposed value, you bounced them off a stone and listened to see if it ‘rang true.’ Fakes sounded rather dull while solid silver or solid gold gave off a particular ping sound.”

Bonney fled to Illinois, where he would become a bounty hunter, detective and politician, among other things. Before his death in 1864, he even wrote a semi-autobiographical book about his life entitled BANDITTI OF THE PRAIRIES.

“There are also stories of ghosts here at the Mill,” added Franke. “I was alone in the basement once and heard someone yell at me. When I turned around, no one was there. So, who knows? This place is full of interesting stories. That’s one of the reasons so many people come here.”

Bonneyville Mill is open all summer long for visitors. And Franke will tell you it’s one of the best places in the American Midwest to visit and let your imagination run wild. “This was once the original social network,” says Franke. “People came here to picnic, gossip and share news of the day. And I am proud that when today’s modern grain manufacturers weren’t able to keep up with demand for flour and other grains last year, we were still getting it done the old-fashioned way.”

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