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## Dream Big: Reviving a Kansas Grain Mill

Cindy Hoedel

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MILL WORKS  
*Dave Leiker*

## DREAM BIG: REVIVING A KANSAS GRAIN MILL

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The back side of the abandoned limestone mill soars four stories into a tree canopy from the tea-colored Cottonwood River that laps at its base.

Cracks wider than your arm race Chutes-and-Ladders-style from roof peak to water's edge, adding an eerie element of danger to the romance of the bucolic setting.

That view, the one from the bridge one hundred feet away, is the one Kansas City day-trippers to the Flint Hills have been posting on Facebook for years with pleas for someone to step up and save the mill.

In April 2015, someone did.

Dan Clothier, seventy-one, a Wichita native who lives in Leawood, surveys the progress on a sundrenched November morning from his perch in a front-end loader he has rented to clear debris.

The other vehicle on the site is his tricked-out, red-and-black turbo VW Beetle convertible with a vanity plate that reads "JAWOOHL" — "Yes, indeed!" in German (with an extra "o"), a language he speaks fluently after a year of college in Bonn.

Clothier has a history of saying "yes" to potential money-pit projects, and the mill at Cedar Point is not his first rodeo.

"I'm not as profit-oriented in the way I think about things as I should be. I spend too much on real estate sometimes and don't make the money on the other side, given what the potential was," he says. But sometimes, investing in high-quality restoration pays off.

In the early 1990s, Clothier renovated the Boathouse on the banks of the Arkansas River in downtown Wichita, getting Bill Koch to fund sailing lessons for urban youth and to park the \$10 million “Jayhawk” yacht Koch sailed to win the America’s Cup in 1992 on the lawn.

In the late ’90s, Clothier transformed a burned-out depot near Kansas City’s Union Station into the dining mecca known today as the Freight House, landing New York-based star chef Lidia Bastianich as his first tenant. Civic leaders say Lidia’s Kansas City gave rise to the Crossroads Arts District.

And now Clothier, whose sparkly blue eyes, close-cropped white hair and cheerful smile look like Santa minus the beard, has brought great cheer to sparsely populated Chase County as word has spread that a guy from Kansas City has come to save the mill.

#### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MILL**

In 1867, a settler from Pennsylvania dammed a steeply banked section of the

Cottonwood River at the location of the current mill, using it first as a saw mill.

Later he took on a partner and switched to grinding flour.

In 1875, the men completed a new stone building with their names carved above a third floor window on the street-facing side: Drinkwater and Schriver.

Carved pediments and meticulous finishing work on the stones give the mill’s facade a much more finished appearance than the rough back and sides.

Yet the facade was hidden for 112 years behind a tin-clad addition.

Until a few weeks ago, no living person in the county had ever seen it, not even ninety-four year old Pat Sauble, whose family has owned the nearby Sauble Ranch since 1856.

“I didn’t even know about it (the facade) because it had always been covered up. When I met Dan, he said it was going to look pretty good when he pulled all that stuff off the front, and it sure does,” Sauble says.

Removing the addition revealed a surprise: over the main doorway, a huge half-moon stone has the name Wyoming Mills on it.

Clothier, a history buff, has yet to unravel the mystery. He has learned that there is a Wyoming County and a Wyoming Valley in Pennsylvania, where the original owners came from, and Clothier speculates Wyoming Mills might have been a company in one of those places offering grist mill outfitting and design.

By 1903, both original owners were gone, and Schriver’s son built a granary addition that increased capacity to one hundred barrels a day but added considerable structural stress.

The mill continued to sell flour until 1941.

During that period, Sauble used to purchase forty sacks of flour at a time, hanging the sacks from rafters in the family’s barn to protect it from rodents.

In 1941, a local cattleman purchased the mill and changed the machinery to

grind cattle feed, but it fell out of use in the 1960s and has languished since.

In 1998, Clothier was deep into the Freight House project but living in Wichita. He frequently stopped in the Flint Hills to break up trips to Kansas City and read about the mill in “*PrairyErth: A Deep Map*”, William Least Heat-Moon’s 1991 book about Chase County. Book in hand, Clothier found the mill, located the owner and strode into the local bank across the street from the mill to set up a nonprofit to pay for Kansas State University architecture students to document the mill as a design project.

The Freight House, other projects and a move to the Kansas City metro consumed all of Clothier’s time for the next decade.

In 2014, on a visit, he discovered the restoration project had stalled. He had sold two of the successful restaurant properties in the Freight House — Fiorella’s Jack Stack and Grunauer (he still owns the Lidia’s building) — which freed up money and time.



MILL AND LOG JAM  
*Dave Leiker*

He bought the mill. Standing inside, looking down at rotted steps leading to the silted-in basement where the river once flowed through, Clothier quipped, “Why not restore the mill? I could have opened a restaurant and lost money on that instead.” (The only Freight House restaurant to date that did not thrive was the one he ran: City Tavern, which preceded the successful Grunauer.)

Clothier has set up a nonprofit corporation called Drinkwater & Schriver Mill with Sauble and two other locals on the board.

Sauble led a successful drive to get the mill listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2007.

A few years ago, when the annual Symphony in the Flint Hills event was being held nearby, he constructed a homemade sign on a piece of plywood saying “Help Save the Mill” and lined up volunteers to hand out printouts asking for donations through the windows of tourists’ cars.

Sauble, having just given up feeding

cattle two years ago at age ninety-two, can recognize hard work when he sees it. He still serves on the state’s Neosho Basin Water Authority.

“I’ve got to hand it to him. Boy, he got in there and started to work on it. He got it all cleaned up in no time,” Sauble says of Clothier.

“Cedar Point used to be a good town,” Sauble continues. “I think there’s gonna be a comeback. Several of the empty buildings downtown have been bought recently, and people are starting to make repairs on some of them.

#### A MILL AGAIN?

“DREAM BIG” reads a neon orange-and-green artwork by Kansas City painter Archie Scott Gobber that hangs in Clothier’s home office.

He always has.

Sitting at the kitchen table in the couple’s Leawood home, which has Kansas landscapes on the walls, Kris Clothier says she is excited about the mill project, but not as much as her husband.

“I’m from Wichita, so I love the Flint Hills too,” she says. “But I’m more practical. I see all the effort that is required.”

Her husband’s original goal for the mill was to restore the outside of the building only and have museum displays about the history and technology of mills inside, and picnic tables outside on the river bank, a rest stop for travelers along U.S. 50 and a destination for history and architecture buffs.

He would not try to locate a vintage paddle wheel (the original one is missing) or reinstall flour-grinding machinery — too expensive, he thought.

Then he learned about Turkey Red.

Mennonite immigrants from Ukraine planted the hard red winter wheat in Kansas in the 1870s, and it quickly became the main wheat crop planted in the Central Plains.

Turkey Red was replaced in the 1940s by higher-yielding cultivars.

Recently Clothier learned that some environmentalists and organic farmers are re-introducing Turkey Red in Kansas for its rich, nutty flavor and because, standing twice as tall as modern cultivars, it shades out weeds, eliminating the need for herbicides.

“How cool would it be to raise Turkey Red right here and grind it up at the mill and even sell it?” he asks, gesturing toward the rich bottomlands flanking the river east of the mill.

As if thinking out loud, he says, “Of course, ka-ching, that pushes the price up, but potential donors seem excited about it, and money always flows to the better ideas.”

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*Excerpt from Cindy Hoedel, “Reviving a Kansas Grain Mill,” Kansas City Star 19 Dec. 2015, copyright 2015 McClatchy. Cindy Hoedel, Kansas City Star writer resides in Matfield Green, Kansas. Cindy enjoys living in a small town, where if she drives a mile, she is in the middle of a stunning tallgrass prairie landscape.*

OPPOSITE PAGE: PRAIRIE, REMEMBERED 2  
Kelly Yarbrough



