MEMORIES OF HANSMANN'S MILLS
By John Auwarter

My first recollections of "the mill," as my dad called it, were when my grandfather, F.H. Hansmann, would ask me if I would like to go to Greene with him in his white pick-up truck, as he had some business to conduct. This was back in the late 1930s. He would always end up at Gray and Sons Insurance in Mr. Charles Gray, Sr.'s back office. Mr. Gray was a great friend of my grandfather, and they would sit and talk for long periods of time. My grandfather would give me a nickel, and I would go next door to Brown's Ice Cream Parlor for an ice cream cone. I really liked this, but not their long discussions!

As the years went by, little by little I learned more about the business, products, and sales, as well as the upkeep of the mill.

My grandfather came to this country from Germany when he was fourteen years old. As a ship's cabin boy, he had to return and come back again to pay for his passage. After he arrived in the United States, he got a job in a grocery store and saved enough money to bring a brother over. The two of them saved enough to bring the third brother over, and they all worked at the store.

He eventually married my grandmother, Meta Rohrssen, and together they bought a small hotel in New York City. After a few years, he would come to Greene with friends from New York on the train to go grouse hunting (we always called it partridge hunting). He liked this area very much and bought the brick house farm above Smithville on the McDonough road and began farming. My mother, also named Meta, was born in New York City and was a very young girl at the time they came to Smithville. She told me my grandfather didn't know anything about farming but would stay up very late reading about the latest farming techniques and equipment.

My Aunt Frieda was born when my mother was five years old. My mother attended school in Smithville while the family lived on the farm. My grandparents did very well on the farm, but due to my grandfather's heart problems, they had to sell. They rented a house on North Chenango Street in Greene where my mother went to high school.

My grandfather was looking for a business to get into and found that the mill and sawmill in Smithville were for sale. He bought the mill and a house in Smithville that is directly across the street from where I live today. He ran the business as a flour and grain business. My grandfather had the first electric lights in Smithville for the house and mill from waterpower.

After my mother married my father, John Auwarter, Sr., they came back to Smithville to live. My two brothers, Fred and Rod, and my sister Meta were born in the house my grandparents lived in. My dad went to work for my grandfather in the early 1920s.

As the years went by, co-ops like G.L.F. came into being, and the grain business was getting very competitive. My grandfather came up with the idea of a self-rising pancake flour that was made by just adding water. My mother used to tell me about my grandparents working on the formula in their kitchen to get the perfect pancake. They finally got the mix just right and had it patented.

At first, my grandfather gave some of the pancake mix to his friends in the area, and then sold it store to store. The response was very good, so he bought a small truck from Jay Doolittle in Greene and expanded his routes all over Chenango, Broome, Delaware, and Cortland counties.

As a young boy, I remember how much pride my grandfather and dad took in the business and the mill building. Every year in the summer when business was slow, they would repair a section of the dam as needed. They worked on mill projects, such as painting and tarring the roof. We boys all learned about repair work.

The dam was a wood plank dam. The apron of the dam was sixteen feet long, with two-by-six planks side by side that went up to the crest of the dam. This was buried under three feet of gravel up to about three feet from the top of the dam. On each side there was a flume you could open to drain the pond or use for waterpower.

Speaking of waterpower, my grandfather and father purchased buckwheat both locally and from the Finger Lakes area. When there was a good headwater in the winter, we would grind around the clock to make buckwheat flour. I learned how to do all this, which brings me to a story.

In the winter when I started working there, the temperature sometimes dropped to 25 to 30 degrees below zero, and someone would have to go under the mill and chop out the ice in the scroll case to open the gate. Normally, it would be opened by a wheel up in the mill. I was always the one chosen to do this, I guess just because I was the youngest. My dad would say, "John, go down and chop out the wheel." Needless to say, the water foamed up when the ice broke and came down on you. It froze instantly. Dad would say, "Go and stand by the radiator." A big puddle ensued!

My grandfather died in 1940, a year after my grandmother. My father, mother, and aunt took up running the business. My dad had two speeds:

fast and faster, and you'd better keep up. He was a driving force and could do every aspect of the business, and he expected my brothers and me to learn it all.

We learned sales, marketing, production, formulation, and building and equipment maintenance. He never asked anything he wouldn't do himself. Again, he had great pride. He used to say 50% is presentation. He always wore a white shirt, tie, and shined shoes, hard to keep with all the dust.

My first years at the mill were working inside. I had the good fortune to work with some great people: Ralph Livermore, Jim Hammerle, George Walker, Carl Kenyon, Bruce Badger, Ed Burns, Merle Rotherforth, and Ralph Crumb, all good and kind men.

One thing you had to know working at the mill was to tie a miller's knot. You had to keep up with the packing machine, usually two machines running at the same time, 240 bags to a machine. I can still tie this knot with my eyes closed.

Dad had to check the temperature of the buckwheat in the bins upstairs a couple of times a week, as the grain would get hot. He would put his arm in up to his shoulder. If it felt too warm, he would move the buckwheat to another bin by the use of the elevators. When the bin got low, it was up to someone to shovel it out—hot, hot work in 90 degree weather in summer. Guess who got to do this!

The buckwheat grain came in bulk—from the truck down a coal chute into the elevator, then upstairs to the bin where it was stored until ready to grind. Then it would come back downstairs to be ground in the roller mills that were made of steel. Then upstairs through the silk mills and separated into the middling and the hull. The middlings would be sold for pig feed, and the hulls for mulch.

A good friend of Dad's, Nate Hyde from Chenango Forks, was the one who came up with the idea that the hulls would make good mulch, and they did for his strawberry plants. Dad thought these could be sold all over and convinced Lou Rappaport in Binghamton to buy a truckload.

We delivered the hulls in the big bags we used for 100 pounds of flour. But when filled with the hulls, the bags were so light they could be picked up with your little finger. Lou had us pile them in the parking lot of his store. It rained hard for the next two weeks; the bags disintegrated, and a huge pile of hulls was left in the parking lot. We ended up shoveling them up with a snow shovel and giving them away. No one had heard of buckwheat hulls for mulch.

My brothers Fred and Rod are now both gone, so I am the only one left to remember all the good times at the mill: swimming, diving off the dam, ice skating on the millpond, with as many as fifty people coming to skate on a Sunday afternoon.

It was a great experience to be a part of all aspects of the mill. I left the business in 1959, but I have never forgotten my training or my roots or my father and the respect he had for people, and they for him.