

**THE STILLWATER TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview with Willard Klemm**

**January 16, 2010**



Interview conducted by Robert Jacoby  
Transcribed by Maureen Block

Rob: My name is Robert Jacoby. I am with the Historical Society of Stillwater Township and I am here at the home of Willard Klemm in Fredon [New Jersey]. It's January 16, 2010 and this is part of the Historical Society's Oral History Program and thanks a lot Mr. Klemm for participating in this. Why don't you lay out the facts first. Where and when were you born?

Willard: 1930, September 28<sup>th</sup> down in Paterson Hospital. We lived in Wyckoff, New Jersey.

Rob: What were your parents' names?

Willard: My parents' names were Alice and Leroy Klemm.

Rob: What did your dad do?

Willard: He was an insurance man in New York. He died very young. He died at 43 years old with a heart attack.

Rob: Now, do you remember him very much?

Willard: Oh yeah. He built a trailer – a camping trailer and added on to the house. He was a very energetic man. He died...what age did I say on there?

Rob: What age? 43.

Willard: No, he died at 34.

Rob: Ooh.

Willard: Man, see I even get that mixed up. 34.

Rob: That is young.

Willard: Yeah, he was young.

Rob: When did you move out to Sussex County?

Willard: The day I graduated from Ridgewood High School in 1948. I

came up here on my – for my party at my uncle’s farm up here and then I went back and forth for – ‘til September. Then I got a job on the farm here for \$95 a month plus room and board – on the lower farm.

Rob: Did your uncle own the farm that we are at now?

Willard: No, my uncle rented the farm down the road which I bought in time. He just rented it for a year from Charlie Smith.

Rob: What was your uncle’s name?

Willard: Herman Kleindienst.

Rob: And your wife – where did you meet her?

Willard: I met her in the Presbyterian Church here in Stillwater. She was the girl that lived by Bill Hill up there by the Methodist Church.

Rob: And what’s her name?

Willard: Janette.

Rob: So you worked at your uncle’s farm.

Willard: Well I helped him there off and on, I went back and forth to the city – to Ridgewood and then I got this job up here and was tied up with this job here for quite a few years. And from here I left and went to Wilbert Carr’s over there by Yellow Frame [New Jersey] for a year and then I went back down to Ridgewood for a year to sell tractors and be a mechanic down there. Then I came back up here on the same farm again and then – we got married at this farmhouse next door and then after [Sylvester] Skuba came over from Yellow Frame to ask me to run that farm over there so we went over there and we started farming over there – fixed the house and barns up and started farming over there. Then we came back here when we bought this place.

Rob: When did you move in here?

Willard: Oh, I'd say in the '50s. I am trying to figure when we bought the barn even. We bought the farm and then we added on three more farms to it.

Rob: How many acres are here all together?

Willard: 400. 400 here.

Rob: Tell me when you first met Gus Roof.

Willard: Gus Roof, I met him when I came up here. We used to bring the logs over to Gus to saw for the farm when I worked on this farm. And then when I got my own farm over there by Yellow Frame then I brought all the logs there to fix the house and to put a double floor in the barn there. We would go in the woods and put the logs on the old '32 Ford dump truck and bring them over. He would saw them up there. And we had him do other stuff for us. Some cabinets and doors for me. Over the years we got to be real friendly with him.

Rob: When you first moved up here the Stillwater Grist Mill was still operating?

Willard: Oh, yeah.

Rob: Tell me what you remember of the woman that owned it.

Willard: I don't really know much about her. She uh – I know her husband was killed in the mill.

Rob: Her name was what – McCord – Jane?

Willard: Yeah, Jane. And I went to her auction. My clock and candlestick holders come from her house. From her auction over there. At that time I was – I guess we were in the creamery business. I was in the creamery business. We started creamery up here around Westbrook Farms and uh, what the heck was I going to say – it slips my mind now. I'll get back to it.

Rob: Did you have her mill any of your grain?

Willard: We picked up some grain there already when I was just a hired hand on the farm but otherwise we never really dealt with them. We dealt with the JC Roys right on the track. Bought a lot of feed right off the freight trains because we had a large herd here. I used to buy it in Blairstown and bring it up.

Rob: So it sounds like you were – you knew a lot about mechanics. You could take apart engines and things.

Willard: We learned about it and on the farm you had to be able to weld. I could do all that stuff. Those days I had no money so if I needed a truck when I was farming over there, I'd take two trucks and weld them together and weld the drive shaft together and make a truck. Like if one had a good rear and the other had a good motor so we would just weld it. I welded a Stewart and a Ford together over there. And we had old tractors and everything else.

Rob: How long did the mill sit empty?

Willard: Umm, I really don't know when they stopped. We bought it in what – '72. But how long it was empty before that I don't know.

Rob: Whose idea was it to buy it?

Willard: I was going to buy the mill regardless but then I said well I'd like to get a partner and Gus was so good with wood so I went over to Gus and asked him to go in. He says, "Oh, I got – I got no money." And I said, "I didn't ask for any money." I said, "I want you for a partner." So, I loaned the money and we bought it together.

Rob: How much was the mill?

Willard: I think about \$40,000 if my mind is right on that.

Rob: What was your intention?

Willard: Oh, just to restore it and get it going.

Rob: On a commercial basis or something else?

Willard: Nah, just for tourists and that. Gus paid me off in a year or two. It wasn't long. He sold a piece of property and paid me off.

Rob: How badly was the mill – how bad was its condition?

Willard: Well, we had a rotted floor. We had to rebuild that. You could still walk on it but it was rotted beams so we went in Gus's woods and we would saw up the trees, bring them down to the mill, saw them and then put everything got out. We didn't spend much money.

Rob: What kind of wood was that – that you put in?

Willard: Oak. We were using oak there and poplar. We made a lot of stuff out of poplar. Gus could make anything out of wood. He made stairs in the mill that were rotted out. Different we needed he could make in there. He showed me how to make some of that stuff. He made my ox yokes for me and showed me how to make them. He was quite a fellow.

Rob: Did you – had you ever worked on a grist mill or a mill – a water mill before?

Willard: No.

Rob: Had Gus?

Willard: I don't think so.

Rob: So you sort of looked at it and worked it out?

Willard: Well it was all just common sense. Same stuff you have on the farm. We ground feed over here every Saturday for our cows – we ground feed. We grew our own feed and then we ground it but – Gus – we repaired the roof. There's a tunnel under the road that brings the water. So we put all new cement in there and we fixed the turbine up – the turbine wasn't settled down. It's broke now but turbine was possible. I went down and I worked on that for hours with WD-40 and loosening up the gates so you could just

move them a little bit.

Rob: What kind of turbine was it?

Willard: It was uh, boy oh boy, I can't remember the name of it. I can see that pamphlet. It's over in the middle somewhere.<sup>1</sup>

Rob: It was already there?

Willard: Oh, yeah the turbine was there and I found out later right behind the turbine is where the water wheel is supposed to be. I still think we should have put the water wheel back in. I think the water wheel should go back in now and get rid of the turbine.

Rob: Why?

Willard: Well, it would be more authentic. Someone got killed on that water wheel taking the ice off it. I remember reading that. But I think it wouldn't be too much problem doing that. Easier [than] to fix that turbine. They wanted big bucks to fix that turbine.

Rob: So the mill was originally made with the water wheel?

Willard: The old water wheel yeah.

Rob: And then at some point the owners put in a turbine, huh?

Willard: As far as I know it had to be a wide water wheel. I don't think it was a narrow one. I think it was as wide as what the cement chamber is there. I think – this is just my thoughts on it. What I read on it.

Rob: Wasn't the turbine producing more horsepower?

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<sup>1</sup> On a subsequent visit Willard told Rob that the turbine was a Leffel Improved Vertical Samson #35 model, made in Springfield, Ohio around the year 1890. Willard provided the following technical information: the turbine ran on a 5-foot head, produced 27.5 horsepower, ran at 104 revolutions per minute, and discharged 3,600 cubic feet of water per minute.

Willard: That I don't know. I know my water wheel out here produces 12. Gus built two of them for me. This last one the Amish built. It's steel, but a turbin – if I'm not mistaken in my head – I think it was 32 horsepower running full head – I think. But we thought about electric, but the dam going up is a quarter mile long and there used to be a lake at the other end and that was all filled in with trees and land now so it's just water runs around that. But we had to – where the water ran over we had to put logs there so the water would have a spot to run over and the rest of quarter mile is just made of stone and dirt – stone and dirt. We poured a lot of stones from here – I brought over there and I fixed that so that the water would go down where we wanted it.

Rob: So this is the raceway that you're describing, right?

Willard: Yeah.

Rob: Did you and Gus buy the property that included all the race?

Willard: Yeah. Yeah. Right up to the – Well that's really the dam all along there but I guess you call it a raceway when it gets down the bottom. I don't know if you can call it a raceway way up. There's another stream comes into it. We had – what's the heck's that mason guy over there in Green – the man with a bulldozer. He went up there and he drove all the way up there. We piled dirt where we wanted it. We walked that dam there and picked up stones and if it broke through any place we made it work and then we built a wood grate down there. Gus built this wood grate for us. That would be just to keep the sticks out of it. Then we went to a steel grate that I found somewhere and we put steel in there. Then we had the back part of the lake, where the water comes out of the mill. We had that dug out too so when it was a dry season we could get rid of the water that way.

Rob: You mean towards the rear of the mill?

Willard: Yeah, the rear of the mill. Yeah.

Rob: So how long – how much time did it take you two to fix it up?



Willard: Not too long. We had it running but it was just steady. We were always doing something. (indistinct) We only had it for five years I think.

Rob: And would you say you put all your spare time – was put into it?

Willard: No, in the beginning – I was sort of just retired. I was just 40 years old then. And, in the beginning we put a lot of time in it. I grew a lot of crops. Buckwheat, oats, and barley. All over here we had our own combine then we would take it over there and grind up some for the chickens and then making flour for the kids.

Rob: What was the toughest part of rebuilding the mill? Was that the turbine pit?

Willard: Nah, nothing was really tough. I liked going down in there and actually enjoyed what we did there.

Rob: How many people does it take to operate the mill?

Willard: Oh, just one.

Rob: You can do it all on your own?

Willard: Yeah, we picked up a lot. I bought a lot of equipment here and there. We would go around and find this piece or somebody would give us this piece and we went and got the stones out of the Swartswood Mill up there. Keen's Mill I guess it's called. Got the stones out of there and they happened to match up to the stones we had. There's only one set. And that mill was the right set. The other set was reverse, but we did find a set at the Keen's Mill. And so we lugged them out. We used to use Reidell's truck down here. It had a rollback – that was quite a thing. We come back up and put the stones on and then we went up to – Lake Grinnell. They had torn that down and we took the gears. The gears that you see around there and all them stones outside are all from Lake Grinnell.

Rob: The ones – there's a set of gears or there used to be right across the road.

Willard: Yeah, I moved them to the back. Then there was one along front of the building. That's all from the lake up there – Grinnell, Grinnell Mill.

Rob: Now you mentioned that one set of stones was set backwards – what do you mean?

Willard: Well they were meant to turn the opposite way.

Rob: So it was a mistake?

Willard: Well, someone tried to get a set of stones. They probably wore out of stones and they wanted to get this pair and they wrong – they were cut wrong.

Rob: I see. So they were useless?

Willard: Well, maybe you could have got somebody to cut them. We had a fellow that could sharpen stones. He was a good friend of Gus's up in – oh along the Hudson up there. He could sharpen stones. He was real good on mills.

Rob: What kind of stone did you use?

Willard: What's the stones made out of?

Rob: Yeah.

Willard: You know, I think some kind of granite or limestone.

Rob: Mmhmm.

Willard: It's a hard stone.

Rob: Quarried locally or is it something special?

Willard: I don't know. I can't tell you on that really – I just. But we have quite a few stones down. Some fell apart or they were left outside

and then not kept up. We kept up on stones, but they rusted the bands and I think they fixed them. I don't know.

Rob: So once you got the mill operating – tell me what happened then.

Willard: Well to get the mill operating we put a corn sheller up there which is still there. And we had to hook up different belts different ways. Some weren't hooked up to the machines. We put a big band saw up there and we hooked that up. We put a grinding wheel upstairs and we needed a new belt for the main set of stones that take the stuff up to the sifter. But those – that belt was shot and there was all metal cuts on it so I called somebody down in Easton to make up this belt. And he says, "We got stainless steel cups and we got this new material out that has held up a lot better." And I said, "Well, I'm restoring the mill." "Oh," he says, "that's quite a bit of money for a belt like that," he says, "with stainless steel cups, but if you're restoring that mill I'll just donate one." So he donated that to us and then...

Rob: Do you remember his name?

Willard: No.

Rob: Easton, Pennsylvania?

Willard: Yeah, I think it's from Easton. So we got that belt. He sent it up and he'd make any other belt we needed or we'd patch up the belts ourselves. There's a grinder in there that takes the whole ear of corn. Gus would grind up for his cattle that way. And then we had a seed cleaner up there. We'd take the buckwheat and we would run it through the seed cleaner and that would blow out towards this little house there. We had to fix the house up too to rent that out and then we got the mill working. Gus could make teeth for the mill if we needed them but we didn't. Never had to make any teeth, I don't think. He might have made one just to show we could make it but I don't think we had to replace any wooden teeth.

Rob: You used the mill as an educational opportunity right? Did you have school groups come?

Willard: Yes, school groups. Everyone who's ever come through the mill is written right in that –

Rob: In that ledger over there?

Willard: Yeah, schools and conservation schools. Schools and the public. I don't know what we charged them – 50 cents or a dollar or something.

Rob: Every weekend or what was the schedule?

Willard: We opened up anytime anybody wanted a group – if they had a group otherwise weekends we would sit there. It was very slow. It was very slow.

Rob: You were selling some wheat, some flour?

Willard: Oh yeah, wheat flour and rye flour and, whole wheat flour – cornmeal and whole wheat flour.

Rob: Under what name did you call it?

Willard: Stillwater Grist Mill.

Rob: Do you remember what size bags you were -?

Willard: Two pounders.

Rob: And how much would that go for?

Willard: I don't think they were three pounders – I think they were two pounders for 75 cents.

Rob: umhum.

Willard: We had a woodstove in there to keep warm but the only place that was warmed up would be the office, otherwise it was cold in there. You would stand around the whole weekend and that's why we were usually working on something.

Rob: Could you use the mill all year round?

Willard: Oh yeah.

Rob: Yeah? There was enough water – even in the summertime?

Willard: Well, in the real dry summertime we could get it to operate for the people but you couldn't get – you didn't have enough water to really pound out. You could grind very slow. If you had a good rain you could grind more. When Gus needed chicken feed he would usually pick when the water was running pretty high then grind his seed there.

Rob: And ice didn't bother the operation?

Willard: Nope, never seemed to bother the turbine there.

Rob: Did the – did the milling create a lot of dust inside – flour dust?

Willard: No, not that I can remember. I don't think the dust wasn't that bad. The whole mill would get a film on it. We used to – down dust or something like that – five gallon cans. I would spray that on the floor and then we would sweep up everything. We'd clean it up before every tour usually.

Rob: When –

Willard: When we'd know they were coming. We had hayrides – horse-drawn hayrides there.

Rob: Why don't you describe the process of making flour. After you got a delivery of grain and what was the first thing that - ?

Willard: Well, we took the grain out of our fields here and bring the corn over there and then we'd bring up to the second floor and drop it in the sheller. Let me see if that was the second floor or third floor. It would go into the sheller and then you would use the husks of the corncobs to start the stove and then you take the kernels of corn and put them in a bin. That could go right from the cornsheller to

that bin. I don't think we ran it.

I don't remember running corn through the cleaner – 'cause the sheller usually did a good job on that. And then, we'd just drop it down on top of the stones and you would – There's a little wooden shaft there you would turn with notches on it and a little piece of wood to hold it in the right notch and you'd just feed it. Feed it too much and you could stop the stones. So you could just feed it so it wasn't coming out hot and from there it would drop down to the lower floor into that new elevator and that would take it up to the third floor and that would drop down through a box and then we would package it there. We would just, add a little sliding door there.

Rob: Could you adjust the, how coarse the grain was?

Willard: Oh yeah, by turning the one wrench there you could adjust the stone up or down.

Rob: So you never had to send it through a second pass?

Willard: No, no. Nope. You just felt it there coming out. If it felt right to you then you let it go.

Rob: And was it pretty much – (cut off by clock chining)

Willard: It's the clock. Half an hour is up. That's what it's telling you.

Rob: Um – was it pretty much the same for wheat more or less?

Willard: Yeah.

Rob: I mean obviously you weren't shelling it, but...

Willard: No, just grinding up into nice powder.

Rob: Uh huh, uh huh.

Willard: Wheat, corn. We did barley – we did – For chicken feed we mixed anything with it. I just put maybe two or three acres of everything

coming down the hill. Had all strips of stuff there that year.

Rob: Now you said the stones could get hot – while they were grinding.

Willard: Yeah, well and then the powder would of course – then the cornmeal coming out would be warm and they always say that's not good. That's why the stones are so much better because they don't make it so hot but when you ground a lot there they're going to get warm anyway because of the constant grinding there.

Rob: Was it a noisy operation?

Willard: Oh yeah.

Rob: Did you wear earplugs?

Willard: No, I don't wear earplugs, now that it's past I probably should have but I can still hear you – but it was noisy.

Rob: Not something you would want to do at night. The neighbors wouldn't –

Willard: Well, inside the mill – you couldn't hear it outside. No, it wasn't bad but we had no lights or nothing – no electric in there. We never hooked up a generator or anything.

Rob: So, why did you get rid of it?

Willard: Well, four of us would have to be down there if we had tours and that. And the women weren't happy to go there all the time and Gus and I were getting tired. And it would take one on each floor especially when we had school groups come through. And you had to hook up the horses and then you'd take them for the hayride. At night we were giving hayrides too. For \$25 we would give hayrides there. So – time changes and you get other interests. At that time I had the one barn rented out but now that I think I was – I don't know what I was doing here on the farm at that time. I think I had a fellow in the barn there. I rented it to him.

Rob: Who did you sell the mill to?

Willard: Buxton. He bought it and then he sold it to the state.

Rob: Did – why did he buy it? Did he want to continue operations?

Willard: Yeah, he was going to do the same thing we were doing. Just build it all up. Do this and that because he had an old hotel or restaurant down there and he thought he'd be able to do that but he never operated it too many times.

Rob: Mm hmm. So did it quickly fall into disuse and disrepair?

Willard: Well, the upper part stayed good. It was just the turbine that finally dropped through the floor.

Rob: Uh huh. Was that in a flood or do you know what happened?

Willard: Nah, it just rotted away. The beams underneath there and then it – I think it dried up. Once the water gets out of the wood then it rots quick. If it's under the water, it'll last for years. I think we could have still had it going. If we'd have owned it we would have kept the water where it belonged.

Rob: So the turbine is still in place there?

Willard: Yeah, that's pretty much rusted out.

Rob: It's out of position?

Willard: Out of position plus it's pretty...even when we had it they said put new door on it. Well, I wouldn't do that. We just fixed it so we could shut it off.

Rob: You mean doors on the turbine? Is that like gates?

Willard: Yeah, gates on there and there's a rod that goes through the center one. I had to loosen all those rods up. It was a lot of work. And when it just sat there it probably all rusted up again. If you used it every week you know every week you open it up a little bit and keep it going that way.



Rob: Have you heard that the mill has just been placed on the National Register?

Willard: Yeah, I heard something about that the other day.

Rob: Does that please you?

Willard: Yeah, I'd like to see the mill keep going. I like to see...but anything that the state runs usually runs down. They can't afford to keep anything going. Because everything they do is – where you can put a roof on a house for \$50,000, the government spends \$750,000 so there's not going to be any changes. If the government ran this farm up here they'd have 150 men and the budget would be four million dollars a year to run it. And I run it on probably \$4,000 so it's just...you got to be there yourself; you got to do everything yourself.

Rob: Do you ever stop by the mill? Go in?

Willard: Oh yeah, I used to go in often. I mean the last time it was opened up, my wife and I were the only ones that cleaned it all up. We swept it all out from top to bottom. No one ever said thank you for that.

Rob: Yeah.

Willard: But I got that list of equipment that was in the mill which I own and what Gus owned and what the mill owned and then the book over there [Willard points to a ledger on his table] is the first paying customer to the last paying customer. A lot of people in there are dead but a lot of people...You ever been through the mill when it was operating?

Rob: Yeah, a couple of times not operating; I've been inside it three or four times.

Willard: Otherwise your name would probably be in it. A lot of dead people in that book. A lot of dead people.

Rob: Any final thoughts on your time operating the mill?

Willard: No, it was fun. They wanted me to...at that time a fellow lived in this house was a curator for the fire companies up in, on the Hudson. He was president or editor – editor of the Home Insurance Magazine. So he was all interested in that. He wanted me to buy the Stillwater Mill, the Inn and the store and take the whole town and develop that there and I said, “Nah, I just want to retire. I don’t want to get into all that.” So with that I could have bought the Inn for \$25,000 once and I could have got the mill cheaper too but then finally I said we’ll buy the mill and then he still wanted me to buy the other thing but I said “Nah..” We used to be pretty good with the Inn over there. We used his bathroom. We had no bathroom. We had an outhouse in the back which the school kids all wanted to know where the outhouse was and they would all line up to use it. So that – that worked out alright and then we built one little shed there but now someone put a big shed in there which I don’t know why that was put in there. Buxton put it in or somebody – state maybe. I don’t know. But that’s where we had to congregate. We only owned half of the alleyway and so that’s where we got in good with the Parsons there. We used part of his garage for display.

We had a display of an old John...my old McCormack tractor over in there. The kids could see and that’s where the bunch would gather. They would park up in Gus’s parking lot. We made a parking lot there and then they would walk down and gather there...wait to come in. Groups would come into the mill when they go through the mill and go out the front and across to the picnic area. We had a sheep, goats over there. Had it all mowed down but now it’s...even the field out front where we had beef on it. You could see that field was a nice field where the garage...the garage is here and now the field is open. The beef would be crossing and that would be all nice and mowed. Well, the state just leaves it grow up and just be sticker bushes and just – just miserable and I don’t – I don’t particularly like that.

Rob: One last thing; earlier you were telling me about Channel 2 television coming down to interview you. Tell me what that was all about.

Willard: They just asked us all about the mill. They wanted to see it operate. They took all pictures and then Ron...well he was a popular guy then. He was – he was – remember that fellow that was head of the 6 o'clock show. Anyway, he come down and we put him on the rope and we pulled him up there and the TV cameras all took pictures over there. In fact I popped my head out there too soon to grab him and they said, "no, no, we don't want your picture in there." So then they had to run it again.

Rob: And did you watch that on TV?

Willard: Oh yeah, but it was four or five minutes – very short.

Rob: Your time of fame.

Willard: Yeah. And they just – I never said that word, I never said this here. But they just take 'em and they made it look good. It all sounded good.

Rob: Well I want to thank you very much Mr. Klemm for telling us about the mill...

Willard: You're welcome.

Rob: ...and hopefully one day the mill will be working again.

Willard: I hope so. I don't know who's going to do that or – unless you can get it away from the state or somehow. I don't know how you're going to do that. Somebody's got to have the heart into it that wants to see it work. Gus Roof's boy – he's good at wood stuff or making water wheels and anything like that there – he's good at that. I think he could put a jack shaft in there or trussed pulley or something and make that – at least make it work so the public could see it. And then the water wheel would look better. The turbine is – the only time you can see that turbine is when the sun comes in. I had windows all in the front. Someone put plywood over them then. When the sun shone in there you could see right down through and you could see it, but you would get sticks in there. They would still sneak through. You would have to take

them out of there. Climb down in there. Not no more. I can't even climb or get on my knees. Everything's falling apart.

Rob: OK, well thank you very much.

Willard: OK, thank you.