



Sandi Woodward

## Beck's Mill from endangered to enduring

By Sandi Woodward, French Lick-West Baden Program Coordinator

“Propped up by its water wheel.” That’s how Tracy Wells of Pritchett Brothers, Inc. describes the condition of Beck’s Mill prior to restoration. “Total transformation” describes the mill’s condition today, three years after it first appeared on Historic Landmarks Foundation’s 10 Most Endangered list. Beck’s Mill reopens in September, in time to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the first mill built on the site.

*Awareness Washington County*, an annual program that encourages servant leadership in Washington County, asks each class to choose a project that will benefit their community. Salem resident Angela Beanblossom says that publicity surrounding the mill’s appearance on Historic Landmark’s 10 Most Endangered list led the Class of 2005 to create the Friends of Beck’s Mill and influenced the seventh generation of the Beck family to donate the dilapidated mill and 14 acres to the nonprofit group. Beanblossom is president of the Friends of Beck’s Mill.

Funding to stabilize the structure was beginning to trickle in when two unfamiliar faces appeared at a Friends meeting in March 2007. Architect George Ridgway and Joe Pritchett of Pritchett Brothers, Inc. did not remain anonymous for long. Ridgway, acting on behalf of Bill, Gayle and Carl Cook, offered to completely restore the mill for the group. Disbelief at the generosity and commitment that the Cooks were making moved many in the room to tears. The Cooks are medical device manufacturers who are also passionate experts in reviving historic places—in Bloomington, where they live, and elsewhere in southern Indiana, most famously in French Lick and West Baden Springs, where they restored two historic hotels.

The mill’s history can be traced back to Revolutionary War veteran George Beck and his family, who left North Carolina in 1807 to migrate westward. They built a cabin near Blue River and

**For years, the water wheel at Beck’s mill served primarily as a prop for the failing structure. This summer, it goes back into service at the restored mill, grinding grain and also generating electricity.**

recognized that a mill would be a very lucrative enterprise. On a hunting trip six miles from their first home, George Beck’s sons discovered the perfect site, where a large spring flowed from a cave on Mill Creek, with an area where they could plant a crop of corn.

They began building the mill in 1808. Very soon, the small log building could hardly keep up with demand. Settlers arrived with their grain to find that they had to wait their turn. Activities such as horse racing, gander pulling, shooting matches and foot races helped to pass the time, making the mill a social as well as commercial venue. The current two-story structure, built in 1864, milled corn and wheat and prepared wool for rug weaving and spinning. More than 50 years later, Beck’s Mill was still a social center, hosting the homecoming celebration in 1918 of WWI soldier Logan Click.

The mill remained in family operation until the death of Merrit Beck, a fourth generation descendant of George Beck, in 1943. Thereafter Merrit’s daughter, Essie ground corn for customers now and then and for Monon railroad employees at Christmas, but the mill grew silent after her death in 1954.

Beck’s Mill was a picturesque wreck, more than four decades vacant, when the Cook team of Ridgway and Pritchett Brothers began restoration in May 2007. They spent the first week sifting through the building’s contents, determining what should be salvaged for repair. They found the original carding machines used to stretch and pull wool fibers, a rug loom and a picker for cleaning wool, a smutter used to grind wheat, and two buhr stones used

to grind corn. Dating to the turn of the twentieth century, the carding machines are very rare. The number of carding machines in existence today “are so few that you could count them on your fingers,” says Carl Cook.

First, the building was secured with cables and raised one-inch so that work to restore the foundation could begin. Upon completion, the crew began the process of replacing rotting beams and posts with new poplar ones. The cypress clapboard and window sills were also replaced.

The restoration team expects to reinstall the repaired turbines, water wheel and other milling equipment this summer. This is not merely decorative or to achieve the right look. The Cooks

determined that Beck’s Mill should not only generate enough electricity for its own use, it should produce power to sell back to the grid. They estimate the mill will generate \$25,000 in annual revenue from the sale of electricity to help the Friends of Beck’s Mill pay for staffing and interpretive programs.

In order to generate power, however, they needed to restore the flow of the springs, a monumental task. Mud and silt had built up behind the 50 x 12 ft. dam, weakening the flow of the spring. Workmen dug out the area by hand and cleared the cave entrance. What began as a two-foot opening was transformed into twelve-foot passage into the 2,600 foot cave where the spring originates. Ceilings in the subter-

anean cavern are 75-85 feet at some points.

Beck’s Mill will reopen in grand style on September 20-21, 2008 during Salem’s *Old Settlers Day* celebration. The Cooks’ generosity spared the Friends of Beck’s Mill a halting, years long, grant-by-grant restoration. Instead, the group is raising money for an endowment that will cover the ongoing maintenance of the mill and interpretive programs for the public. The Friends hope the mill becomes a venue for schoolchildren to learn Indiana and local history—and a source of the raw material for your next skillet of cornbread.

**Beck’s Mill was a community center for decades until deterioration landed the stately building on Historic Landmarks’ 10 Most Endangered list in 2005. The listing galvanized the Friends of Beck’s Mill and convinced the builder’s descendants to donate the mill. The Cook family sponsored the dramatic transformation.**



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