

Arva boasts oldest mill — 'by a dam site'

We are such a young country yet we have a rich history nationally, as well as right here in London. From time to time I get the urge to discover stories from another time. There are many in and around our city.

A couple of weeks ago I visited one of my favourite spots, the Arva Flour Mill, North America's oldest functioning flour mill. Its colourful slogan, "The Best Flour by a Dam Site," refers to the dam spanning a modest Medway Creek. In fact, part of the mill still operates on water power. Yet the mill is on the Internet and it was there that I learned about this most comforting part of our past.

When the mill was built with barter and a little cash on the bank of what used to be Martin's Creek about 1819, Arva was indeed out in the country. Living in gracious yellow-brick homes with working farms, prominent London families sought to escape the hectic pace of the city. Today, like the mill, many of the original farming families remain: folks like the McClarys, the Donaldsons and the

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Fortners.

In 1869, a fire in Arva destroyed most of the records so although there were prior proprietors, the first owner of the mill is recorded as Edward Matthews in 1842. By 1917 there had been a succession of owners; H. Templeman and his partner Clarence Scott, whose son Harold incorporated it in 1961. Harold Scott's son-in-law, Bill Matthews, a Montreal native raised in Sarnia, became manager of the mill in 1978 and married the miller's daughter, Susan. In 1981, he bought the mill from his father-in-law and now the Arva Flour Mill has been in the same family for about 80 years.

The Web site does more than record the mill's history. It attracts a widely dispersed following of customers who e-mail, fax and write to order special

flours, which are milled from the original stuff many call the Mother Grain. "Spelt" is one of the first grains to be grown by early farmers, as long ago as 5000 B.C. It's popular in Europe, where it is also known as "farro" (Italy) and "dinkel" (Germany). In Roman times it was "farrum," and its origins can be traced back to early Mesopotamia. Spelt (*Triticum spelta*) is an ancient and distant cousin to modern wheat.

Knowledgeable consumers on this side of the Atlantic love the flavour and know that spelt is high in fibre, contains more protein than wheat, and is higher in B vitamins and in simple and complex carbohydrates. Another plus is that some gluten-sensitive people have been able to include spelt-based foods in their diets.

The stuff is in big demand and the little mill in Arva sells tonnes of it annually to customers from all over.

One of the mill's most famous clients orders his spelt flour shipped to Texas — the popular recording star and actor, George Strait. He and his family, including a son, Bubba, discovered "the little mill that could" on

the Internet. They've been devotees ever since, unfazed by the \$53.50 cost of shipping \$20 worth of flour.

Making a dozen different flours is a complex process that sees various grains go through rollers, choppers and five cleanings. Listening to the tutorial, I heard words like "middlings," "breaks," "elevators" and "tailings," and learned that it takes 142 pounds of wheat to make 100 pounds of flour.

The Matthews family treasures the rich history of the mill and is proud of the place it has in our past. It smells good in there, too.

An unrelated note: Recently I drove past a very urban farm — existing in the tall shadows of apartment towers and a community of townhouses. Snow now covers the corn stubble and there it is, a stone's throw from Oxford Street on Proudfoot Lane, and just beyond it, a forest. It's taken me about 40 years to find this comforting piece of London.

Bill Brady is secretary of Blackburn Group Inc. His column appears Thursdays.

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HAPPY 75TH BIRTHDAY



LOVE, THE WHOLE FAM-DAMILY

BROWNS WI

Euchre party an evening of fun and fellowship

The regular euchre party of Browns Womens Institute was held on Thursday February 6 at 8 p.m. The winners were as follows: high lady Kathy Jeffrey, high man

David Arthur, lone hands, ladies Jean Sims, men Allen Sims; ladies low Betty Barons, men's low Jim Kennedy. The lucky prize winners were Donna Jeffrey and

Gordon Smith. The next euchre will be on February 13 at 8 p.m. in the school. Everyone welcome for an evening of fun, fellowship, cost \$2 and lunch to share.