

The Happy Miller

Golda Risinger Unkefer, '30ed, found an old mill, financial success and happiness where the Cherokees ended their "Trail of Tears" and outlaws found sanctuary.

By DAVID BURR, '52ba

Quietly, but with determination, the season's first snow settled to sleep on the Cookson Hills. East of Tahlequah, the capital of the Cherokees, the Cookson range tumbled and rolled, sleeping fitfully under their new white blanket, as though troubled by a bad memory.

One of the most legendary areas of Oklahoma, the Cooksons were hosts to the Daltons, the Youngers, Ned Christie and assorted bad men. Here was the end of one of history's most infamous journeys. It was in the lovely and lonely rolling Cookson hills that the Cherokees found the end of their "Trail of Tears."

Deep in these hills a gate still opens, water runs, a wheel turns and corn is ground. The essentials of producing corn meal at the mill are the same today as they were more than 100 years ago when two part-Cherokees built a small grist mill to handle one of the basic needs of the Indians.

There are a few differences in the present mill and the one constructed in the 1850s. The bushel and a peck arrangement between miller and consumer is gone. No longer does a farmer bring his bushel of corn for meal and pay the cost of grinding by allowing the miller to keep a peck. Today the mill, whose wheel is constantly turning, finds a ready demand for its product from wholesale and retail outlets.

The change in operational methods did not come as a natural part of the Age of Technology.

Until 1949 the old Bittings Spring Mill had not had a face lifting or become acquainted with its possibilities.

In that year, the wife of a Hollywood publicist returned to Muskogee for a visit with relatives. She brought with her a desire for real honest-to-goodness corn meal. There was something of the romantic running deep also. She began to inquire of local friends the whereabouts of a mill that ground meal in the old-fashioned way.

Her first attempts were frustrating. Tips were tracked down without success. Fi-

nally, she heard that the old Bittings Spring Mill might still be standing.

On a November day in 1949, Golda Risinger Unkefer, '30ed, started the road that was to bring her to her destination. The road to the mill ran north of Muskogee through Tahlequah and east beyond the town. State highways were plainly marked

clung to their language, and in some cases could not speak English.

"Can you tell me how to get to Bittings Spring Mill?" she asked.

The tiny old lady answered in Cherokee, indicating that she didn't understand English. But the Bittings Mill part seemed to strike a chord, and she waved and



THE AGE-OLD PROCESS of corn milling is being used as a successful commercial venture at Golda's Old Stone Milling Co. in Oklahoma's Cookson Hills. Corn is fed into a hopper, is ground by buhrstones and comes out whole grain meal. Power is generated by water wheel.

for most of the trip. But as she was nearing the Arkansas line, her way took her onto a gravelled road. Perhaps she fell in love with the Cooksons when she turned off the main traveled highway. At any rate she fell in love with the area.

After a few miles on the gravelled road she believed herself to be lost. She stopped to ask instructions of an old Indian lady. She had heard that many of the Cherokees

crooked her arm, indicating the turnings of the road that would take Mrs. Unkefer to her objective.

Searching for some adequate way to thank her silent guide, Mrs. Unkefer became a bit confused and said:

"I wish I could speak English."

Golda Unkefer's mistake came back to her a few months later when she discovered that the Cherokee could speak

English as well as she. The Indian had adopted her guise, as many of the Cherokees do, to discourage "foreigners."

No one was more surprised than Mrs. Unkefer when, by following the pantomimed directions, she reached her destination, 50 miles from Muskogee and 14 miles from the Arkansas boundary.

Beyond two shimmering mill ponds, one small and one large, she came to a ramshackled building that seemed in immediate danger of collapsing from lung fever. The water wheel was still spinning its tearful way but the frame was shaken and the stone and buhrs inside operated consumptively.

"It could have been a scene from the *Grapes of Wrath*, she remembers.

She was not too disappointed, however, and she approached the miller with the proposal of contracting to market the product of the mill. Thinking of profits and not females, the miller agreed.

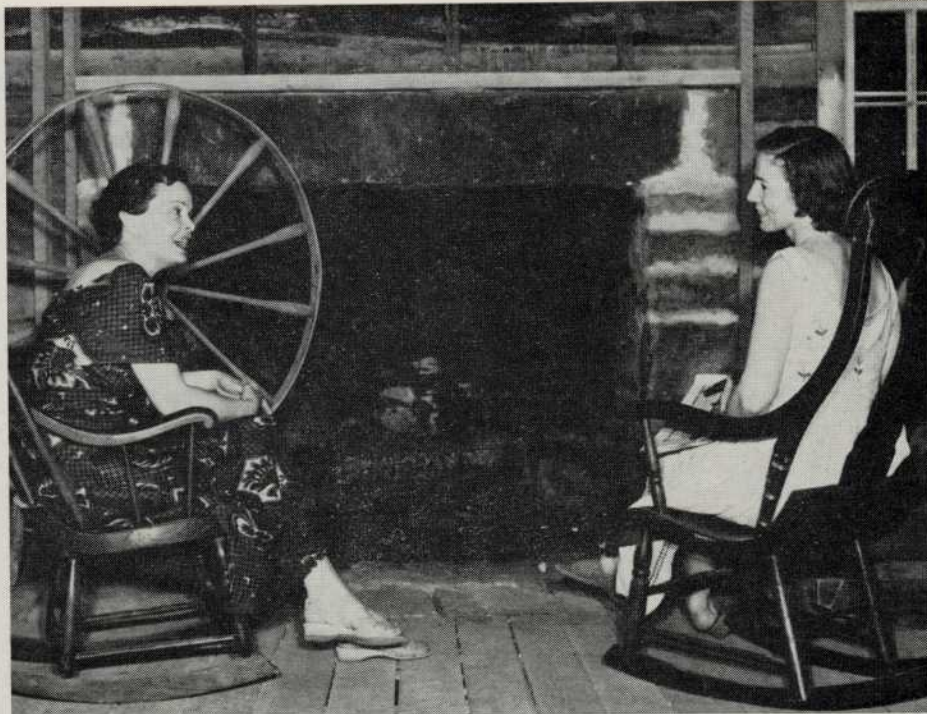
Every day Golda traveled the 50 miles to and from the mill to help make it reach sanitary and efficiency standards. On her first day, she found the building overrun with hogs, dogs and other animals that seemed to know the mill intimately.

And so the trouble began that was to last in one way or another for several months.

The miller, a man who wore his emotions on his shoulder as a chip, did not like a female telling him how to run his business. More particularly he didn't like having the extra work that was required to prepare a corn meal that would meet pure food and drug specifications.

From other members of her family, the story of Golda's brush with the miller was a bit hair raising. To shorten a long story,

FIREPLACE in Mrs. Jewell Risinger Ditmar's Muskogee home offers contrast to mill's. All the Risingers have an active interest in Golda's Mill. Here Mrs. Minnie Risinger and Chrystal, '27ba, examine a Frankhoma pottery jug designed especially for packaging Golda's Corn Meal. Golda Unkefer, '30ed, and Mrs. Ditmars, '19ba, have good reason to smile approvingly.



GOLDA UNKEFER and Mrs. Retha Dellinger Miller, '19-'20, Tulsa, have remodelled the Old Bittings Springs mill, but kept its rustic appearance. "New" fireplace is 100 years old.

he eventually threatened her with personal injury.

In the spring she gave up on her venture as middle man to an "unhappy" miller and bought the mill. With the mill she purchased the frame house that sits nearby and 55 acres of land.

Unfortunately, her troubles had just begun.

There was the job of reconstruction and overhaul. Mrs. Retha Dellinger Miller, '19-'20, an old friend of Mrs. Unkefer's from Tulsa, joined in the task of rebuilding. (At

the time of purchase, the property was incorporated as Golda's Old Stone Milling Company. Mrs. Unkefer served as president, Mrs. Miller and Golda's sister, Mrs. Jewell Risinger Ditmars, '19ba, Muskogee, were vice presidents, and another sister, Chrystal Risinger, '27ba, also of Muskogee, was listed as secretary-treasurer. They still hold office.)

Troubles mounted on troubles. The shelled corn needed to be washed and dried and heated to kill the weevil egg. A wholesale corn merchant in Neosha, Missouri, agreed to supply the mill with corn that met the specifications. The arrangement was short lived when Golda discovered unwashed and undried corn in her supply.

"At one time, I dried 500 pounds of wet corn in the oven of the electric range in the house," Mrs. Unkefer recalls.

Part of the mill's difficulties were overcome when Ed Willis, a man who knew nothing about grinding corn but who possessed a great deal of inventive imagination, was hired to manage operations.

Corn was sent to the O.U. Medical School for examination to determine the amount of heat necessary to kill the weevil egg. Willis set up a production line of Willis-made machines. He built a washer, a dryer, and an oven of infra-red bulbs that provide the safeguards against weevil as suggested by the Medical School, cooling racks and got the mill up to the point it is today—with a capacity of 100 bushels per

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that Oklahoma had been offered a bid to the Orange Bowl in Miami, Florida, set off student agitation for a team trip south. Big Seven rulings prohibiting post-season games notwithstanding, a group of students met in front of President Cross' house in an attempt to convince him that the trip should be made.

The decision as to whether to go or not was tossed around like a hot potato from Dr. Cross to the Regents to the coach to the team and all the way back again. The chances for accepting the bid were finally nipped when the team, left with the de-

cision, voted that they wanted to go but didn't believe they should make such a choice.

But the team was scheduled to go to the Orange Bowl after all. The Board of Regents passed on a request for a \$10,400 supplement to the athletic department's budget, thus providing funds to fly the entire team and their wives to the game as spectators. In later action, taken just at press time, the Regents reversed their decision and the bowl trip was off.

Coach Bud Wilkinson, Eddie Crowder, Billy Vessels and Tom Catlin couldn't have made the trip anyway. They were in Honolulu for the Hula Bowl.

A mild flurry of excitement arose over the decision to send the group to the Orange Bowl. It was pointed out that such a trip would be in direct violation of the Big Seven ruling which prohibits the giving of money or the equivalent in gifts to athletes. Excitement over this point has been put to test with the latest ruling by the Regents.

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8-hour period. He and Mrs. Willis (she also assists at the mill) and their young son now live in the renovated frame house a short distance above the mill.

With the prospect of producing high-quality, whole-grain meal in sight, Golda Unkefer and Retha Miller set out to sell their meal. Golda describes Retha as "a super-salesman." The two began to

make inroads on the corn meal buying habits of wholesalers and retailers. Their main selling point was that in "Golda's Corn Meal" the buyer wasn't gypped. The whole grain was left intact, just smashed a little.

From a standpoint of nutrition experts, Golda's meal had more food value than

HARMON CONSTRUCTION CO.

100 S. Indiana

CEntral 2-6471

H. J. JEFFRIES TRUCK LINES, Inc.

4720 S. Shields

Oklahoma City

MElrose 8-1521

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most commercial brands. Besides, the two argued effectively, the meal made into any recipe was just plain better tasting than their competitors' meal.

The meal caught on and is presently being distributed in various sized packages throughout Oklahoma, Kansas, Texas and Arkansas. "We have sold meal in limited quantities to every state in the union, but the home and neighboring states are the main marketing areas now," Golda says. Other states are scheduled for sizeable invasions in the near future.

One of the methods employed in marketing the meal to every state in the U. S. is through gift basket sales by mail. Each basket contains the meal, delicious jellies, made from wild berries of the Cookson Hills, and a recipe book for corn meal dishes. The meal is packed in unique Frankoma Pottery jugs.

There have been many sidelights to the success story of Golda's Old Stone Milling Company and of "Golda's Stone Ground Corn Meal."

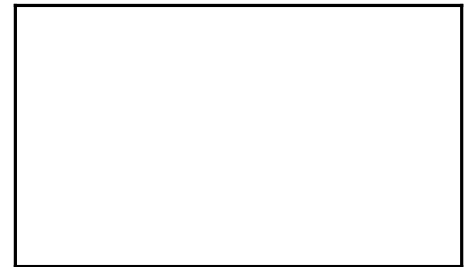
In 1951 Lex Barker and Arlene Dahl of the movies spent part of their honeymoon

at the mill. Their time at the mill was well publicized in *Look* magazine.

Reluctantly but pleased, Golda showed the author a copy of a letter she had received from Mrs. Mamie Eisenhower, expressing thanks for a gift of two packages of meal, designed to tempt the General to

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cook some of his favorite food. Golda's family had shipped the meal without her knowledge and the "thank you" letter offered a pleasant surprise.

Golda's family has a natural interest in the mill and meal besides holding office in the mill company.

The Risingers are a close knit family who have spent most of their lives in Oklahoma.

R. L. Risinger came to Oklahoma and settled in Norman before the turn of the century. A few years later he married Mrs. Risinger. The family roots were finding their way into Oklahoma's red clay.

Risinger was a barber. From his barbershop came the beginnings of football at O.U. He helped organize the University's first football team from his barbershop vantage point. His three daughters and a son, Bradford, '23ba, were given a fine home and the essentials, "But we provided the frills ourselves if we had any," Mrs. Ditmars remembers.

Jewell, Brad, Chrystal and Golda all attended Norman schools and graduated from O.U. The three girls taught school for varying lengths of time. Jewell married S. F. Ditmars, '17, of Muskogee, after a hitch at teaching. Chrystal taught for a period and then opened a book store in Muskogee. She now operates the New Chicago Gift and Book Store and is famous for the party appointments she designs.

Bradford eventually settled in Sapulpa. Golda went to California. Discussing her view of Golda's trip west, Mrs. Miller said "With her legs, I thought she would out Dietrich Marlene and sweep the movies." Instead she taught school for seven years in Santa Barbara County. She met and married Linn Unkefer, presently serving as assistant director of publicity at RKO studios.

In 1946 the father of the family died. Mrs. Risinger started the move that was to consolidate the Risinger family once again. She moved to a house a few doors from Mrs. Ditmars in Muskogee. In 1950 Brad Risinger died and in 1951 S. F. Ditmars passed away.

Today the three sisters and their mother live in Muskogee. It is not quite accurate to say Golda lives in Muskogee. She maintains a residence in Hollywood but has spent most of the past three years in Oklahoma.

It is hard to determine which member of the family is most proud of the picturesque mill. They have all had a hand in its promotion. Mrs. Risinger still hand-cuts the wrappers for the boxes, an operation that will soon be machine operated. Moral and physical support have been forthcoming from Jewell and Chrystal.

Yet, it is not hard to see what everything from signs on the mill to placards in grocery stores proclaim: This mill is Golda's.

The marketing of the corn meal is becoming easier now that its reputation has begun to spread. Tough markets and market areas are being invaded with success and the mill will probably gross over \$100,000.00 this year.

To meet the demand she foresaw, Golda had two new wings added to the mill several months ago to provide more working space. She wanted to keep the mill's stock in trade—it's rustic appearance. It is difficult to tell from the exterior that any additions have been made. To keep the

inside's quaint appeal, a new fireplace was added. She arranged to buy the chimney of an old home in the mill area and numbered the stones as they were removed. They were then moved and replaced at the mill in the exact order they occupied in the old farm house.

Deep in the Cookson Hills where outlaws once found sanctuary from the law and the Cherokees found rest from their "Trail of Tears," Golda Risinger Unkefer's mill with its spring fed-mill ponds, operates as it did 100 years ago. The water turns the mill that grinds the grain that provides an unusual way for an alumna to make a living.

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