

The Cider Mill

This is about the cider mill my great uncle Rich Bradigan built and operated. I don't know when he built it; it was always there as long as I can remember. I was told he built it himself.

I used to love that place! All the flat belts and pulleys and the big wooden screw and Uncle Rich in his hip boots and black rubber apron, and either grapes or apples going up the conveyor and the juice spilling out across the board and into a keg.

Uncle Rich's daughter, Linda, fondly remembers the slightly sour, but also sweet smells of the cider mill on a warm Fall day. She would head to the cider mill as soon as she could after school and have a dipper-full of that fresh apple cider. Funny how we never gave one thought to how many lips had touched that dipper! The dipper hung on a nail near the vat. And worse yet, it was probably aluminum. I remember he had another aluminum cup on a nail by the spigot in the cow barn too and I always got a drink from that. Why didn't we have e.coli back then?

Here's a photo Linda gave me of the cider mill, looking towards Creek Road from Laona Road. The high part of the roof was necessary because that was right above the press of the cider mill. The equipment went up into that raised part.

You can also see the bridge on Laona Road over Walnut Creek. The creek runs right to left behind the mill.



Now here's another of Linda's photos, a little closer. You can see a sliding door on the end of the mill towards the road, and another one on the left side. As I remember it, the door on the end of the mill is where farmers would back their pickups up to the door, and pour their grapes or apples into a wooden bin just inside the door. The bin had a sloped floor so the apples would roll down and through a gate onto a flatbelt conveyor. Uncle Rich's tractor would also be backed up at this end, with a flat belt stretched over its pulley and running into another pulley inside, which is how the entire mill was powered. There were lots of flat belts and pulleys, and they all made the same whirring noise, which combined with the tractor running at full throttle, made it a pretty noisy place. The pulleys moved really fast, and so with all the movement and noise, you had to really watch out and be aware of where you were and where you put your hand or your foot. We didn't have OSHA back then, thank God, and safety guards and personal protective equipment (PPE) were probably not invented yet.



Farmers would bring pickups loaded with hampers of apples or crates of grapes. Usually the apples were windfalls - apples that were probably bruised or had worms, because they had been blown off the tree onto the ground by the wind. They couldn't be sold at the roadside stand for eating, but they could be squeezed into juice for cider or something even better. The pickup would back up to the door, and the hampers of apples got dumped into the bin inside the door. There was a chute with a gate, and the gate was used to meter the flow of apples onto the conveyor. Sometimes a man (or a boy) would stand in the bin and use a big grain shovel to push the apples down through the chute onto the conveyor.

The conveyor took the apples up near the ceiling and to the back of the mill, where the raised part of the roof was. That's where the press was. The conveyor would shuttle the apples back to near the press.

The press was a big, heavy square wooden device about 4 feet square. It was mounted on a steel frame which had a big wooden screw, about 8 inches in diameter, going up through the center of it. Now, remember, there's a lot of this I don't remember too well, so I'm making up what I don't remember so it at least sounds good.

Uncle Rich had a number of wooden frames about 6 inches high and a little bigger square than the press that was mounted on the screw. He would run the press up to the top of the screw, and put a frame on the press board. The press board was about 4 feet off the ground, and it was flush with the spill board, which was tilted to run the juice down to a corner near the rear door. The corner had a funnel which directed the juice into a barrel.

Now, Uncle Rich would place a square frame on the press board and lay a big sheet of burlap on top of the frame. Then he would let enough apples fall into the frame to fill it. Then he placed another frame on top of the first one, and another sheet of burlap, and filled that with apples. He would keep doing this until several layers of frames with burlap and filled with apples were stacked up directly below the big press on the screw. Then, when he had enough apples there, he would use a clutch to start the press down onto the apples via the screw. The gears and shafts and pulley and belts were all driven by the tractor's flatbelt pulley. It was really fascinating for a small boy to watch all the whirling and flying and pressure squeeze the juice out of bushels and bushels of apples. The juice flowed across the spillboard and into a barrel or a gallon jug, whatever the farmer brought to haul his cider away in.

And as Linda remembers, there was a tin cup, and you could sample the fresh cider spilling out from under the big press anytime you wanted. Of course, too much cider would have an effect, so you just tasted it - nice and cold and really fresh.

The farmers would haul their barrels and jugs away. One of them told me about making applejack brandy. I don't know if this is true, but he said you poured a lot of sugar into the barrel and left it out in the yard. It would get hard, then ferment, and in mid February, all but a few gallons (out of a 55 gallon hogshead barrel) would freeze. What was left as liquid couldn't freeze because there was so much alcohol in it. It would all be in the center of the barrel on top. Then you would go out and siphon that out into glass jugs. It was called applejack brandy and it was high proof. But I don't know for sure.

After all the juice was squeezed out of a stack of frames and apples, Uncle Rich would reverse the gears and run the press back up the screw to the top of the raised roof. What was left was a stack of frames with the apple seeds and skins in between the burlap sheets. He would gather up each burlap and carry the contents to another door of the mill which faced the Creek. There, he dumped the contents, called puce, onto a big pile. It was probably where lots of the smells came from. This was a really messy, wet, sticky job, and probably why Uncle Rich always wore a long black rubber apron while he did this job. Each layer of puce was dumped and the burlaps were stacked and then the process started over again.

Linda is still amazed that her Dad used the creek as his water supply. "He would take those burlap cloths and "wash" them in the creek at the end of the day, literally bang them on the rocks and "rinse" them like a pioneer. He never wore gloves of course and I remember how stained his hands were through grape pressing season and how much they ached from being in the cold creek water. He had painful arthritis in this finger

joints, I'm sure as a result of that "method." One thing is for sure, it was VERY hard work to press those apples and grapes and I believe he did that for over 40 years. He used to bring home extra cider in glass gallon jugs and we'd leave it on the porch. "Customers" would just come up on the porch and leave their 40 cents (later 50 cents) and return the jug on their next visit. This cider had no preservatives and certainly was not produced in sterile conditions and started to ferment within a couple of days. Don and I were given that money for our Christmas shopping. The only thing I remember that we had to do was to make sure there were clean jugs ready and once or twice we might pick the apples from an old Spy apple tree in the pasture to contribute to that "bin." I wish I had that organic puce for my flower garden!"

[Here](#)'s a link to the Wikipedia article on this, which somewhat validates some of my recollection. Here's a photo from that article:



Uncle Rich also pressed grapes for the local farmers. Most of that was made into homemade wine. In those days, it was not politically incorrect to call that produce "Dago Red." After all, the cider mill was located right at the foot of "Guinea Hill."