

The scene played out every autumn across rural America around the turn of the 20th century. Farmers hitched their wagons — loaded with the family and the season's harvest — and traveled to a nearby gristmill. Here, the crop they toiled all spring and summer to coax from the soil was transformed into flour or meal.

In Ozark County, farmers from miles around brought their grain to Dawt Mill, a three-story roller mill perched high on the east bank of the North Fork of the White River. During the busy milling season, the mill operated 24 hours a day, and farmers would often wait days to “take their turn” on the millstone, spawning the expression used today when waiting to reach the front of a line.

A trip to Dawt was more than an occasion to grind grain, though. Here in this thriving pioneer community, the women shopped in the general store and picked up letters at the post office. Children played games, skipped rocks on the millpond or fished while the men chatted about their crops, the weather and their plans for the coming year.

With time and technological progress, however, the heyday of the water-powered gristmill ended about the time of World War II.

Dawt Mill would continue to overlook the North Fork for more than a century, but by last fall, it seemed destined to succumb to the same fate as so many other gristmills whose names are now but a footnote in Missouri Ozarks history.

Tired and sagging, teetering on the bank, the old mill stood quiet, its doors locked, its millstones stilled. The elements had taken their toll. Dawt's once-gleaming corrugated tin roof was a patchwork of auburn and rust. Only a few vestiges of gray paint and red trim remained. Like its crumbling foundation, the raceway that for decades had channeled water to Dawt's turbines lay in ruins.

While it appeared to many that the ramshackle mill's final chapter had been written, owner Dr. Ed Henegar decided the story was not yet complete.

Following an extensive 10-month renovation project, Dawt Mill has once again become a hub for commerce in Ozark County. Since June, the steady rumble of ancient machinery grinding corn into meal can be heard gently resonating through the three-story building, which is now home to fine dining at Henegar's Grist Mill Restaurant.

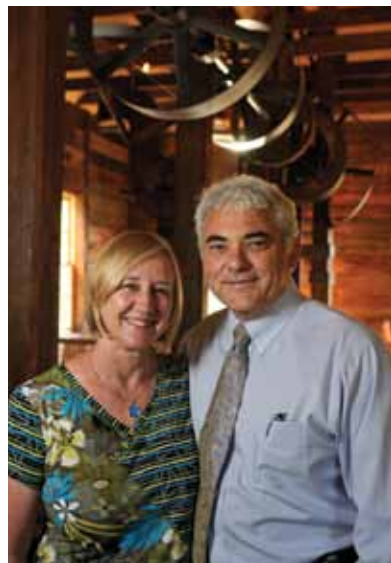
“It's my way of thanking Ozark County,” says Henegar, who purchased the mill and accompanying resort in 1995. “It's what I can do to preserve the history that has made this such a fine place to live.”

Located off Highway PP a few miles north of Highway 160 near Tecumseh, Dawt Mill was built in 1900 by famed Missouri millwright Alva Hodgson, who is best known for the mill farther north that bears his surname.

Dawt was not the first gristmill to occupy this site on the North Fork's east bank; according to “A History of Ozark County, 1841-1991,” a mill was present as early as 1866. In 1892, John C. Caldwell bought the property and began building his mill, including a 425-foot-long angling dam that both funneled water to the mill's raceway and eased pressure from the fast-flowing river.

Caldwell's mill would meet an untimely end, burning to the ground in 1900. The prevailing tale is that the owners of Friend Mill, which was several miles upstream on the North Fork, had grown intolerant of their downstream competition.

“They paid a ‘simple-minded youth’ \$10 to burn the mill down,” says Ron Harden, Dawt Mill's present-day general manager, recounting the story told to him. “The boy rode a crippled mule, and that's how they tracked him back to his home where he



Owner Dr. Ed Henegar and Mary Oakley spent countless hours to ensure that Dawt Mill retained its historic character and charm.



To order a print of this photo, see page 29.

Once in danger of falling into the North Fork, a restored Dawt Mill is now home to Henegar's Grist Mill Restaurant.

# New run of the mill

## Ozark landmark once again a hub for commerce

confessed and exposed the plot.”

Using Caldwell's original foundation and dam, Hodgson built and operated his mill, along with a general store and cotton gin, until he sold it in 1909. Through several ownership changes during the next six decades, Dawt remained a viable gristmill long after others closed. In 1966, a new era began when the old mill became the focal point of a tourist attraction where people camped, fished and canoed.

Not long after Dr. Henegar purchased Dawt Mill, which is served by Howell-Oregon Electric Cooperative, he began planning for a restaurant he hoped to open one day. The mill's deteriorating condition meant that it was either now or never.

“It was about to fall off in the river,” says Rollin Warden, a superintendent for RKL Construction of West Plains, which oversaw the renovation project.

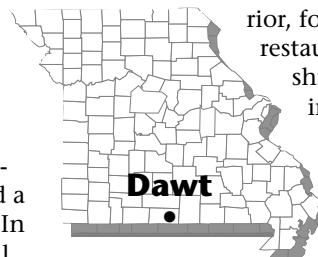
“It only had two columns that were really holding anything.”

Workers used three, 60-ton jacks to raise the mill and shore up the foundation. Construction crews then stripped the mill to its timber frame and began the arduous task of incorporating electricity, plumbing, heating, cooling and insulation into a building that had none.

“Not a thing about it was square,” Harden says, “or plumb or level.”

Though an addition to the mill's south side was torn off and expanded during the project, the building is essentially unchanged from what visitors have seen for more than 100 years.

In order to capture Dawt's character and charm, original building materials were salvaged and used in the renovation. Weathered clapboard siding from the mill's exte-



rior, for instance, now graces walls inside the restaurant. Rusted roof panels — replaced by shiny new ones — have been incorporated into the landscaping.

Chutes that once carried grain through various sifters and separators are still present, as are many of the original pulleys that transferred the river's power to the miller's tasks. Most importantly, though, visitors can watch

the mill grind grain once again.

With a total seating of about 140, the building features one top floor and two main floor dining rooms, along with a small bar area and a large deck overlooking the North Fork. In the basement, another seasonal dining area is planned. Here, the millworks — including its ring and pinion gear, gear shaft and brake — are all visible.

Henegar's Grist Mill Restaurant offers a complete lunch and dinner menu, including appetizers, soups, salads and desserts. The menu features a dozen dinner entrées — from fire-grilled beef steaks and seafood to pasta dishes and burgers.

“On behalf of Ozark County, we want to express our appreciation to you for what you've done,” County Commissioner David Morrison said to Dr. Henegar during a media dinner in late June. “This is another crown jewel that we can claim for Ozark County.”

In addition to the restaurant, Dawt Mill offers lodging, canoeing, camping and a shuttle service that will carry dinner guests from nearby communities to and from the mill.

“It's about the people,” Henegar says of Dawt. “The building will stand now. It won't fall down, at least for a while. What's made Dawt great in the past is the people, and what will make it great in the future is the people.”

*Henegar's Grist Mill Restaurant is open Wednesdays through Saturdays for lunch and dinner, and Sundays for breakfast and lunch. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays. Reservations are accepted. For more information, call 417-284-3540 or 888-884-3298.*