

## Pickwick Mill, Pickwick (Winona County)



THE OLD MILL at the hamlet of Pickwick in rural Winona County represents two centuries in Minnesota history. In 1854 two enterprising settler families recognized the potential of Big Trout Creek and built a six-story, water-powered grain mill from local timber and limestone. (The bottom floors do not show in this image because the mill is built into a hillside.) They fashioned a wooden overshot water wheel, 20 feet in diameter and 4 feet wide, which drove an ingenious system of machines that hauled grain to the top floors for sorting and cleaning before it descended to lower levels to be ground into flour between huge millstones and packaged into bags or barrels.

In the 1860s and 1870s, wheat was king in Minnesota and Pickwick was the hub of great activity. Farmers in horse-drawn wagons full of wheat lined up as far as a mile down the road, waiting their turn. Their flour was then hauled two miles to a steamboat landing on the Mississippi; from there it was shipped worldwide—even, for a few years, to the Union Army. By 1890 the wheat boom had ended and the milling industry centralized in Minneapolis. Pickwick Mill, which was by then run by a diesel engine, switched to producing livestock feed and did so until 1978, a remarkable run of 124 years.

In 1980 a devastating flood damaged the idle mill, putting its future in jeopardy. Fortunately, a local



*Pickwick Mill, about 1945. As part of the restoration work begun in the 1980s, the roof pictured here was replaced with a gabled one like the mill's original, which was destroyed in a 1907 tornado. (MHS COLLECTIONS)*

group, led by Opal Fitch, banded together to save the mill from demolition. Through decades of sweat equity and local fundraising, as well as support from the Minnesota Historical Society, they restored the building to its nineteenth-century water-powered grain-milling origins.

Daily in the summer and on weekends in spring and fall, visitors can tour the mill and watch and hear falling water turning the wooden water wheel. On special occasions, volunteers engage all of the machinery throughout the building.

Recently, community members organized a fundraiser to celebrate Charles Dickens's two-hundredth birthday. What's the connection? Mary Davis, from one of the founding families, was reading the *Pickwick Papers* to the mill's builders when it came time to name the village.

—Greg Gaut and Marsha Neff

*Greg Gaut and Marsha Neff write about history from their home in Winona.*

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