



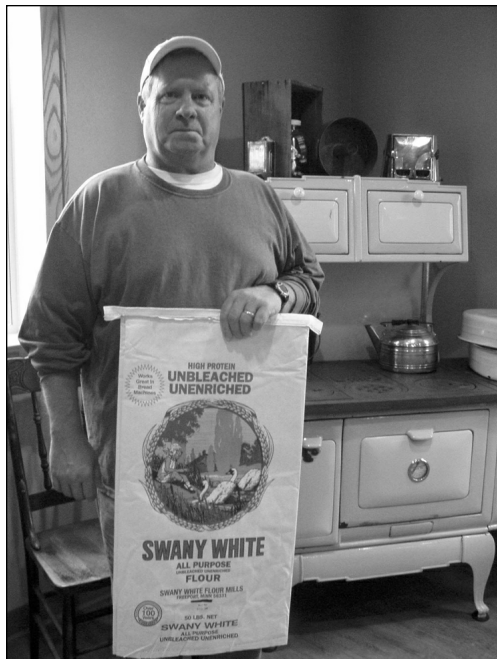
PRODUCER PROFILES: Swany White Flour Mill

By Tim King

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FREEPORT - A photograph of two vigorous elderly gentlemen hung on the wall of the retail space in the old Swany White Mill in Freeport. Both men were smoking cigars, or stogies, as current owner Gary Thelen calls them.

"Grandpa Pete wore the blue striped overalls because he ran the steam engine," Gary explained when we first saw the photo years ago. "His business partner Hubert wore white overalls because he was the miller."



Gary holding the iconic Swany White flour sack. Photo by Jan King.

Gary's father, Walter, took the mill over from the cigar-smoking gents and then, in 1998, Gary took over from his father.

But the Swany White Mill that Pete and Hubert bought in 1903, and that was passed on to two generations of Thelens, burned down on December 27, 2011. It took over 5 surrounding fire agencies to put out the blaze. An employee reported the fire at 4:48 P.M. That night, people gathered all around and witnessed the historic building burn while holding hands and crying.

With the mill went the photo of Pete and Hubert, two generations of memorabilia, and the ninety-eight year old milling equipment.

Memory is an important part of the newly built Swany White mill. On the wall behind the retail counter is a wide-angle painting of the fateful blaze. Standing in front of the painting, Gary leans on the new counter. Outside

the window visitors can see the old brick chimney for the boiler. Looking at that chimney causes Gary to tell us again about his grandfather.

"People ask me why I don't tear the chimney down," Gary said. "We stopped operating with steam years ago but I liked it. Grandpa Pete ran the boiler and steam engine. He wore the blue striped overalls and Hubert wore the white overalls"

The photo is gone but Gary holds that memory close in his mind. The new Swany White is a testament to memory as well as future plans. The retail space is much larger than the old mill.

"We've been open since October and we have people stop by every day. Whole Farm Cooperative is picking up products every Wednesday on their way to the Cities" Gary said. "Once we get going we're going to put up shelving to display products."

In mid-October Swany White had pancake mix, oatmeal, bread mix and flaxseed. For now, there are neatly arranged bags of the products on the counter, just like at the old mill. There is a dusting of flour on the wood grain floor, just like the old mill. The flooring, however, isn't the old maple but a very convincing, and attractive, synthetic product.

"That's from Joe Hennen at Hennen Floor Covering here in Freeport," Gary said. "After the fire Joe took me on as a driver so I had something to do. He's the kind of guy that would do anything for you"

That the new Swany White mill exists at all is testament to Gary's own dogged determination to keep the name Swany White alive, as well as the generous support from the community and his family. Sharon, his wife, has been particularly supportive. She bought the beautiful old wood cook stove and wooden cabinet that are in the retail space. She, with help from friends, found the decorations for the retail space that give it a homey look and feel. And, Gary says, she is responsible for the slate gray and red color of the exterior.

Gary, however, is responsible for locating the stamped tin ceiling that recalls the old stamped tin walls. He found it in Florida, via the internet.



The Mill's new retail area.
Photo by Jan King.



The chimney of the historic mill stands to the west of the new building. It can be seen poking above the roof just behind the cupola.

Photo by Jan King.

"It's amazing how you can locate things with the internet," he said.

He's found his sparkling new stainless steel mixing and bagging equipment on the internet. He's also got a bag-sealing machine. A hammer mill will arrive soon.

The new equipment sparkles and shines in the spacious milling area. But the one thing that Gary will not find on the internet is that old 1913 two-story roller mill that used to cause the entire building to vibrate. The roller mill made the white flour that Swany White was famous for.

The hammer mill won't be able to do that. But Gary Thelen intends to continue making the other high quality products that Swany White has always been known for.

"I just didn't want to let the name die," Gary said.

Now, the tall brick smokestack that Interstate 94 travelers see when passing Freeport will have a little more meaning than it had before. It will stand for the determination to continue forward while refusing to let a family tradition go up in smoke.