



Tim Rasmussen / Special to The Courant

■ Ernest Schwarzmamm stands in the doorway of the Schwarzmamm mill on Foote Road in Burlington. The mill is expected to be torn down this month.

Historic Burlington mill nears end of its days

By BRYAN T. MORYTKO
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BURLINGTON — For almost 200 years, the Schwarzmamm mill turned out lumber, flour and apple cider for Burlington residents and their neighbors. But within a matter of days, the mill could be gone.

The mill at the corner of Foote and Vineyard roads has become a safety hazard and an insurance nightmare in the 20 years since the town bought it, said First Selectman Theodore C. Scheidel.

The building is scheduled to be torn down this month and relegated to the history books and the memories of those longtime residents who can remember the operation in its glory.

Ernest Schwarzmamm, whose father was the last to operate the mill, readily admits that the old building is beyond repair but he fondly remembers a different time — a time when he and his siblings worked 10 or 12 hours a day at the mill.

"There was always something to do here; if you weren't making cider, there was sawing to be done," said Schwarzmamm. "You couldn't ever say you were out of work."

The Schwarzmamm family owned the mill for more than 100 years before selling the site to the town in 1976. Before town ownership of the mill, the family produced lumber, flour, shingles and apple cider there. William Schwarzmamm, Ernest's father, ran the mill for more than 50 years and served as the town's first selectman for two decades, from 1927 to 1947.

Today, the building is in shambles. A large area in the rear has collapsed into a heap while the floors are close to falling through and the roof has already failed in spots.

But as weathered as the outside appears, the inside boasts a treasure trove of artifacts.

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Ernest Schwarzmamm

Son of former Schwarzmamm mill owner

The mill's massive waterwheel, which powered all of its operations, can still be seen through the floorboards while 20-foot-high wooden apple cider casks and a giant circular saw remain.

The sawmill was always busy, cutting ties for the local railroad company and lumber for the Metropolitan District Commission. People from miles around brought their grain to the mill for grinding into flour but it was the apple cider that really defined the mill, said Schwarzmamm.

"Apples around this time of year was the biggest up until November when it got cold," said 81-year-old Schwarzmamm. "People came from all over to bring their apples. They even came down from New Hartford by horse. . . We didn't have trucks back then."

Other apples came by railroad cars from New York State, said Schwarzmamm. The fruits were shoveled by the bushel onto a conveyor belt before being ground up into "mush" and later having all the juice pressed out of them, said Schwarzmamm, pointing to the machines and equipment that he and his brothers used.

Historical documents at the Burlington Public Library show that the cider was then delivered by horse and wagon to taverns in New Britain or by the railroad to New York.

Leftover cider, fermented to the point it was no longer drinkable, was shipped to New York where it was turned into vinegar, he said.

"You never wasted any of that cider," said Schwarzmamm. There were other cider mills in town but none with a cider press that could deliver 100 tons of pressure onto the apples the way the Schwarzmamm Mill could, he said.

While the mill is most commonly associated with the Schwarzmamm family, it dates back long before Ernest Schwarzmamm's grandfather ever stepped foot in America from his native Germany.

Originally owned by Jared Tyler, the mill is said to have provided flour to the Continental Army after the Revolutionary War began. Records show the earliest date of business to be 1781.

Soon after, the mill became known as Hitchcock's Mill — named for its operator Joel Hitchcock — and was later owned by Ira Foote before being purchased by George and Dorothea Schwarzmamm, Ernest's grandparents.

Plans called for the mill to be restored when the town first bought the building, and officials have worked for years trying to find someone to take the antique machinery.

But the cost of renovating the structure — estimated at \$280,000 in 1991 — was too much for the town's volunteers to handle. No restoration was ever done and the site has deteriorated since the town's purchase of the mill.

"If the foundation was good I think they could have saved it but it was just too much," said Jan Tanner, president of the town's historical society. Experts concluded that the building's foundation — built without mortar — would have to be replaced and the building disassembled and rebuilt, she said.

"It's really a shame," said Schwarzmamm, gazing up at the mill. "This was quite a place back when I was a kid."