

## **Our Story/ Our History LONG VERSION:**

Now in its 162<sup>st</sup> year, diversification and innovation are nothing new to the Fly Creek Cider Mill & Orchard which continues to thrive on the banks of Fly Creek, just minutes from Cooperstown in the center of rural Upstate New York.

### **A Seed Was Planted:**

The seed for the Mill's creation was planted long before any Dutch settlers entered the Fly Creek Valley. The Dutch benefited from the work of a gentleman known to Americans as Johnny Appleseed. John Chapman, his real name, started off from New England sowing the seeds of apples far ahead of the flow of people who were destined to tame the frontier. Johnny planted trees that would produce cider apples to quench the thirst of these early exploring pioneers and heroes of New York. Cider apples were often small and tart with plenty of astringency and also very juicy, perfect for making cider-- hard cider that is.

These first Dutch settlers in the lovely Fly Creek Valley called the low-lying swampy area "vlie" or "vly." Over time, "vlie" turned into "fly" and that is how the hamlet's unusual name came about. The Dutch cleared the land, started farming and pressed apple juice themselves, fermenting it into hard cider and wine. With refrigeration not yet developed, fermented beverages were shelf stable, safe to drink, nourishing and most importantly, delicious! Cider, as they called it, was the beverage of choice -- three meals a day. More trees were planted that included sweeter dessert varieties, precursors to the Macintosh, Cortland and Empire varieties used for fresh eating, canning and drying.

### **The Mill's Early Years:**

Observing this increase in cider consumption, entrepreneur Hosea Williams built a centralized cider mill to more efficiently turn apples into sweet cider. To harness the power of water, he used a turbine to run a state-of-the-art, Boomer and Boschert water hydraulic press and grinder. Settlers from miles around abandoned their hand presses to use Hosea's Mill. While waiting for apples to be pressed, farmers would watch this fascinating machinery work, visit and picnic by the millpond. When the juice was ready, they were allowed to draw off three gallons for every bushel delivered. Filling their barrels and casks was an easy job, thanks to Hosea's well-designed facility. Back on the farm, barrels of juice were lowered into the root cellar and sweetened. That's where the science of turning sweet cider into hard was each pioneer's trade secret, well protected and seldom shared. To keep the Mill operational all year, Williams diversified the operation by including a woodworking shop. The turbine powered a wood lathe, jig-saw and planer that fashioned fancy scroll work and decorative brackets for porches and eaves that still adorn many of the homes in Fly Creek and Cooperstown. Shavings from the wood finishing were used to store ice harvested from the millpond, which was then sold throughout the year. He added a grist mill to grind corn and wheat to meet the needs of the growing community. Eight more mills sprung up to manufacture wooden pails, forks, ironworks and lumber to fulfill orders from the growing hop industry. Hops were a major crop at the time, the key ingredient to beer being made in New York City.

The Mill's industrial boom crested during the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the ownership of Linn Kane, the second owner of the Mill. He purchased a brand new Waterloo Boy, a two-cylinder gas engine to run the grinder thereby decreasing the reliance on water to power the Mill during drier periods. His operation was successful and efficient, continuing Hosea William's practice of innovation.

### **A "Dry" Period:**

Temperance and prohibition hit the Mill hard as all production of hard cider ceased. After this dry period the large beer producers were in full production, larger and more powerful than ever, selling inexpensive beer far cheaper than you could make cider. Kane continued custom pressing and

woodworking until his Mill became the only one remaining along Fly Creek. In the 1950's he closed the "Old Mill" as it was called then by the locals. It became destined to fade away as did the others that had served the community so well.

### **A Young Couple Invests:**

On a hot summer day in 1962 a newly-married, enterprising young couple, Charlie and Barbara Michaels, purchased the Mill property in hopes of making a home in the miller's residence on the corner. Glad for the extra cash (and having hidden hopes that this couple would once again breathe life into the Old Mill), Linn Kane sold them the property at a price they couldn't refuse. The task of restoring the home was huge but Charlie, a skilled craftsman, was able to make the house a home for his growing family. Barbara, a grade school art teacher, applied her eclectic gift of design and decor to convert the broken down property into an efficient functioning, beautifully decorated home. While watching the busy Michaels renovate the home, neighboring Kane held on to his hope that the Mill was to be next on their project list. Promoting this wish he regaled Charlie with many stories of the golden years when wagons lined the street to the corner, waiting for apple pressing.

### **The Mill's Rebirth:**

The stories took root and the vision was transferred to Charlie and Barbara as they saw a potential family business right in their own backyard. The first step was to shore up the structure and start cleaning 20 years of dust and sticky cider from the pressing area. Long weeknights and weekends of cleaning, painting and carpentry brought the Mill back to its original state. Things started out small for the Michaels as they had "real" jobs and a young family to look after. Charlie planted the Mill's first orchard and friends helped truck apples from afar for weekend pressing. Officially named the Fly Creek Cider Mill & Orchard, business was restarted with pressed sweet cider and apples. Old customers returned with their own apples to be pressed and Charlie was happy to perform the time-honored tradition of custom pressing. Barrels were filled and fermented; the Mill was on a track for rebirth. Barbara started selling her art ware and local consignments in her own Old Mill Studio Shoppe on the second level where the grist mill had sat. Old-fashioned doughnuts, apple bread and grandma's molasses crinkles were merchandised right beside Barbara's trademark artistic dried floral arrangements. Retail sales grew in the miniscule Mill Store with the addition of pure New York maple syrup and local honey. Still the Mill was a fall weekend hobby business for the young couple. Cider seasons flew by and sales increased to the point that the Michaels realized with a little more effort, investment and marketing, their hobby's profits could become a stand-alone source of income.

Expansion started with an enlarged sales room and a more diverse product mix. Barbara's creative spirit was set free in marketing the Fly Creek Cider Mill as a fall family attraction where "traditions are kept alive." Brochures, newsletters and plenty of promotions "grew" the Mill to become just what they aimed for: a fall family destination complete with entertainments, foodservice and plenty of fresh, sweet cider produced in a historic Mill on original equipment. Visitors praised the hard work invested and the uniqueness of what the Michaels had brought back to life. With retirement looming and a successful fall operation in place, the Michaels were ready slow down and let the next owner continue the Mill's development.

### **The Next Generation:**

Fortunately at this very time, newly married son, Bill, and daughter-in-law, Brenda, were also looking for something new. Bill, experienced in the hospitality industry, and Brenda, a graphic designer and interior architect, were perfectly suited to this style of business. They decided to purchase the Mill from Charlie and Barbara.

Eager young innovators in their own right, Brenda and Bill chose to take the Mill to the next level of success by expanding the traditional fall season into the busy summer tourist months and by adding

many interesting, hard-to-find specialty foods and culinary treats. The young Michaels continued the tradition of reinvestment with the addition of much needed restrooms and an interior stairway to the second level. A cold-storage room was converted into a pack-your-own apple display room where visitors hand select fresh from the orchard apples. Promotion and marketing efforts have increased visitor traffic exponentially, thereby establishing a much greater awareness of this historic gem in the heart of Central New York.

### **Today's Mill:**

Today the Mill is a strong component of Otsego County's tourism mix, a must-see destination in any Cooperstown itinerary. It has become an agri-tourism mecca for people wanting to experience the tastes and flavors of rural Central New York. Farm-direct, Pride of New York products are abundant at the Mill throughout the expanded season. Known for attentive customer service, the Mill offers more than 40 samples daily, ranging from their famous Mill-made fudge to aged NY cheddar cheese, apple salsas, apple butter, marinades, dips, and of course, sweet cider and apples. Continuing the traditions of the past is very important to the Michaels, their primary reason for becoming a New York Farm Winery. Hard ciders and apple wines are sampled next to many other New York varietal wines.

Foodservice at the Fly Creek Cider Mill includes a lunch menu, wide bakery selection and many ice cream treats. Not only are the famous Cider Mill doughnuts still offered to be enjoyed with a cold glass of sweet cider, but also a cider slush or cider float, a refreshing way to stave off the hot summer's heat.

The Michaels totally renovated the Mill during the winter of 2016 enhancing both the retail and production side of the operation. Visitors may now view the historic press on three sides from the new second level Learning Center. The Mill Store Marketplace was updated to allow greater access and display area. Renovations enabled the Mill to be open all year.

Celebrating the Mill's 160th year is the publication of the Fly Creek Cider Mill Cookbook by Agate/Surrey Books. This full-color cookbook profiles the history of the mill and the cider-making process along with more than 100 delicious apple and cider based recipes.

Just like the early days, on fall weekends families can see cider being made on the Mill's original water-powered press. At other times, visitors can view the process in the Learning Center and Cider Gallery. The Millpond continues to be a gathering place now boasting a boardwalk at the water's edge. Visitors can feed the several breeds of ducks, geese and chickens and enjoy the view of beautiful Fly Creek Valley.

Whether it is through new products, entertainments and educational exhibits, or just adapting flavors of the past to the present, the Michaels family has positioned the Mill for a future of continued diversification and innovation for yet another 162 years.



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