



PRELIMINARY INFORMATION FORM (PIF) for INDIVIDUAL PROPERTIES

DHR No. (to be completed by DHR staff) 031-0001

Purpose of Evaluation

Please use the following space to explain briefly why you are seeking an evaluation of this property.

We are seeking to obtain official recognition of the mill's historical significance to the area.

Are you interested in applying for State and/or Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credits? Yes No x

Are you interested in receiving more information about DHR's easement program? Yes No x

1. General Property Information

Property name: Roberson Mill

Property address: 1367 Roberson Mill Road SE

City or Town: Floyd

Zip code: 24019

Name of the Independent City or County where the property is located: Floyd County

Category of Property (choose only one of the following):

Building x Site Structure Object

2. Physical Aspects

Acreage: +/- 3.0 acres

Setting (choose only one of the following):

Urban Suburban Town Village Hamlet Rural x

Briefly describe the property's overall setting, including any notable landscape features:

The mill is located on the south side of Roberson Mill Rd SE (Rt. 714), on the inside of a 90-degree bend in the road; about one-quarter mile from Route 8. The West Fork of Dodd Creek meanders through a nearly flat, fertile meadow on the east and south sides of the mill, and before 1972 was channeled to the mill race and a wooden flume that led to the mill wheel. The flume has deteriorated, leaving only the mill wheel on the east side of the mill building. Until about 40 years ago, a spring house stood directly across the road from the mill. Parts of the earthen mill race remain intact. The county parcel ID# is 66-12.

### 3. Architectural Description

Architectural Style(s): No discernable style

If the property was designed by an architect, landscape architect, engineer, or other professional, please list here: \_\_\_\_\_

If the builder is known, please list here: John W. Epperly, millwright (builder)

Date of construction (can be approximate): 1880s

#### **Narrative Description:**

In the space below, briefly describe the general characteristics of the entire property, such as its current use (and historic use if different), as well as the primary building or structure on the property (such as a house, store, mill, factory, depot, bridge, etc.). Include the architectural style, materials and method(s) of construction, physical appearance and condition (exterior and interior), and any additions, remodelings, or other alterations.

Roberson Mill is an a frame two-story grist mill that measures about 25' x 35'. It is estimated to have been built in the 1880's by John W. Epperly. The mill building is structurally sound and many of the inner workings are still intact, but the building and steel water wheel are in overall poor condition.

The mill was last in operation around 1984. After the wooden sluice began to collapse in 1972, milling continued using electric power instead of water power. The last work on the building was done in the mid 1990s, when the foundation and roof were repaired. Since then it has continued to deteriorate; however, the roof remains sound and continues to protect the interior.

The book *The Water-powered Mills of Floyd County, Virginia : Illustrated Histories, 1770-2010* [Franklin F. Webb and Ricky L. Cox, 2012: 111-114] contains good descriptions and history of the Roberson Mill and notes the following as unique [or unusual] features:

- Split-level main floor, no basement. The main gearing is exposed to and accessible from the main floor.
- The millstones sit on an elevated platform [built of heavy timbers].
- Stairs in the center of the mill, rather an along a wall or in a corner.
- Minimal shafts and belting.
- John W. Epperly's name is stamped in the forged steel arms of the millstone hoist.
- The wooden mill race (flume) was among the longest and tallest in the county.

In addition the book notes that the wooden overshot water wheel was replaced by a Fitz steel overshot wheel in 1956. There are two burr millstones and a buckwheat huller.

Besides the mill wheel, there are no other extant historic resources associated with the mill. The flume is pictured in the Webb and Cox book.

#### 4. Property's History and Significance

In the space below, briefly describe the history of the property, such as significant events, persons, and/or families associated with the property. Please list all sources of information used to research the history of the property. (It is not necessary to attach lengthy articles or family genealogies to this form.)

If the property is important for its architecture, engineering, landscape architecture, or other aspects of design, please include a brief explanation of this aspect.

The mill was built by John W. Epperly in the 1880s and purchased by miller Homer Roberson in 1931. Homer's son Harry purchased the mill in 1988 and retains ownership currently. Epperly is noted as having been "one of Floyd County's most accomplished millwrights." Cleve Smith bought "John Epperly's old mill" from J. W. Brammer in 1922 and sold it to John Smith in 1926. Smith sold it to Homer Roberson in 1931. His son Harry Roberson operated the mill at varying capacities until 1988.

"The mill was one of the last two commercial mills to operate under water power in the county and one of only two existing flour mills that was neither designed to incorporate a roller mill nor modified afterward to accommodate one...The Roberson mill represents, therefore, the county's most authentic picture of flour milling as it was done in the United States through most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, it is the most distinctive among mills (that were still standing in 2010) in design and machine layout, and also demonstrated some of the finest craftsmanship in wood and metal components. The pride Epperly took in what he built, evidenced by the stamping of his name on the forged steel arms of the stone hoist, was well justified" [Webb and Cox, 111-114].

The pages of the Roberson Mill entry from Webb and Cox's book are enclosed as an attachment.

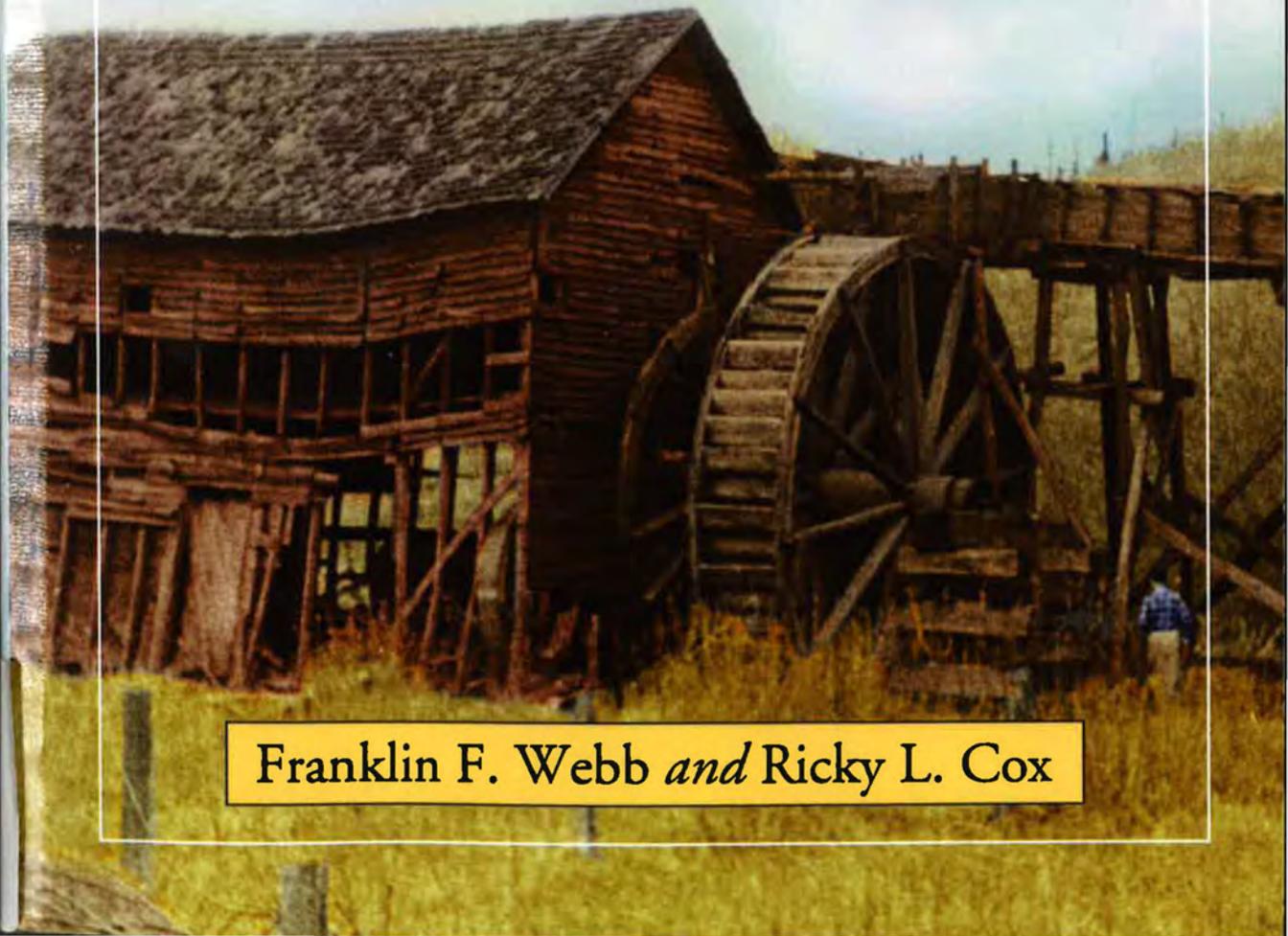




CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN STUDIES, 30

# The Water-Powered Mills of Floyd County, Virginia

*Illustrated Histories, 1770–2010*



Franklin F. Webb *and* Ricky L. Cox

D. B. "V," page 33, 26 November 1890. Mary Rakes, widow of J. Rakes, to W. Reid Agee, mill and land known as the Jarman Rakes mill property, 37 acres.

D. B. 29, page 361, February 5, 1903, W. Reid and Louisa Agee to Thomas Monroe Yeatts, 2½ acres land and mill property on South Fork Little River (Dodd Creek).

D. B. 33, page 297, 23 February 1907. Thomas M. Yeatts to John W. Ferguson mill, land and water rights

on headwaters of Dodd Creek. Dam not to be high enough to cover spring.

D. B. 43, page 20, 12 May 1917. James Wesley Ferguson to Ira M. Compton, mill property and all water rights. Not to build dam so high as to interfere with spring.

D. B. 56, page 80, 15 July 1937. I. M. Compton and Cassie Ann, his wife, to Commonwealth of Virginia, 2.37 acres land on Dodd Creek.

## 27. Old J. W. Epperly Mill/Homer Roberson Mill

### *Dodd Creek*

**LOCATION:** South side of Route 714 (Roberson Mill Road SE) about .25 mile east of Route 8 (Parkway Lane S); **POWER:** Wooden overshot wheel, replaced by Fitz steel overshot wheel in 1956; **STONES:** Two sets and buckwheat huller, sawmill; **VISIBLE REMAINS:** Mill still standing with overshot wheel in place, both in poor condition. Dug race and remnants of the long (½ mile) wooden race

**History.** John W. Epperly, one of Floyd County's most accomplished millwrights, built what is now known as the Roberson mill in the 1880s on land that may already have been developed as a water power site. Epperly was also a skilled blacksmith and gunsmith, and according to his great-grandson Jim Altizer, had a blacksmith shop across the road from the mill.<sup>17</sup> Stuart Cannaday is said to have worked as a miller for Epperly and for the mill's third owner, Rufus Abraham "Abe" DeHart, who bought the mill from Harrison Scott in 1910. DeHart ran the store while Cannaday looked after the mill, but was himself a miller, having learned the trade from his father, Stephen DeHart, on Rock Castle Creek in nearby Patrick County, Virginia. Abe DeHart later owned the second John W. Epperly Mill (IV, 126) and, at some point, McDonald's Mill on the North Fork of the Roanoke River in Montgomery County, Virginia.

Cleve Smith bought what was by then known as John Epperly's Old Mill from J. W. Brammer in 1922 and stayed on as miller after selling the property to John Smith in 1926. The mill has been in the Roberson family since John Smith sold it to Homer Roberson in 1931. Current owner Harry Roberson operated the mill under water power until the wooden race or

flume collapsed about 1970. Electric power was used to grind buckwheat flour on a part-time basis until 1984. Phillip Gettel noted in a 1985 survey of Floyd area mills that a single poplar tree provided the weatherboard siding for one side and both ends of the 2½ story Roberson mill.<sup>18</sup>

The Roberson Mill was one of the last two commercial mills to operate under water power in Floyd County and one of only two existing Floyd County flour mills that was neither designed to incorporate a roller mill nor modified afterward to accommodate one. The other is the William Allen Simpson Mill (II, 113) which is older but far less complete, having been used



An early view of the west end of the "Old John Epperly Mill." The wooden race was among the longest and tallest in the county. (Courtesy Annie Mae [Roop] Gardner)



The Fitz steel wheel was installed in 1956, replacing the last wooden water wheel in use at a commercial mill in Floyd County. The race collapsed soon after this picture was taken in 1972 but the mill ran until around 1984, grinding buckwheat part-time using electric power. (Courtesy Floyd County Historical Society)

for other purposes since closing its doors around 1941. The Roberson mill represents, therefore, the county's most authentic picture of flour milling as it was done in the United States through most of the 19th century. At the same time, it is the most distinctive among mills (that were still standing in 2010) in design and machine layout, and also demonstrated some of the finest craftsmanship in wood and metal components. The pride Epperly took in what he built, evidenced by the stamping of his name on the forged steel arms of the stone hoist, was well justified.

Unusual features include a split-level main floor; no basement; main gearing exposed to and accessible from the main floor; elevated stone platform; elevators with individual drive shafts, oriented at right angles to the peak of the roof; fully floored third level; stairs placed in the center of the mill (most are along a wall or in a corner); and minimal shafts and belting. Power is carried to upper floors by a vertical shaft extending upward from the main drive gear. This last may be characteristic of mills that pre-dated the arrival of roller mills and their attendant line shafts, drive belts, and pulleys; a similar system was used in the William Allen Simpson Mill, the

only other remaining flour mill that was never converted to the roller system.

Why a mill whose owners resisted a powerful trend toward modernization outlasted many newer mills both as a structure and a business may have as much to do with personalities as it does technology, but nonetheless invites speculation about the impact of two interesting circumstances on the history of this and other Floyd County mills.

The first of these circumstances is that the mill was built in the 1880s, during which decade the flour milling industry in the United States was undergoing the most significant technological change in its entire history — the transition from the time honored method of crushing and cutting grain between two millstones, one revolving and the other stationary, to the roller mill process, which abrades grain between as many as eight separate pairs of corrugated steel rollers rotating in the same direction, like the rollers in a clothes wringer, but at much higher and slightly different speeds. Had John Epperly built a roller mill on this site in the 1880s, it would have been the very first in the county. As it turned out, his was among the very last Floyd County flour mills\* to incorporate the old Oliver

\*The Irvin Huff Mill (I, 2) and the William Jackson Stanley Mill (IV, 54) were built after 1900 to make flour using the Evans system, and both were on streams so small that a roller mill system may have been unworkable. The Irvin Huff Mill was, like Roberson's, known for its excellent buckwheat flour.

Evans system of flour milling, the chief components of which (in Floyd County flour mills) are one set of conventional millstones specially dressed for grinding wheat and a simple reel-type sifter. Additional needs include shafting with pulleys and belts or gears to transmit power, elevators and spouts for moving wheat and flour between levels, and one or more machines for removing foreign matter from the wheat before it is ground. But even in its most complex form, the Evans system is simpler and less expensive than the roller mill system that replaced it. It is also slower and less efficient at producing the highest return per bushel of the ultra-white, ultra-fine flour Americans had been persuaded to prefer over the slightly coarser, slightly darker flour produced by buhr-stone flour mills. Had he waited even ten years, John Epperly probably would have planned from the outset to install a roller mill system, and having made that choice, may not have built a mill here at all since the relatively low volume of water probably couldn't have reliably generated enough power to run a high speed roller mill. He was, in effect, correcting both shortcomings—an obsolete flour milling system and an inadequate source of power—when he built a large, modern roller mill (IV, 126) several miles downstream, and below the confluence of Dodd Creek's two main branches, fifteen years later.

The second circumstance that helps explain why the Roberson mill better represents 19th century flour milling than 20th is the fact that the men who owned it between 1900 and 1930 chose not to refit the interior and modify the water power to accommodate a roller mill system, although they no doubt knew this was happening at other older flour mills, like the Spangler Mill on Pine Creek and the Harman Mill on West Fork Creek. The owners of still other flour mills decided it was impractical to rework an existing mill and water power, and chose instead to tear down an obsolete building and build a new one. While they were at it, several replaced (with a turbine or a factory made steel water wheel) or upgraded (with a new or raised dam) the power system. This was the case with the flour mills then or later known as Greasy Creek, Vaughn's, Ed Strong, and Thompson-Akers, among others. Only about thirty years old at the 1915 peak of the roller mill mania, the "J. W. Epperly Old Mill" may have seemed too new for its owners to consider razing and replacing it, considering, especially, how

well constructed it has in the meantime proven itself to be. When it came to refitting the mill for a roller system, they may have perceived, as some of their counterparts on the headwaters of other streams did not, that there simply wasn't enough power to be had from the available water.

Whether the men who owned the mill during these decades consciously chose not to remodel or rebuild for practical (lack of water), personal (lack of energy), or financial (lack of money) reasons, by the time Homer Roberson bought the mill in 1931, the opportunity had passed, along with the thirty-five-year flurry of mill building and refitting that would be the high-water mark of Floyd County grain milling. By the late 1920s, forward-looking Floyd County investors may have been deterred from putting money into a small-scale, agriculture-based business by the economic trends of the teens and twenties, which predicted an economic future more and more dependent on a centralized, industrialized national economy. They would certainly have been demoralized by the cash-poor reality of the 1930s. As a result of either or both circumstances, no new roller mills were built, and no old mills refitted to accept the roller system after 1930 in Floyd County. Roberson either decided, or was left with no choice, to specialize in the grinding of buckwheat, a process that was either too difficult to adapt to the roller process, or that was thought too exotic to be worth the trouble. Roberson also occasionally ground rye flour for customers who had acquired a taste for rye biscuits, which Harry Roberson described as the color of brown sugar and good right out of the oven, but not so good after they got cold.<sup>19</sup>

According to Harry Roberson, Homer Roberson's son, the only major change made by Roberson was the replacement of the 16-foot wooden wheel with Fitz steel overshot wheel. The salvaged 18-foot wheel was bought for \$90 from P.L. Shelor, Jr., about 1948 and came from the Huffville Roller Miller/Ezra Wimmer Mill on Brush Creek (II, 119). It was not installed until 1956 by which time the ½ mile long wooden race or flume was also in need of repair. The steel wheel was an improvement but the extra two feet of diameter sometimes interfered with the tailwater, thereby wasting some of the wheel's power.<sup>20</sup>

Considering the number and variety of exposed gears, shafts, pulleys, and belts in a water-powered mill—or any pre-OSHA industrial plant in which every machine and mecha-

nism was driven by a single power source — accidents were inevitable. In the last fatal accident at a Floyd County mill, Homer Roberson was caught and dragged beneath the wheel on October 30, 1966, while removing a prop from the water wheel which had partially filled due to a leaking flume. Roberson was able to pull himself out of the water but died before he could be gotten to a hospital. During the 1940s Roberson's mill had been the scene of a funeral after a procession of mourners passing by the mill on its way to the cemetery was caught in a downpour. The funeral was conducted inside the mill and the casket kept there until it could be hauled over the muddy roads and to the cemetery on the back of a flat bed truck.<sup>21</sup>

The setting, longevity, and rustic appearance of the Homer Roberson mill, combined with its nearness to a major county highway (Route 8) and to the Blue Ridge Parkway, place it among the county's most frequently photographed mills. A series of photographs taken by Roanoke Photographer W.H. Bratton around 1945 is but one proof of its appeal.

## Deeds

Floyd County Deed Book "P," page 524, 5 May 1880. John Merritt, Special Commissioner to John W. Epperly, 55½ acres of "the land on which Eden Epperly resided," South fork of Little River. "Balance of tract to John T. Agee at request of John W. Epperly." Bounds include "white oak, on north side of the Mill race."

D. B. "R," page 318, 9 February 1884. John T. Agee to J. W. Epperly, rights for race and to spill water from same.

D. B. "U," page 258, 13 December 1889. Sarah E. Epperly to J. W. Epperly, land on which mill race now exists.

D. B. 30, page 82, 30 September 1903. John Epperly to Harrison F. Scott, mill and all rights.

D. B. 37, page 536, 29 August 1910. H. F. Scott to Rufus Abraham "Abe" DeHart, 2 November 1921 (no deed), J. W. Brammer purchased mill, land, and water rights.

D. B. 45, page 37, 3 April 1922. J. W. Brammer to G. C. "Cleve" Smith and wife, mill, land, and water rights.

D. B. 46, page 30, 3 July 1926. G. C. Smith to John S. Smith, mill.

D. B. 49, page 463, 31 August 1931. J. S. Smith to Homer A. Roberson, mill, land and rights.

D. B. 164, page 166, 10 June 1988. Dale Proffitt, Gino W. Williams, and Kendall O. Clay, Special Commissioners, to Harry A. and Mary E. Roberson, three tracts including the same conveyed by J.S. Smith to H. A. and Annie Roberson, 31 August 1931.

## 29. Floyd Milling Company/Peter Dickerson Mill

**LOCATION:** East side of Route 8 (S Locust Street/Parkway Lane S), Town of Floyd, across from former Skyline Sportswear Building, currently (2010) Winter Sun/Sun Music Hall; **POWER:** Gas or diesel engine, then electric motors; **STONES:** Midget Marvel flour mill; **VISIBLE REMAINS:** None

*History.* Numerous small mills were built in Floyd County after 1920 to produce cornmeal and cattle feed using gasoline or electric power, but by the time these alternatives to water power were widely available and perceived to be reliable, flour milling was in decline. The Peter Dickerson Mill was one of only three Floyd County mills built expressly to make flour using a source of power other than falling water.\*

Millwright Joe Terry helped Peter Dickerson build this mill and may have worked there as well. Dickerson's choice of the Midget Marvel

Mill, a self-contained unit that combined cleaning, grinding, and sifting functions in a single machine, allowed for the use of a building not radically different from other industrial or commercial structures. As a result, the building was more easily converted to retail space after the mill closed than would have been the case with a traditional multi-story flour mill with all the attendant spouts, elevators, and shafting.

A restaurant is supposed to have operated in an attached building while the Dickerson mill was running. Posey Dickerson was living in the mill when it was sold to Albert P. Smith and Fred Sweeny in 1940. Afterward, Fred Sweeny ran a furniture store in the mill building for several years.

The two-story wood-frame building was covered with squares of patterned tin made to look like blocks of hewn stone. It stood very near to the street on the left as one drives south on Route 8/Locust Street, across from the brick

\*The Burdine Reed flour mill (III, 80) used a gasoline engine. Peter Hatcher intended to make flour at his steam-powered mill (I, 21) but the flour mill was never installed.