

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ST. VRAIN MILL

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The St. Vrain Mill in Mora, New Mexico was built in 1864 by Ceran St. Vrain. It is a stone structure and is the most dominant structure in Mora today. In 1972 the mill was added to the National Register of Historic Places and in 2002 it was added to the List of Ten Most Endangered Historical Places in New Mexico. The mill is located several hundred yards north of the original Mora Plaza and two hundred feet north of the Mora River. The stone structure of the mill is 50 feet by 40 feet. It is three stories high with the third story being wood siding. The stone for the mill is thought to have come from Watrous, New Mexico, a town about 30 miles east and 10 miles southeast of Fort Union. The mill stones were what was called French buhrstones and St. Vrain had purchased them in Wespoint , Kansas in 1850. Power was provided by water brought by a wooden trestle from the Mora River. The original wheel was likely wooden and built locally. The present wheel is metal.

There were likely several reasons for its construction. The demands for flour for nearby Ft. Union were large and increasing. Fort Union was established in 1851 and from 1863 to 1869 underwent significant rebuilding and expansion. During this period there were over two thousand people at the Fort. In 1864 the Army moved 6000 Navaho Indians to a Reservation about 150 miles southeast of Fort Union and the Army was responsible for their feeding. St. Vrain had the contract for their feeding. Fort Union had become the supply depot for the Southwest. Another mill owned by St Vrain near Rancho de Taos (60 miles to the west) had been destroyed by fire earlier in 1864. St. Vrain was now living in Mora; Mora was becoming a large grain growing area; and Ft. Union was only 15 miles to the east. Finally, he already had another mill operating in Mora.

Fort Union National Monument. Photo © sumikophoto/123rf.

In 1850 St. Vrain had obtained a contract to supply flour to Army posts in the Territory of New Mexico. In the same year he built his first mill in Mora. The exact location of this wooden mill is not known today, but it was likely very close to the present stone mill. Several references by travelers in 1853 mention the mill in Mora and Mora was quite small. The last mention of this wooden mill (el molino viejo) is 1877.

The construction of the stone mill is that of a double stone wall with rubble in between. Settling of the north wall has caused severe cracks (eight inches wide) in the east wall and the other walls have noticeable cracks. On the west wall some of the rock has fallen away from the upper second story. The interior is of post and beam construction and is very substantial. Above the front door are the remains of a loading platform. Apparently there was an opening in the platform for a wooden slide for sacks of flour to the waiting wagons below. Much of the interior woodwork needs to be replaced except for the main posts. Some of the wooden grain chutes still exist in the interior. Windows and doors are almost non-existent. The wood siding of the third floor and the roof need replacing. Most of the interior milling equipment existed until 1972 but was sold in the mid-1970's (It is said to be in the Los Lunas area south of Albuquerque and we are currently trying to locate it.)

St. Vrain died in 1870 and ownership of the mill passed to his sons Vicente and Felix. Perhaps Vicente acquired full ownership from Felix, because when Vicente died in 1877 mill ownership passed to Vicente's wife, Amelia. Shortly afterward, Amelia traded all her holdings in Mora to her brother William Rohman for land in Texas. In 1912 the mill was purchased by Frank Trambly and he operated the mill until his death in 1922. The mill was never operated after that. The mill remained in the Trambly family until 1990 when it was sold to Michael Montoya, the present owner.

The primary customer for the flour from the mill was Fort Union. Yearly contracts were at times in excess of 100,000 pounds and perhaps as high as 250,000 pounds. The price for the flour delivered to Fort Union varied approximately from 5 to 10 cents per pound. Two attempts

have been made to restore and preserve the mill. From 1976 to 1980 a Foundation was formed that did some cleanup and restoration, but serious efforts failed due to lack of a significant funding source. From 1990 to 1992 another restoration effort was undertaken. The efforts of this latter attempt were directed at the State Legislature to create a State Park with the mill as a centerpiece. After some initial interest, it failed for lack of funding.

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