

# Flour power

Great cities are often built along the confluence of rivers, or at the crossroads of modes of transportation, where water, rail or road come together to form a cohesive avenue for the movement of goods.



The Port's Past  
By Patrick Lapinski

The location of the Port of Duluth-Superior has always been just such a place. And that was certainly true in the bustling 1880s as the Port was energetically developing, receiving and shipping goods and growing via rail and water. In the 1800s the Port imported for survival and exported for subsistence while entrepreneurs looked for opportunities. The Port was fast becoming a key link in the supply chain of wheat flowing eastward from the heartland, with the shorter rail distance and deep water access combining to drive down transportation costs. Harnessing this potential could reap large dividends for a successful speculator.

The almost instantaneous access to high-grade spring wheat moving through the harbor became the catalyst for the growth of a highly successful flour milling industry at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Flour milling interests from New Ulm, Minn., were the first, seeking land and expansion in West Superior along Connor's Point. In 1882, the Lake Superior Roller Mill Company completed construction of its mill and began production of flour. However,

the mill had one significant problem that would plague it during the course of its existence – the lack of a deep water dock. Package freighters refused to enter the shallow water along the point, so the owners relied upon scows to ferry their flour barrels to docks in Duluth for loading. Even with this added expense, the mill, with a modest capacity of 200 barrels a day, proved that it could make a profit.

Duluth entered the flour milling industry in 1888 with the establishment of the Duluth Imperial Mill Company. The mill's founders, B.C. Church, a miller from Illinois, and R.S. Munger, one of Duluth's early entrepreneurs, aimed to compete directly against millers in Minneapolis, looking to usurp that city's position as the largest milling center in the world.

With an opening capacity of 1,500 barrels of flour per day, Imperial quickly expanded its output to 6,000 barrels a day within a few years. The Imperial Mill, considered an experiment when it was built, surpassed all expectations in October 1891, when the mill produced more than 8,000 barrels in a 24-hour period, "surpassing previous records of all other flour mills in the world." By the mid 1890s, the output of the Imperial Mill was exceeded only by the Pillsbury "A" Mill in Minneapolis.

Milling on the Wisconsin side of the harbor continued growing as well, soon surpassing Duluth in mills and capacity. The growth in Superior took place along the Hughitt Avenue slip in West Super-

rior and along the Quebec and Toledo piers on the eastern side of the city.

The Minkota Mill and the Grand Republic lined the west side of the Hughitt Avenue slip, on the site of today's Cenex-Harvest States elevator. On the east side stood the Freeman Mill, constructed in 1891. Proclaimed to be a "model flour factory," this mill stood six stories high and in the building process used an estimated 1.6 million bricks.

In the East End milling district, the Lake Superior Milling Company of Duluth constructed two large flour mills in close proximity to each other. The 3,500 bbl/day Listman Mill, featuring the Marvel brand of flour, opened for production along the Toledo pier and the Lake Superior Mill along the Quebec pier.

The Lake Superior Mill, with a production capacity of 6,000 bbl/day, rivaled the output of Duluth's Imperial Mill. The Lake Superior Mill had a large overseas market for its flour, exporting to Great Britain, Scotland and Holland with its "Perfecta" and "Wonder" brands. The Duluth Superior Milling Company, with offices in Duluth, as well as Buffalo, Philadelphia, New York and Boston, employed nearly 300 people.

Yet another mill, the Anchor, was sandwiched between the Listman and Lake Superior mills. The Anchor Mill was operated by interests from La Crosse, Wis., and featured the Anchor brand of flour. Figures for the port of Superior report the amount of flour shipped from its mills for the years 1890 - 1892 being in excess of 5 million barrels.

A natural volatility accompanied the rapid growth of the flour industry in the region. The meteoric rise peaked at the end of the century, when the Twin Ports became second only to Minneapolis as the leading flour producer in the world.



What soon followed was a precipitous drop in production, decimating milling at the head of the lakes. A number of factors combined to change the industry, beginning on the wheat fields of the Midwest.

On the supply side, farmers, seeing the price of wheat plummet as a result of overproduction, began growing less wheat. Diversification to other crops pushed millers to look outside of the state, to the Dakotas, Montana and Canada for wheat to mill.

On the transportation side, rail rates dropped as the railroads reached deeper into the wheat growing regions. Additionally, changes in rail tariffs, favorable for East Coast millers, neutralized the once beneficial low cost of water transportation on the Great Lakes, causing a shift away from Duluth-Superior and tipping the balance toward eastern cities like Buffalo.

Another noteworthy change was the consolidation of many Great Lakes and Northwest millers into one organization — the United States Flour Milling Company. United States Flour did not thrive as its investors had hoped and soon encountered financial difficulties. The instability that ensued led to the closing of a number of mills, including the Duluth Imperial Mill. The Imperial was sold to interests in Minneapolis, who in turn leased the building to several non-grain related companies before eventually selling the mill, along with its two storage elevators, to the Capitol Elevator Company of Duluth. The sale included a clause prohibiting, “in perpetuity,” any handling or production of flour.

Time and economics weren't the only factors leading to the demise of the Port's flour industry. Fire, the nemesis of all grain elevators, claimed its share of havoc in the harbor. In 1895, fire claimed

the Lake Superior Roller Mill, known at the time as Gill & Wright's mill, while threatening nearby sawmills and coal docks along Connor's Point.

The next big fire, on November 8, 1907, devastated the port of Superior, destroying all of the mills along the Hughitt Avenue slip. Efforts to contain the fire, originating in the Great Northern Elevator “A.” were futile. A strong

### **Grain — and flour —played a key role in the earliest development of the Twin Ports**

westerly wind carried balls of flame over the roofs of the adjacent Globe Elevator, directly toward the flour mills. Against the night sky the flames made spectacular shapes as they devoured everything in their path before finally exhausting their fuel supply. By morning all that remained were smoldering piles of grain and the charred ruins of the Freeman, Grand Republic and Minkota mills.

Production in Duluth and Superior was reduced to a few mills, relying on a well established regional bakery market and their hard-earned overseas trade in Europe and Central America to sustain their operations. As the Port grew, it too began to diversify, exporting goods and products like lumber, iron ore and fish, while continuing to be a world leader in the handling of grain, a commodity for which the port is still internationally recognized.

The last functioning mill in Duluth was the Duluth Universal Milling Company, established in 1900. Universal operated into the 1950s before succumbing to tough economic forces that led to an end of production. From its warehouse doors Universal Milling continued delivering its flour, even though wooden

barrels had changed to stitched bags and trucks and trains had replaced the package freighters.

Through these same warehouse doors the workers watched their city changing, struggling through the Great Depression, sliding the doors shut when wartime ship launchings at Marine Iron threatened to flood their warehouse floor. But in the 1950s, when shipping flour went to bulk loading in large tankers, the cost was too prohibitive for Universal to upgrade its equipment. In 1957, Universal Milling closed its warehouse doors for the last time.

In Superior, the Peavey Company was still milling flour at its King Midas Mill on the city's east side. When Peavey purchased the mill in 1938 from Standard Milling it moved its durum wheat operation from Hastings, Minn., to Superior, milling durum wheat flour used in macaroni and spaghetti. The opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway sparked a brief new in the bulk shipment of flour, but it never really amounted to much. In 1970, Peavey moved its durum operation back to a new mill in Hastings, and flour milling came to an end in the Twin Ports.

During its boom, flour milling was instrumental in putting Duluth-Superior in the world spotlight, helping establish the Port as a known trading and export center, at a time when the region itself was barely settled.

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