

Siler City Mills ~ The Twilight Years 1976-1988

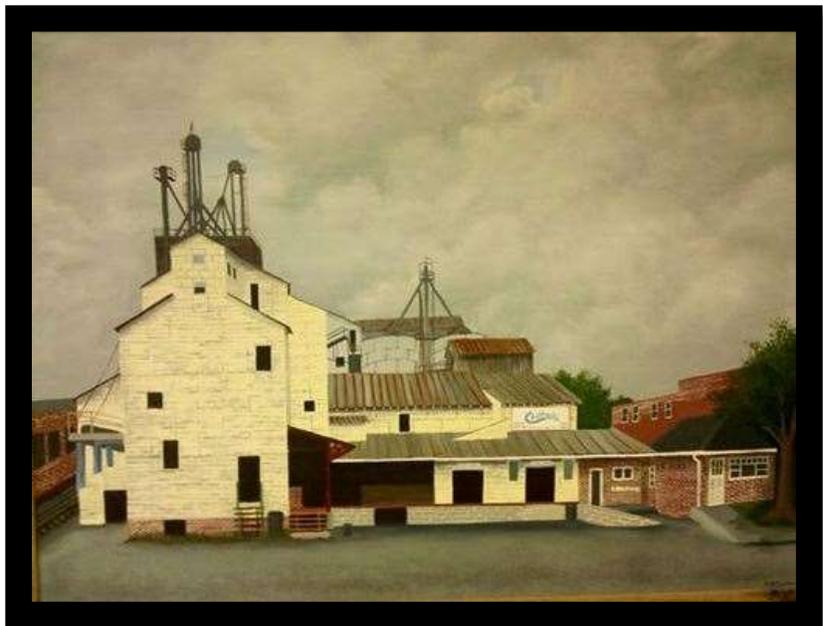
by Jerry Stone
May 2019

Having seen several of Jerry Stone's posts about Siler City Mills on a Facebook page devoted to sharing information about people and history in western Chatham, we requested that he provide a longer, more-detailed version of his memories here. We are grateful for his contribution, which captures much about the people, process and products of Siler City Mills (editor).

The in-depth commentary that follows is for those who may not know some of the stellar history or notable contribution that Siler City Mills made to our community, North Carolina and the MidAtlantic/Southeastern-US marketing area. I write as a past sales representative of Siler City Mills, where I worked from January, 1976 thru August, 1988, or for the final 12 years of the company's 78-year distinguished life span. I am not, by any means, a professional historian, writer or journalist. Neither do I profess to know every date and detail of this very important subject. I am a retired, local resident whose life and immediate family were very positively impacted by this fine, old Southern corporation during its twilight years, as were the lives of many generations of local employees, and their families, for 78 years of the 20th Century.

Early Days of the Mill ~ Thru the 1940s

In 1892, Mr. Lossing (Loss) Lafayette Wren began work for Dr. JD Edwards' Drug Store, located at the corner of West Raleigh Street and South Birch Avenue, in Siler City, NC. He bought half interest in the local drug store, with Mr. George Smith, in 1896. The drug store moved up to the corner of South Chatham Avenue and West Raleigh Street where it began operating as the Siler City Drug Store in 1906. It changed ownership several times until it was sold to Dr. Frank Brooks in 1922. The Brooks family operated Siler



Painting of Siler City Mills. Courtesy of Mark McKeown.
Painted by G. L. Conken in 1987.

City Drug continuously for the next 60 years. Meanwhile, Loss Wren had other business and personal interests around town. He became Vice President of the Chatham Bank in 1902, was Post Master in 1901 and again in 1932, and served as Mayor of Siler City from 1913-1915.

Mr. Wren founded Siler City Milling Company in 1910. That company occupied a building on the south side of West 3rd Street, just east of the railroad, and operated as a roller flour and cornmeal mill that marketed "Chatham Lilly" and "Queen's Choice" flour retail brands, with an original production capacity of 50 barrels per day. In 1921, the Siler City Milling Company merged with the Electric Milling Company, which was located on the north side of West 2nd Street, just east of the railroad, and which made the retail brand, "Chatham Rabbit Flour," to form Siler City Mills, Inc. that would be in continuous business until 1986.¹ The Electric Milling Company had been the first roller flour mill to become powered by a 35 horsepower electric motor.

As founder, owner and grand-patron of Siler City Mills, Loss was indeed a once-in-a-lifetime local visionary who realized the value of providing the local farmers a mill where they could bring their wheat and corn to be milled or ground into flour and cornmeal to feed their families and to sell their crops for financial benefit. The flour milling operation, led by the best wheat and grain millers available, like Mr. Peter Beane, evolved into a memorable retail branded manufacturer of Chatham Lilly Flour that was sold in grocery stores throughout North Carolina and the Southeast. Mr. Beane, who joined the company around 1910, was a respected and experienced flour miller and was eventually named president of the company until his retirement in 1939 due to declining health. The branded flour production and sales flourished well into the 1950s.

By-products of the wheat-milling process to produce flour, called wheat shorts or midds, came to be used in the manufacture of animal feeds by Siler City Mills in the 1920s and were also sold to other animal feed manufacturers. A new Vice President of Nutrition, Clyde L. Fore, helped develop these new products that were first hand mixed with vitamins and minerals on the mill floor. These new complete feeds were the beginning of a new era for the company. Horse and mule feed, also made with bran and molasses, became big items in this new line of products, as all road construction and farm work were done with horse and mule power in those days.

Mr. Fore's devotion and vision also helped Mr. Wren develop contract growing of broiler chickens in partnership with local poultry farmers. Their corporate foresight to become a pioneer in the famed North Carolina poultry industry, as a poultry breeder/hatchery operator, contract distributor and poultry feed manufacturer, helped nourish Siler City Mills through the dark days of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

A separate company, Chatham Poultry Farms, Inc., was formed in 1942 to finance the broiler operation. Mr. Lafayette Wrenn, (no relation to L.L. Wren) eventually became the director of Chatham Poultry Farms.

Siler City Mills also owned a poultry feed manufacturing plant in Shelby, NC. The Shelby Milling Division, managed by Mr. Charles Jackson, had 100,000 layer-hens

contracted with local layer farms. Chatham Animal Feeds and Pet Food were also sold and distributed by the Shelby Milling Division into the 1970s.

The Boom Years ~ 50s thru the 80s

William M. (Bill) Wren joined his father, Loss, at Siler City Mills after attending the University of Alabama and serving in the US Naval Reserve as a Lieutenant Commander during World War II. He assumed management of the company with new ideas and energy which led to the remodeling of the mill in 1951-52 that doubled the previous manufacturing capacity. Upon Mr. L.L. Wren's death in 1954, Bill became the company President and assembled a talented and dedicated team to assist him with twenty years of prosperous growth to follow.

Mr. James L. Sheppard was brought on as the Plant Superintendent of the newly expanded mill in 1952. Mr. Paul Smith, the Mayor of Liberty, NC, became Sales Manager in 1948. Mr. Lanier C. (Buck) Howell, educated at Clemson and Oklahoma State, was hired as the company Nutritionist. Mr. Ray F. Swain, a lawyer, became Secretary-Treasurer in 1954 and eventually served as General Manager from 1964-1974. All of these managers helped blaze the trail for Siler City Mills' branded Chatham Animal Feed and Pet Food products within the NC and US wholesale grocery and chain store food industry, as well as the Southeastern Agricultural Feed and Seed Industry.

On October 1, 1974, a new Siler City Mills, Inc. corporation was established with William (Bill) Wren as Chairman of the Board. Bill Wren prided himself on surrounding the company with top management and manufacturing professionals. He hired a new company President and General Manager, Mr. Dennis Sawyer, to whom he sold stock in the burgeoning company. Mr. Sawyer, a lawyer, had management experience as a Vice-President for the Jim Dandy (Pet Food and Animal Feed) Company of Birmingham, Alabama, for 15 years. He had also served as the General Manager of the Wells Division of the National Pet Food Company in Monmouth, Illinois for a few years prior to joining Siler City Mills. He brought with him my mentor, Mr. Ralph Faulkner as Sales Manager and Mr. Don Luddington as Plant Production Manager, both from Wells. Mr. Buford Barrows was already in place as the Vice-President of Nutrition and Purchasing Manager. Mr. William (Bill) McKeown, CPA, Executive Vice-President and Secretary, had also already been at Siler City Mills for a few years in charge of accounting and finance.

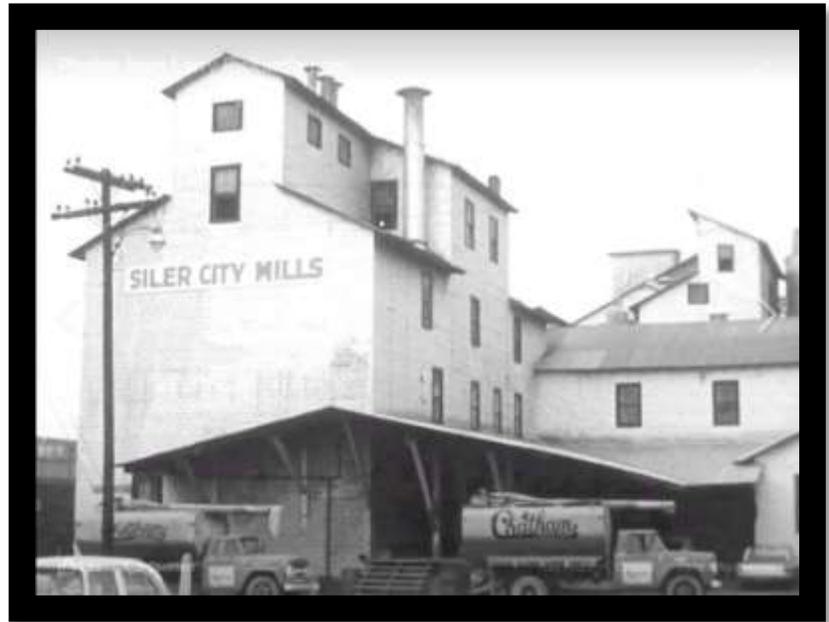
Plans were soon completed to construct a new expanded-pet-food manufacturing center within the existing mill structure where the old flour mill had been located. The original Chatham Dog Food brand and the new branded, expanded Chatham Chunx Dog Food products, along with a new Champ Dog Food label, soon gained a large percentage of the total dry dog food sales in North Carolina in the late 70s.

Champ Dog Food, a lower-priced, more competitive product, made with a lower protein and fat content, was added to the company's extensive line of products in the mid-70s. Champ was named after a very popular company-owned wholesale and retail animal

feed and pet food warehouse and distribution center, Champion Milling Company, located in the eastern NC town of Dunn. This very profitable Siler City Mills operation was led by the memorable and honorable Mr. H. C. Warren, who conducted all sales either directly to area farms or to local, rural mom and pop stores. Mr. Baird Paschal, a Siler City native, worked very closely with H.C. as the receiving and shipping manager for Champion Milling for many years.

Upon the invention of pellet mills, they had been added to the company manufacturing base for the production of all types of Chatham farm animal feeds, including a new product, Chatham Dog

Food. Siler City Mills had recently purchased the trademark and ingredients formula for a very popular dry Graino Dog Food, whose factory had burned in Greensboro, NC, and began making and packing their own new dry Graino/Chatham Dog Food in the mid-50s. The old Graino name was gradually eliminated from the bags and packaging, as the new Chatham brand of dry dog food experienced solid, substantial sales growth.



Siler City Mills. Photo courtesy of Larry Pickard.

All these products were distributed to country stores, feed/seed dealers and grocery stores throughout the MidAtlantic and Southeastern US. The national popularity of feeding dry dog food to pets and working/hunting dogs exploded in the 1950s with Ralston-Purina's Expanded Dog Chow that was "shot from guns," or made on newly developed expander machines for the feed and pet food industries.

There were a couple of large elevators inside the mill for moving pallets of supplies, bags or some finished product from one of the four floors to another. There was a rather tricky individual elevating apparatus that consisted of a conveyor belt running perpendicular through an opening in each floor. There were steps attached to the belt about a foot apart onto which you stood and also held onto as you traveled up and through each floor. Once you cleared the hole in each floor, you could either step off, if you had reached your destination, or continue on up. You could then walk around to the other side of the belt and follow the same procedure down. While the old mill was first built in 1910, it had been modified many times as new products and their requirements

were added. However, the mill continued to use the laws of gravity for as long as it was in operation.

All of the grain and soybeans that were not bought from local farmers were shipped to the mill, by both rail and truck, from the vast corn, wheat and soybean fields of the great Midwestern US. The company owned a 50,000-bushel capacity grain storage elevator at Clinton Grains in Clinton, NC. All meat and fish meal were bought from Southeastern meat packing and coastal seafood processing plants, along with chicken fat from poultry rendering plants in the area. These were generally shipped or picked up by truck. All grain, meal and fat ingredients were stored in large metal bins or vats outside where augers in metal tubes pulled the products to the mixing rooms on the top or fourth floor where they were mixed with minerals, nutrients, and medication, depending on the particular product's formula, and then dropped into various holding bins, on the third floor, that fed the pellet mills. The pellet mills, also on the third floor, compressed the mixed ingredients into small cylinder-shaped pellets. Corn kibbles purchased from other manufacturers were added to the Chatham Dog Food formula until the new expanded plant was built in the mid-70s. The company then began to make their own corn kibbles for use in their Chatham products and the kibbles were also sold to other pet food manufacturers.

The various finished pelleted products were dropped and stored in additional holding bins on the second floor, stationed near or right over the packaging process where the different bags were placed on a conveyor belt and filled with the pelleted product before



Line workers at Siler City Mills. Probably 1960s.
Photo courtesy of Jeff Davis.

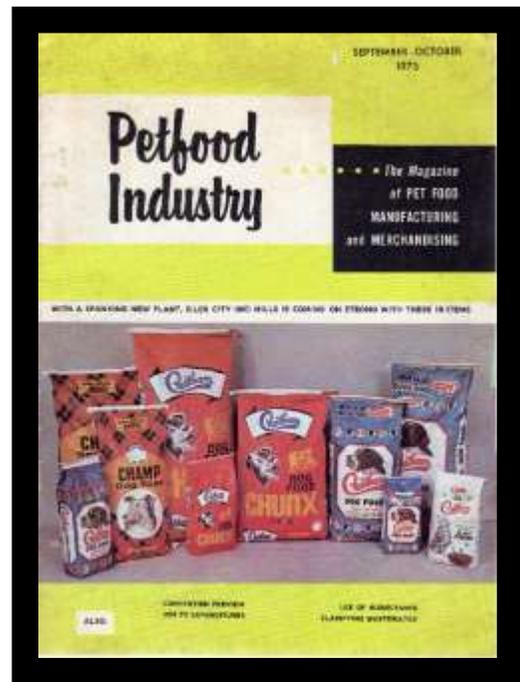
being run through a sewing machine to seal the top of the bag for shipping. Most sewn bags of products were sent from the second story packaging floor down wooden shoots or troughs, worn smooth by daily use for over 75 years, to a palletization staging area on the main, lower first floor to be loaded onto trucks for delivery or to be picked up.

The picture, above, of Siler City Mills employees, operating the 50lb. bagging line, was probably made in the 1960s or 70s. Those 50lb. bags of assorted animal and dog food items were either discontinued or downsized in the early 80s. Before that, small 5,000-10,000 lb. shipments of those 50 lb. bags of assorted products were made on short trucks, not tractor trailer trucks, which were the average size orders for the independent

retail feed/seed dealers who wanted these direct deliveries made to their locations. In the late 70s, 50-40lb. bags of dry dog food began to experience steady, increased growth in retail grocery supermarkets, such as Ingle's in the Asheville area and Wilson's in the Wilmington area, as independent feed and seed dealers began to decline in number.

The conversion of the old four-floor flour mill, on the southeastern corner of the mill, to become the new expanded-pet-food production center was ram-rodged by Plant Superintendent James L. Sheppard (Shep), for whom the new million-dollar investment was named in 1974. All four floors of the old flour mill were metal-plated for strength and stability. Ingredient bins were installed and supplied by elevator conveyors bringing raw materials to the fourth-floor mixing room. Two Anderson extruders, or expanders, were added to the third-floor cooking area that fed the cooked or expanded products into Aeroglide dryers beneath on the second floor. The expander machine was a cylindrical-shaped tube or pressure cooker filled with a mixture of ingredients, minerals, medication and nutrients, that were pressure- or steam-cooked and then extruded through dyes of different shapes and sizes on the end of the expander, before being dropped onto conveyor belts and fed into the huge dryer below.

When dry, the finished expanded products were augered over to various holding bins on the second-floor packaging area of the old side of the mil, ready to be packaged or bagged for shipment. Crunchy round nuggets or kibbles, made with meat meal, corn, wheat and soybean meal of varying size and protein content, sprayed or coated with chicken fat to enhance the flavor and palatability of the product, were produced for consumption by most canine of different ages or nutrient requirements. The smaller, expanded star shaped pieces of cat food, made with fish meal and some grain or soy, that could be picked up by the little mouth of a kitten or cats, generally had a much higher consistency of chicken fat and protein because a feline didn't eat nearly as much or as often as dogs. The new kibbled dry dog food and cat food were the type of products, more similar to the national Purina brands, that put the Chatham brands on



Petfood Industry Sept-Oct 1975
Highlighted the growth of Siler City Mills -- "With a Spanking New Plant, Siler City (NC) Mills Is Coming on Strong with These 10 Items." Courtesy of Jerry Stone.

the map from New York to Florida, the Deep South and west to Kentucky, Indiana, Ohio and all markets in between.

Another Siler City Mills Pet Food manufacturing plant was bought and remodeled in Shelbyville, TN, near Nashville, managed by Mr. Roy McCollum, and later by Mr. Anthony Steed. Siler City Mills also purchased Mohawk Milling Company, a flour mill/corn meal manufacturer in Newport, TN, near Knoxville, in the late 70s to early 80s, that was completely refurbished and updated by their new Plant Manager, Anthony Steed. These new plants were in addition to a couple of smaller pet food plants, Acme Milling in Burlington and Watson Milling in Taylorsville, NC, previously acquired by Siler City Mills. Mr. Ed Outland managed the production at Acme Milling before returning to the home mill in Siler City as the Plant Production Superintendent in the mid-80s.

The implementation of the expander cooking/drying process for pet food also opened the door for the manufacture and sale of Chatham Floating Fish Food for the exciting and ever-increasing commercial, home-grown catfish ponds that had recently become a new agricultural endeavor in the Southeastern US in the 70s. This newly formulated product was generally sold thru feed/seed dealers or directly to catfish farms large enough to buy 5,000 to 10,000-pound shipments of 50lb bags of the product. The fish food nuggets were dumped into the individual ponds where it floated on top of the water, until a few hundred catfish would surface and feed upon the product--which was quite a sight to behold!

In the 1980s, these small shipments of 5,000-10,000 lbs. became prohibitive due to increased delivery costs, propelled by higher-priced gas. A growing number of smaller "Mom & Pop" feed and grocery stores, who were the principal points of distribution for those items, succumbed to the decreased per-item margin of profit taken by larger chain feed/grocery and, especially, big-box stores, like Walmart. The decline of small family farms, who were the main consumers of those items, also heavily contributed to the slow death of those 50 lb. products over the years.

Three 8-hour work shifts were required to satisfy the production, packaging and shipments of the company, from the mid-70s to the mid-80s, with a combination of approximately 100 production and shipping workers, some with 30+ years faithful service, assorted among those three shifts Monday thru Friday each week and some on weekends.

Mrs. Louise Adcock, Customer Service Manager, a 26-year veteran, was in charge of the mammoth shipping and delivery schedule required to distribute approximately 80,000 tons of finished product, both private label and branded, annually, at the company's pinnacle of sales distribution in the early- to mid-80s. Mrs. Adcock commanded a delivery force of twenty drivers, being shifted among thirty or so tractor/trailer transfer trucks, pulling a multiple of 100+ hauling trailers at different times, to get the job done efficiently and on time. In addition to direct delivery of purchase orders, customer pick-up of orders was encouraged for an additional invoice discount, which was very appealing to Food Lion, Lowe's Foods and Byrd's Food Stores after

making deliveries to their local stores in the Siler City area. There was a corporate office staff of a dozen or so ladies assisting accounting, purchasing, production, shipping, sales and their respective managers. Mrs. Nancy Harris, another 30+-year career veteran employee, was the company receptionist and personal secretary for Mr. William M. (Bill) Wren and the Wren Foundation. Mr. David Vestal, a 30+-year veteran employee was the auto and maintenance shop manager, responsible for keeping all of the trucks, company cars, and equipment up and running efficiently in support of the ever-growing Siler City Mills.

Mr. Bill Wren shared with me the architectural drawings of a very impressive new mill that he had wanted to build on land that he owned, south of town, where old Hwy. 421 South branched off to the right by the railroad tracks as you were going toward Mt. Vernon Springs and Bonlee. However, his top management persuaded him to purchase and remodel some mills already in existence in Tennessee that they thought were better geographically located to accommodate the sales expansion that they desired.

The Mill Closes

The phenomenal growth and sales distribution, aided by a network of food-brokerage sales organizations and a direct sales force of six Regional Sales Managers, located throughout the company's sales domain (that I led, as Sales Manager of Grocery Products, upon the untimely death of Mr. Faulkner in 1983), remained strong until the late 1980s. Mr. Ted Wortman was Sales Manager of the Feed Division and Private Label Feed Sales. In the late 1980s the cost of ingredients to the manufacturer, particularly corn, skyrocketed. This was partially due to the introduction of corn ethanol for use in gasoline as 40% of the US corn crop is now used for corn ethanol production. Competitive brands of dry pet food, like Chatham, became impossible to manufacture with nearly as much profit as before.

The company President, Mr. Sawyer, left in 1984 and the owner, Mr. Bill Wren, then in his 80s, sold the physical plants and the trademarks to a group of investors in 1986, who formed Chatham Industries, Inc., but were not successful long term. The result was the eventual sale of the Chatham trademarks to our number-one competitor, Sunshine Mills of Red Bay, Alabama (makers of Field Trial Dog Food), in 1988, whom I joined as a Regional Sales Manager of the Chatham Pet Food products with an office in Siler City for the next 10 years. The Siler City Mill structure deteriorated and finally burned in 1990.

The Chatham brand is no longer in existence and lies dormant among many other regional brands of pet food that Walmart's private label brand, Ol'Roy, and other



Siler City Mills destroyed by fire, 1990. Photo from *The Chatham News*. Contributed by Mindy Brown.

retailer's private label brands have replaced in the marketplace. The Siler City Mills Chatham brands of flour, animal feeds and pet food provided the welfare and well-being of hundreds of families for 78 years and played a key role in the history of our community.

The Wren Family's contribution to our community began around the turn of the 20th century, with Loss Wren, an industrial/civic giant and pillar of the First Baptist Church, behind which he and his family lived for many illustrious years. The contributions of Bill Wren and his lovely wife, Marion, include their

generous gift that led to the construction of the local and treasured Wren Memorial Library in 1969. The Wren family's impact on Siler City has been graciously extended by the many donations of the Wren Foundation, headed by Margaret Wren De St. Aubin, to current community needs such as the new Siler City Aquatic Center. Siler City owes a great deal of gratitude to them as they will be forever remembered as one of the founding and most supportive families of our fair city.

Link to booklet [The First 75 Years of Siler City Mills](#).

Link to article in *Petfood Industry* Sept-Oct 1975, "[With a Spanking New Plant, Siler City \(NC\) Mills Is Coming on Strong with These 10 Items.](#)"

ⁱ Information on the early years of the mill from Wade Hadley, *Siler City North Carolina, 1887-1987*.