APPENDIX A

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH HARRY ISAACS, JR.

Interview with Harry Issacs, Jr.

Near Reynolds Mill, Sussex County, DE
May 5, 2005
Interviewed by Chris Espenshade (Skelly and Loy, Inc.)

ESPENSHADE: When did the mill out there burn, the last mill?

MR. ISAACS: Some time in the 70s.

ESPENSHADE: Do you know, was it kids messing around?

MR. ISAACS: Threw a Molotov cocktail against it.

ESPENSHADE: Just to see it burn, right?

MR. ISAACS: Yes.

ESPENSHADE: And it had been out of operation . . . when was the last it was actually used?

MR. ISAACS: Early 50s.

ESPENSHADE: Who was the last miller? Do you know the last person to run it?

MR. ISAACS: My grandfather. He didn't actually make flour. The last one to do that was Fred Jensen. He (Isaacs) used it to grind corn and stuff for chicken feed.

ESPENSHADE: Do you know when the flour-making would have stopped then?

MR. ISAACS: No.

ESPENSHADE: So, he (your grandfather) was just basically cracking corn?

MR. ISAACS: Right.

ESPENSHADE: Now Gerry, he was doing some deed work or something, and I guess he had two different dates for the year your grandfather died. Was it 1951?

MR. ISAACS: 50.

ESPENSHADE: This Fred Jensen, did he live in the old Ponder tenant house?

MR. ISAACS: There used to be a house right beside the mill. It burned down, also.

ESPENSHADE: At the same time (as the mill)?

MR. ISAACS: No, probably back in the 50s. I won't tell you how it burned down.

ESPENSHADE: Gerry may have come across a story on that.

MR. ISAACS: Well, I tell you (glancing at tape recorder) . . .

ESPENSHADE: That's the kind of thing I sometimes just leave names out. I don't want to get somebody in trouble, with slander or something.

MR. ISAACS: I can tell you. Man had a still in there. Caught fire.

ESPENSHADE: Do people call this pond . . . does everybody call it the same thing? Do some call it Isaacs, or . . .

MR. ISAACS: Mostly Reynolds. Reynolds or Jensen. But on all the maps it is Reynolds.

ESPENSHADE: Have you ever heard of there being two mills out here?

MR. ISAACS: Not right here. There used to be another mill on 212.

ESPENSHADE: No. On this pond. Where the pipe is on the far end there.

MR. ISAACS: That was just an overflow pipe.

ESPENSHADE: Okay. There are some places in the tax records – nineteenth century – talks about grist and saw mills. But lots of times that was one building. They're switching a belt to drive a saw mill. But it is not really clear if it was two separate buildings or not.

Have you ever heard any stories of the dam being damaged? You know, a big flood taking out part of the dam, or anything like that?

MR. ISAACS: No.

ESPENSHADE: The last mill, was it turbine-powered, I assume? What drove the last mill?

MR. ISAACS: Water wheel.

ESPENSHADE: Was it an undershot wheel, or was it actually a turbine?

MR. ISAACS: You got me.

ESPENSHADE: Okay. Let's see, I've got these drawings. This is the flume, looking down. The two walls, the center pillar, where the gates used to be. The road is over here. It's got this round pit; the turbine would have set right down on top of that.

MR. ISAACS: Yes.

ESPENSHADE: It's what they call a turbine. It is just a type of water wheel. You don't know anything about how powerful it was, horsepower, or anything like that?

MR. ISAACS: No.

ESPENSHADE: Do you know how long they could run it before they had to start worrying about the pond getting low?

MR. ISAACS: No.

ESPENSHADE: The gristmill, going back to Mr. Jensen and earlier times, how big of an area do you think it serviced? Was it pretty close? I know that there were a lot of mill ponds, throughout Sussex County. Was it a pretty tight community that came in here?

MR. ISAACS: Yes. Years ago there was another mill on 212 over there. There was a mill on Waples Pond. There was a mill on Cedar Creek Pond.

ESPENSHADE: (unfolding map) This is Sussex County. Just from historic mapping, all the purples . . . we're right here . . . all the purple marks are where historically there was a mill. Cubbage. Cedar Creek. The mill is still up there.

MR. ISAACS: My grandfather owned that one, too. He owned Waples, too.

ESPENSHADE: I didn't know that.

MR. ISAACS: That's his daughter that owns it now. Cedar Creek.

ESPENSHADE: So, he was in competition with himself?

MR. ISAACS: She inherited it. It went with the farms when he bought them.

ESPENSHADE: At one point, he had thousands and thousands of acres?

MR. ISAACS: 10,000. He was the world's largest producer of lima beans and owned the world's largest poultry processing plant, at one time.

ESPENSHADE: Do you have any photos of the old mill?

MR. ISAACS: I do, up to my house.

ESPENSHADE: Maybe we could borrow them or look at them at some point . . .

MR. ISAACS: I'll show it to you. The only photo I've ever seen of it.

ESPENSHADE: That'd be great. I might even be able to take a picture of the picture. Sometimes that comes out. At least I can do a sketch of it.

This is kind of jumping subjects, but down there where we have been digging . . . back over here . . . there is that cut that comes in there. Was that for irrigation or to get logs out of the swamp? Do you know why?

MR. ISAACS: Where do you mean? The water? Water comes in from the stream?

ESPENSHADE: Yes.

MR. ISAACS: We did that years ago for cattle. Irrigation, whatever we wanted. We dug that in from the stream.

ESPENSHADE: When about would that have been?

MR. ISAACS: Probably in the 50s.

ESPENSHADE: That's good. I was telling somebody "that's not natural."

(returning to mill drawing) Out here, here's where the flume survives. And to one side here there is this concrete foundation or pier . . .

MR. ISAACS: It was for the generator.

ESPENSHADE: The generator?

MR. ISAACS: In later years.

ESPENSHADE: So, it would have set outside the mill?

MR. ISAACS: Yes.

ESPENSHADE: It's not quite oriented right with the mill.

Now, you were, as I understand it, responsible for the flood control gates. Do you remember when that whole program was established? When they first came to you and said . . . I don't know what the proper term is . . .

MR. ISAACS: They never. We just always . . . we owned the gates. So every time we have excess water, we just pull a gate.

ESPENSHADE: I was under the mis-impression that there was an official state program. So they didn't give you any training or . . . they just count on you?

MR. ISAACS: Yes.

ESPENSHADE: Do you have any idea through the years how often you have had to open them?

MR. ISAACS: It depends on the weather. Some years, 5 or 6 times. Some years, only one.

ESPENSHADE: I saw some folks putting boats in down there this afternoon. Do you get a lot of recreational use?

MR. ISAACS: Yes.

ESPENSHADE: And, that is not an official boat ramp?

MR. ISAACS: No, it is my boat ramp.

ESPENSHADE: I didn't see any signs. It didn't look like a state . . .

MR. ISAACS: I own the entire pond.

ESPENSHADE: Historically, has it been . . . get a lot of recreation use? Fishing, swimming?

MR. ISAACS: No (to swimming).

ESPENSHADE: Mostly fishing?

MR. ISAACS: Fishing. Years ago, ice skating.

ESPENSHADE: Do you stock it for fishing?

MR. ISAACS: No.

ESPENSHADE: I was up at the little store . . .

MR. ISAACS: Cedar Creek?

ESPENSHADE: Yes, I guess that was Cedar Creek, and his doorway there is impressive (covered with pictures of local fisherman and their catches). Seems like every pond has big bass coming out of them.

When we look at the old maps, this seems like a pretty tight community. A school. A church. A mill serving the community. But sometimes that can be misleading. Was there a sense that this was a defined community, almost like a town here?

MR. ISAACS: I don't think so. I mean, you have to remember that back then there was a schoolhouse every 3, 4 miles. You walked to school. If you wanted to define it as a tight-knit community, yes, everybody in a certain neighborhood went to that school, probably went to that church, and probably used the mill, but it wasn't considered a town.

ESPENSHADE: I noticed Isaacs, there are no Isaacs in the cemetery over there (the Reynolds Church cemetery). Do you have a family plot somewhere?

MR. ISAACS: Milford.

ESPENSHADE: Was that your grand-dad's main residence?

MR. ISAACS: Well that's where he started out. And then he moved up here in his later years. He just bought a plot up there for the family.

ESPENSHADE: Do you know the deepest point in the pond, how deep it is?

MR. ISAACS: Roughly six foot. Six or seven feet.

ESPENSHADE: Other than these basic questions, do you have any particular memories of mill . . .

MR. ISAACS: Well, I remember it.

ESPENSHADE: Maybe under the heading of neat stories?

MR. ISAACS: No,

ESPENSHADE: Was it fairly busy? Was it seasonal?

MR. ISAACS: I don't know. That was back when . . . before my time or when I was so young I didn't care.

ESPENSHADE: The side with the hunt club down there, aside from the tenant house that burned, there was any other house on that side?

MR. ISAACS: No. It wasn't a tenant house. The guy that owned the house owned the mill. That's where he lived. Fred Jensen.

Now you talk about recreational use, back in his days, he used to rent boats to people from Pennsylvania, and, a room in his house. You know, they'd come down and stay overnight and fish.

ESPENSHADE: That long dock that reaches out in the lake?

MR. ISAACS: I put that there. I had a fish farm.

ESPENSHADE: Okay, somebody had asked me that at one point, "out at the fish farm?"

This is sort of a strange question, but when we were digging down there, we found what looks like . . . we won't know for sure until my wife, a bone expert, looks at it . . . horse or pony.

MR. ISAACS: Cow?

ESPENSHADE: Might be a calf. Did you guys bury stuff over there?

MR. ISAACS: We had cows back there, used to pasture there.

ESPENSHADE: This thing was intentionally buried, maybe three feet deep.

MR. ISAACS: It could have been one that something happened to and died, just took a backhoe and buried it.

ESPENSHADE: Had me worried at first. Pulled up here, and they told me "we've got some bone in the bottom of this one place." I don't want to hear that. If its Indian bones, I don't want to hear about it (I hope we don't hit burials). I made them dig the rest of it, and got the skull with the big long teeth.

MR. ISAACS: Probably a cow.

ESPENSHADE: That would make sense then.

I think I asked you, but I forget now, how long has the hunt club been out there?

MR. ISAACS: Probably 10 years, give or take.

ESPENSHADE: And you moved that house in there (to serve as the hunt club)?

MR. ISAACS: We moved it in. Came from Rehoboth. We built a room on it.

ESPENSHADE: That's something we noticed, the more we work in Sussex County. People will move a house (snap fingers) and not even think about it. It's much more extreme than you find anywhere else. Gerry, starts dealing with these houses, and he's gotten to asking really quick "this house always been here?"

MR. ISAACS: Yes, he did me on this corner up here.

ESPENSHADE: The house looks old, but it doesn't show up on the maps. What's going on? I think I've got everything covered. At some point if it is convenient, I'd like to see the photo.

MR. ISAACS: I'll go get it now, or you can ride up there with me.

ESPENSHADE: Either way.

Do you want to keep this tape (or can we use it)?

MR. ISAACS: Aw, I don't care.

ESPENSHADE: Thank you.

End of Tape