

Water, Stones, and Grits

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As we continue our explorations of our Barnwell County heritage, today it will include geography, history, science, technology, and even food.

First the geography: In the past and even today, there are many places, roads, and communities that have “mill” or “pond” in their name, along with family names. These are remnants of a significant part of our heritage--the water powered mills to grind corn into grits and meal, a staple in most family diets. These were located throughout Barnwell County to serve the individual communities, often within horseback or mule and wagon range of as many farms as possible. Before taking corn to the mill the grains were removed from the cob. This was with a hand-operated sheller. Every farm had one.

In the past, and especially when we were a more rural community, corn was grown on all farms. It was a major source of food for both humans and livestock; the hogs and beef for meat and the cows for milking. For many years grits and cornmeal were a substantial part of family diets for several meals each day. A major factor was that corn was raised locally and was among the least expensive and most available food sources in the form of grits and meal for cornbread. Both are ground corn; the difference is how fine they are ground. Corn meal is more of a powder and grits are grainier. The word "grits" is derived from the Old English word *grytt*, meaning "coarse meal."

Corn based food, including grits, was introduced to the early settlers by the Native Americans because corn was native to the Americas. Grits have transitioned from what was once a survival food in the South to a food now enjoyed in several forms available in many areas of the country, even in New York and other northern states. The Shrimp and Grits meal that originated in the coastal area of South Carolina is a favorite.

Today when we purchase grits we have a choice including instant, quick, regular, or “real grits.” What I consider as real grits carry the label of either “stone-ground” or “water-ground.” This was the type of grits that was produced in Barnwell County for generations. They were ground from corn in local mills with large rotating stones that used water as the source of power.

Using stones for grinding grains is probably almost as old as the human race when grains were crushed by hand with small stones. Mills consisting of pairs of stones, one rotating against the other, have a long history extending back into the BC era.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millstone> .

The stones used for centuries and in our Barnwell County mills had a very specific design. They were two large stones with a pattern of grooves cut into them with chisels; some mills had more complex designs than others. The grooves provided the edges for crushing the corn and also moved the grits or meal out to the edges and into a container. The space between the stones was adjusted to select either meal or grits. Periodically the mill was taken apart and the grooves recut because of the wear from the stones rotating against each other. This was done with a hammer and chisel and known as sharpening the stones.

Geographically Barnwell County is relatively flat with a network of streams and creeks. These were dammed up to form the mill ponds. We sometimes see pictures of the large waterwheels used in some other parts of the country that were powered by the weight of the falling water that depended on a difference in elevation. But the Barnwell County mills generally used a type of turbine powered by the rapidly flowing water released from the pond into the raceway.

The ponds along with some of the larger ones known as lakes were the favorite fishing places in the community. Some were also used for baptisms by some of the churches.

Now for exploring Barnwell County: as you have an opportunity to drive around and perhaps use a GPS, how many roads can you find that include the names *mill*, *pond*, or *lake*. Two that we will no longer find traces of are Kennedy Mill and Corley Mill. Both were operating up until the time they were destroyed for the construction of the Savannah River Project in the early 1950s.

Grits are a major part of our heritage that combine contributions of corn by the Native Americans, stone grinding methods from the Old World, and the agricultural lifestyle of our past generations.