FILM REVIEWS


Reviewed by Annette Fromm

Grist Miller is a film which acquaints its viewers with a small industry run by one man while describing and recreating the quiet life of years ago. It is one of four films in a series entitled "Today and Yesterday: American Lifestyles." Also included in this series are The Birch Canoe Builder, Cider Maker, and Maple Sugar Farmer.

The grist mill portrayed here is located in Stillwater, New Jersey. It has been in operation since 1844, when its structure was built on a site originally used in 1741. The idea of a self-sufficient community is developed by the narrators who are all inhabitants of Stillwater: a farmer harvesting corn for the mill, the miller, and the miller's wife who bakes with the ground flour. The farmer explains how much he enjoys harvesting by hand and how the community seems to have lived more congruously in the past when most labor was done manually.

The miller briefly explains the technology of the mill--how the water is controlled to activate the wheel, which in turn activates a series of gears and belts to run the grindstones. The excellent photography of the mechanical movement within the mill whets the appetite, leaving one wanting to see more or perhaps to have the mechanism more fully explained. It would be fascinating to see the wheel moved by the stream, or to see more of the synchronization of the gears.

The final section which shows the ground product of the mill being used makes a contrasting statement--people living in small towns, like Stillwater, are nowadays dependent upon commercialized products and are no longer self-sufficient. The miller's wife says that the only way to obtain any non-commercial bread is to make it yourself. The film shows her working closely with her family while making bread.

Grist Miller does indeed show a "working antique" as the miller calls his excellent edifice. It also shows a way of life which many people miss and perhaps would like to recapture. This is an excellent introductory film suitable for junior high school, high school, college and adult levels as it does not delve into the subject deeply. Interesting tangents can be developed by the folklorist from the points raised by the film in reference to both a traditional trade and the folk histories of Stillwater's inhabitants who are briefly introduced.