

# Looking Back #13

## The Argo Milling Company/ Weathervane Inn

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The four-story ironclad Argo mill in 1953, said to be the ugliest building in Charlevoix, which daily sight nobody seemed to mind because it had been part of the cityscape for so long

In the previous issue, Looking Back looked back at the Lewis Grand Opera House which was constructed in 1889 right next to the lower channel bridge. Four years prior, its neighbor, the first commercial grist mill in Charlevoix, had gone up directly across the channel. It was built by Hiram Rifenburg, who gave it his name. Hiram equipped the mill with the best full roller process machinery of its day, and incorporated the business as the Rifenburg Flouring Company. At first, local wheat was purchased, but demands for the mill's flour became greater than the wheat supply from the immediate area, so Rifenburg soon bought three lake schooners to haul wheat from locations throughout the Great Lakes.

By early 1890, the cost of maintenance for the steam-operated mill and its equipment, as well as the docks and the schooners involved, found Rifenburg with a cash flow problem. In 1893, Henry Enos, the local superintendent of schools, bought into the business and took over management of the mill. But as wheat prices rose, along with maintenance costs, the mill started to flounder. In 1896, John Burns of Oyster Bay east of town became a partner, and Rifenburg retired. The business was then incorporated as the Charlevoix Roller Mills. By 1900, the mill was fortunately out of debt and its flour was selling throughout Michigan, Minnesota, Illinois, and Wisconsin.

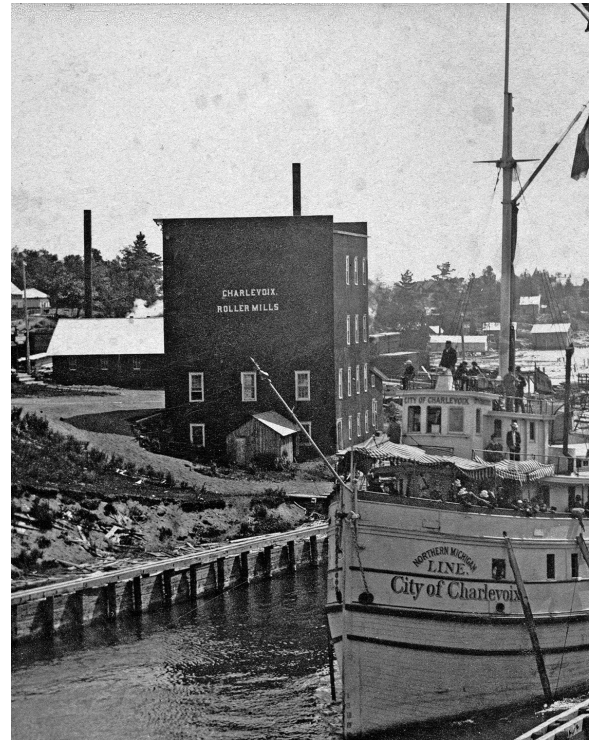


Left: Henry Enos

Right: Charlevoix Roller Mills lettering on the mill's west side

Bottom: George Swinton

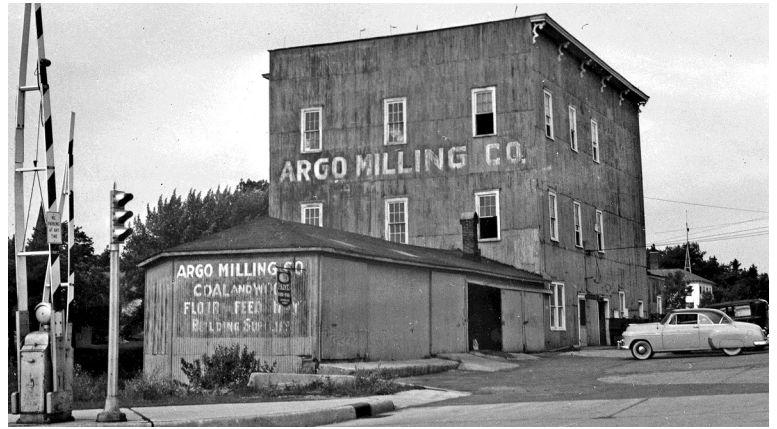
Bottom right: his son Archibald Swinton



In 1902, Burns sold his share of the mill to George D. Swinton from Calumet, MI. On December 1, 1903, the business was now incorporated as the Argo Milling Company, with a capital stock of \$60,000. Officers were: president, G. D. Swinton; secretary/treasurer, Henry Enos; vice-president, Swinton's son Archibald. They hired a new mill superintendent and bookkeeper. The Argo name would remain until 1953.



The business flourished. A railroad carload amount of grain was utilized daily, and the mill produced sixty barrels of flour per day. The company erected a new, electrically powered mill in East Jordan at the south end of Lake Charlevoix in 1903 for \$18,000, including a grain elevator. Combined with the Charlevoix facility, the Argo company's output capacity was 120 barrels of flour per day. Several years later, a third mill was constructed in Central Lake further south of Charlevoix.



The mill as seen from Michigan Avenue just north of the channel bridge.



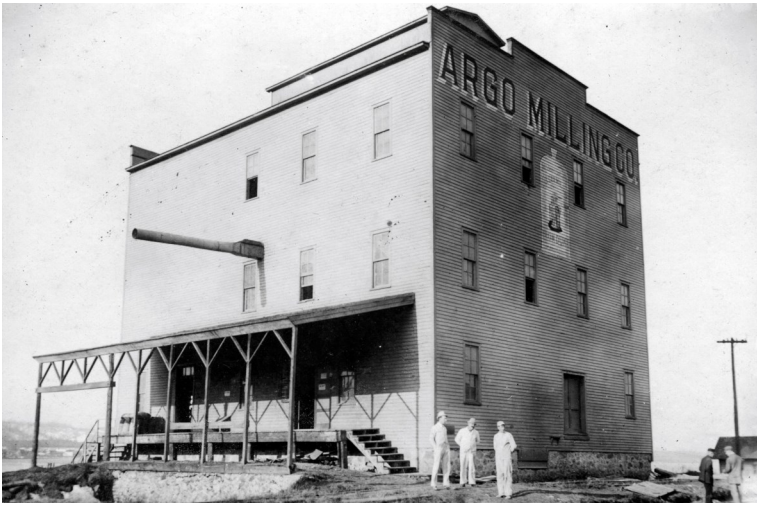
The main shed beside the highway, made of corrugated iron sheeting



A view from the southwest



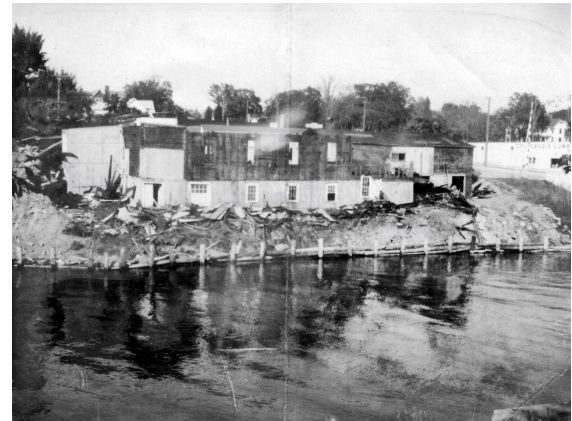
Remains of the dock constructed in the channel to handle coal deliveries, here seen in the early 1950s



In 1921, the East Jordan structure was sold to the East Jordan Co-Operative to be used as a feed mill. The Central Lake mill was in operation until the late 1940s. The Charlevoix mill lasted until 1953 when it was obtained by the town's master builder in stone Earl Young to make way for the crowning achievement of his long career, the Weathervane Inn.

Above, left: the East Jordan Argo mill

Above and left: Two interior views of the East Jordan Argo mill, probably very similar to the Charlevoix mill



During the Great Depression, the economically battered mill ceased to grind grain, and concentrated on coal, firewood, animal feed, and building supplies. In the early 1940s, Earl got the inspiration to raze the aging structure to make way for a restaurant. Negotiations with the co-owning Swinton/Craig families began in 1943, and dragged on for a decade while the two groups hammered out their differences. Finally they said yes. Papers were signed in 1953, and an eager Earl began to tear the old mill down almost before the ink was dry (above). As can be seen, the first construction (right) was Earl's installation of pilings and retaining logs along the water.

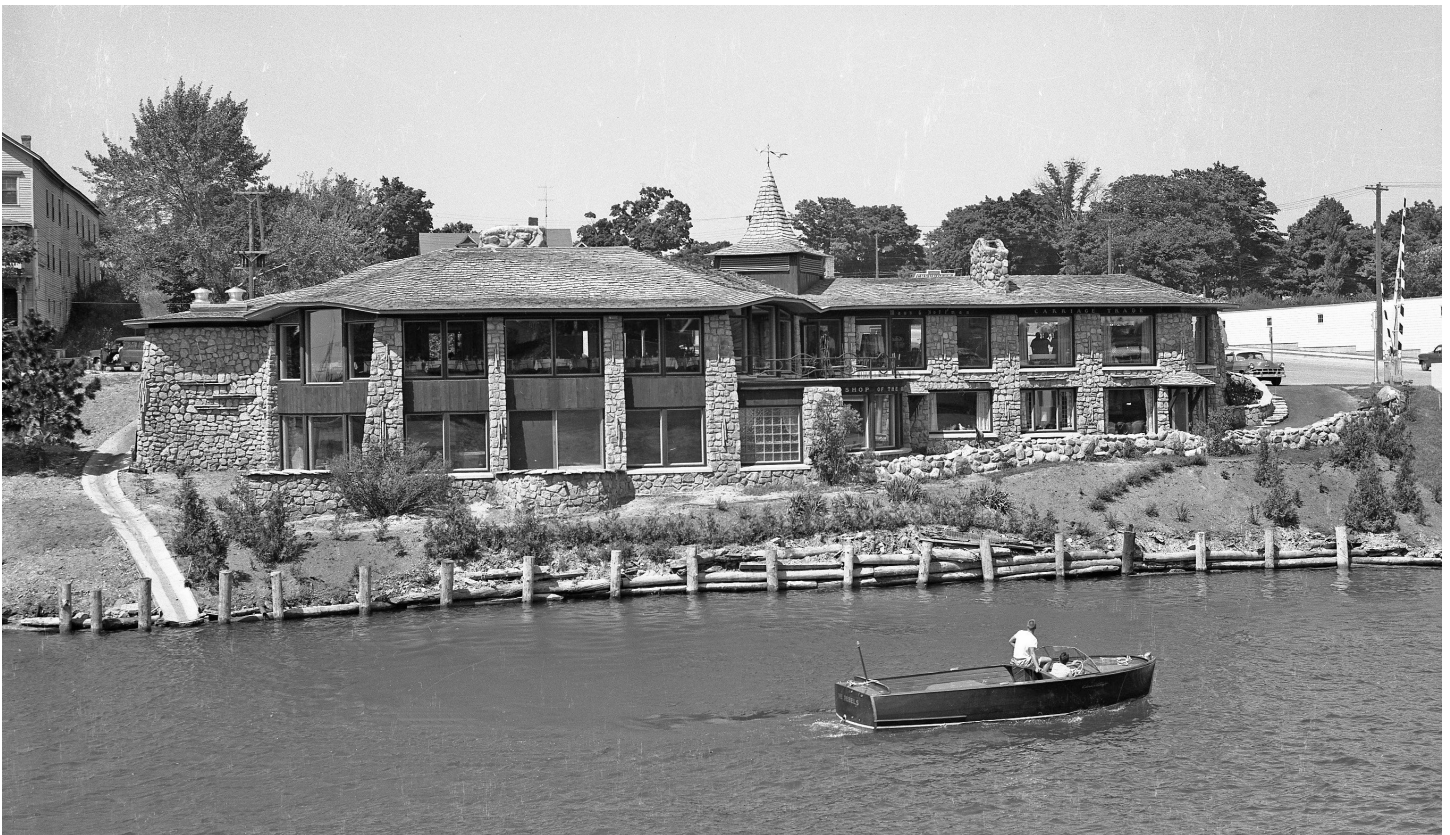




Two of the original foot-square maple pillars from the old mill that Earl re-incorporated into the new structure as either supports or embellishments, each with its own unique notchings and cut marks, here in the main dining room



On the lower lounge level, Earl retained the mill's original pillars and their transverse extensions under the main floor. Still today, these extensions (where the coat/hat rack is positioned above) are low enough to cause serious head thumps to those not paying attention.



The Weathervane Inn, seen here brand new in 1954, when it became the sensation of northern Michigan, and is now known throughout the world