

Halsey Rinehart original artwork of Bowen's Mill - Richland County History Room.

## **Bowen's Mill, County Trunk Highway AA, Richland County - 1867.**

Florence, located just north of the present-day Richland County Fairgrounds, now known as Bowen's Mill, was once a thriving village. In fact, if it had not been for the machinations of Ira Haseltine, Florence may have become the county seat. The town was surveyed in April of 1852 by R.C. Field for James Cass and George Pond. Cass and Pond built a sawmill there which resulted in the establishment of Florence. It even had a post office; built in the early part of 1854 with James Cass serving as the postmaster.

The mill built by Cass was operated by water power created by the Pine River. A sash saw was installed and Cass bought out Pond and became the sole owner in 1853. (A sash saw is operated vertically as opposed to the familiar circular saws of today). In 1854 Cass sold the property to William J. Bowen for \$3,100 cash, the amount said to have been paid in gold. William J. Bowen, along with his brother and partner, Frederick P. Bowen, replaced the vertical saw with a circular saw in 1855, which was the first such saw in Richland County. They also added a corn grinder as well. In 1867, a flour mill was erected. It was a wooden structure, two and a half stories high with a basement. Years later it became a feed mill with a generator to furnish power.

In the pioneer era of Richland County, people had to travel to Mineral Point, Platteville and other places for flour. It did not take long for people from the surrounding counties to patronize Bowen's Mill.

Florence flourished. John Bowen opened a store; there was a cheese factory and a blacksmith shop. Hoop pole shavers worked hard to keep up with demand. There was a tie and log yard in operation.



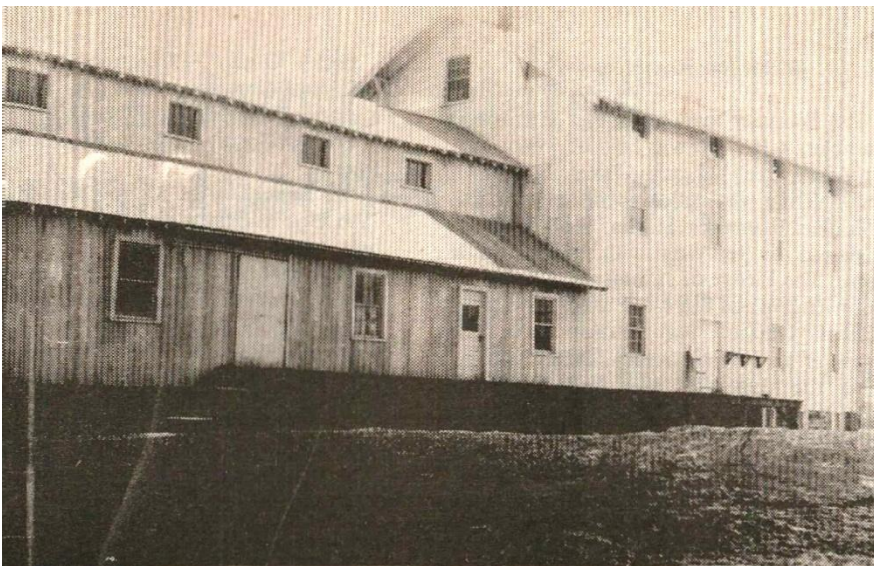


William J. Bowen was somewhat of a world traveler before locating in Richland County in 1854. Before his marriage to Mary Thorpe in 1854, he made his way to California in 1850 in a quest for gold. He stayed there until 1852, and then went to Australia and Peru searching for gold. When Bowen returned, he and Mary Thorpe were married and moved to Richland County with enough money to purchase the Cass sawmill

**William J. Bowen and Mrs. Mary (Thorpe) Bowen - Richland County History Room photos.**

and 500 acres of land.

Four generations of the Bowen family had a hand at operating the mill. First was W.J. Bowen as owner, followed by his son William and then Frank, son of William. Thus was handed down from father to son, and again from father to son, the oldest established business in Richland County. Other mills were started earlier, but Bowen's Mill outlasted them all.



**Bowen's Mill before ruin. Richland Democrat photo.**

the pioneer grist mill but to a limited extent. Wheat is a crop that extracts much vitality from the soil and the soil was depleted by re-cropping. The raising of stock and dairy herds replaced grain raising for home use and for market sales. Today (1943) the wheat industry has almost entirely given way to the raising of corn and grains that are suitable for stock raising and the feeding of dairy herds and hogs. The stock and dairy business in Richland County has come to the front to the extent that Richland County ranks very high all over the nation as one of the best dairy sections.

In the pioneer days of wheat raising Richland County had twenty four grist mills located on the various streams and developing ample water power to drive these mills for custom grinding. As we evolved from a grain raising county to a stock and dairy section, the raising and grinding of wheat for our people slowly winked out and with the industry there went the custom grist mill. Today we have but one custom grist mill in Richland County that does an all-around custom milling business in grinding all kinds of grain for the public. This mill is known as Bowen's Mill and is located on the Pine

In June of 1943, Pearl Lincoln, former mayor of Richland Center and Richland County Judge wrote an article about the history of the mill and its evolution from the early pioneer days to his time.

"Our ever changing industrial life has had its impact on the country custom grist mill along with our many other industrial transformations. In our early pioneer days when food was of major and prime importance to the pioneer and his family, he raised his wheat for his immediate table use. He took his grain to the custom flouring mill and there met his fellow neighbor on a like errand. Some feed grinding was carried on in





The results of years of neglect - Richland County History Room photo.

River two and one half miles north of Richland Center. The mill was built in 1867 by two brothers, W.J. Bowen and F.P. Bowen. Subsequently W.J. Bowen became the sole owner and he operated the mill for many years. On his death his son Frank Bowen operated the mill for a period of years. The present owner and operator is W.J. Bowen a grandson of one of the original builders of the mill. An excellent system of flour milling machinery is maintained in the mill together with feed grinding equipment. Wheat is brought to this mill from four or five adjoining counties and so the art of home baking still survives in some of our homes. But the old time flour mill has evolved out of the picture – all but one – the Bowen’s Mill built in 1867.”

## Flour and Feeds

Low grade flour, \$2.50 per cwt.  
 Wisconsin egg mash, best analysis, best combination, \$3.25 per 100 lbs.  
 Wisconsin chick mash with skim milk to drink makes a complete food for chicks, sound grain, no fillers or junk, 25 lbs. 90c, 100 lbs. \$3.50.  
 Winter wheat flour \$2.25 and \$2.50 sack.  
 Clark’s yellow dent seed corn.  
 Flour and feed milled every day.

## W. J. Bowen

Richland Democrat photo.



Remnants of the mill equipment. Mark McCauley photo.

The mill is now in complete ruin although part of the old building is still standing and some remnants of the mill machinery are still on site. Bowen’s Mill is an important and significant piece of Richland County history; here from the very first days of pioneer settlement. Perhaps the old, neglected mill will get the last laugh on the “modern” world. Custom milling of a multitude of grains has become an important part of the “farm to table” movement and is experiencing a resurgence. We have an example of this phenomenon here in Richland County. Lonesome Stone

Milling located in Lone Rock occupies the former Lone Rock Milling operation. They buy grains from Driftless Area family



farms and grind flour with a traditional mill stone. They sell fresh to area bakeries and folks who care about food quality and where it comes from. For more information about their operation visit [www.lonesomestonemilling.com](http://www.lonesomestonemilling.com).



**Bowen's Mill, the only part that remains of the village of Florence. Richland County History Room photo.**

South of Bowen's Mill and the old hamlet of Florence is the Bowen Cemetery. Many of the pioneer settlers of Richland County are buried there including William and Mary (Thorpe) Bowen as well as a number of Civil War veterans.