

## Simpkins, Mary Lea: The Yates Mill <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Mary Lea Simpkins: The Yates Mill

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>[2]</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 7/8/2001. Copyrighted.  
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Mary Lea Simpkins grew up around one of the state's oldest grist mills, the Yates Mill just off Lake Wheeler Road south of Raleigh. For more than 200 years the Yates Mill ground meal and flour for local farmers, and Simpkins' father, John Daniel Lea Sr., was the miller there from 1898 to its closing in 1953. Simpkins often helped her father in the mill but mostly enjoyed a childhood spent playing in the mill's attic and along the shores of the millpond.

Water-powered mills like the Yates Mill once thrived in nearly every community. By damming creeks and channeling their flow, mill builders used nature's power to turn a waterwheel that moved belts, pulleys and cogs that whirled heavy millstones to shear the corn and wheat. In the days before electricity and gasoline, mills furnished clean, abundant energy, and villages and towns often sprouted up around them.

The Yates Mill has been called the "queen" of the state's grist mills because of its wonderful state of preservation, including much of its original machinery and two pairs of millstones. Currently being restored by a local community group as the centerpiece of a new county park, the mill will soon host schoolchildren and other visitors who want to learn about the workings of one of the most common, but often forgotten parts of daily life in our past.

And if those visitors are lucky, Mary Simpkins will drop by and remind them that a mill wasn't just a place of business, but a place for summer joys like picnicking, fishing and falling in love.

In *Mary Lea Simpkins's* words:



Mary Lea Simpkins. Photo by Chris Seward, 2001. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the *News & Observer*.

Farmers would come to the mill and bring corn on wagons and mules. They would come from all around, up over Swift Creek and places like that. They were just country people. They would bring the corn in burlap bags, and Daddy would we  
When Daddy would go in to start the water going, there was an iron like a lever. That's where he turned the water on the forebay. Then it would come on and the rocks would start turning and he would grind. There was a big box that held the  
When it would be grinding, Daddy would do like that with his hand to see how coarse it was, and then he'd throw a little bit in his mouth and taste it. He could rub it through his fingers and check it. This was the way he really could tell how it w  
Daddy would sell meal in 5- and 10-pound bags. He had a great big old Franklin -- he was proud of that old car -- and he would go to Raleigh. He could fill that car full of meal and we'd go to town with him and eat candy and hot dogs and ban  
An old fellow named Mr. Stanley Smith helped Daddy in the mill, and he would go to town with him and help unload his meal. I thought the world of him. He had a shack made out of tote bags and everything, but he would sleep in the mill. We  
We had some kind of fun down at that old mill. We'd go down there lots, sit down there around the mill and play. Mama would go down there, too, and sit and carry me when I was a baby. People would come out and have picnics up there, ar  
There'd be a lot of fishermen out there. They rented boats to people, so much a day, and they could fish as long as they wanted to. People from Raleigh and places around would come fishing. We would have Easter egg hunts and roast hot  
And Lord, yes, they used to date down there. The moon would be shining, and that yard would be full of people! Oh, Lordy, they'd date, you better believe they would. They'd go around the pond and park and date. That's all they'd do -- date!  
We loved to walk around the mill, and go in it, and walk on the dam, walk around the pond, in the woods. It was real pretty. In the fall it was absolutely beautiful. When the trees were like that in color, and the water was real still, it looked like a  
People would come to the mill, and they sure would talk to Daddy. Everybody would talk to him! I'm not saying it because it was my daddy, because I know there's a lot of good people in this world. But they all liked Daddy. They'd talk to him,  
But every time Mother would cook dinner for him, he'd sit down and we'd hear somebody shouting, "Ehhhh, Mr. Johnny!" Somebody come to pick up some meal where he had left his corn, and Daddy would get up and go and get it. One old r

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### Authors:

[Cecelski, David S.](#) <sup>[9]</sup>

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