

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



"They Were Making Good Money, Just Ten Minutes from Home" Proximity and Distance in the Plant Shutdown Stories of Northern Ontario Mill Workers

Steven High

Volume 76, Fall 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1034473ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

High, S. (2015). "They Were Making Good Money, Just Ten Minutes from Home": Proximity and Distance in the Plant Shutdown Stories of Northern Ontario Mill Workers. *Labour / Le Travail*, 76, 11–36.

All Rights Reserved © Canadian Committee on Labour History,

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

ARTICLE

“They Were Making Good Money, Just Ten Minutes from Home”: Proximity and Distance in the Plant Shutdown Stories of Northern Ontario Mill Workers

Steven High

“It was just like home. You know, you go to work ... my brother was in the yard. My dad was in the hardboard.... I had a cousin working with me in electrical. My brother, he used to work in the hardboard. I had uncles in the paint line ... every place you’d go in the mill, number one hardboard, number two hardboard, paint line.... I had some relatives working there. So, you’d stop there a couple of minutes, stop there a couple of minutes. Well we could do that because we worked all over. Electrical can work all over, wherever you had to go.... So I mean, I saw everybody.” – Larry Shank, mill worker.¹

WORKING AT THE MILL HAD BEEN a family affair for generations of Sturgeon Falls’ mill workers, as young men followed their fathers, uncles, older brothers, and occasionally mothers, into the mill – the town’s largest employer for more than a century. Claude Lortie’s father, for example, had been a welder in the mill, and two of his brothers were millwrights. He thought of himself as something of an outlier in the family, as he worked the “production end” at

1. Larry Shank, interview by Kristen O’Hare, 27 August 2004. Subsequent references to Shank’s interview will be indicated by his name in the text. All of the video-recorded interviews have been archived at Sturgeon River House Museum in Sturgeon Falls, Ontario as well as the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University in Montréal. These interviews were approved by the research ethics review boards at Nipissing and Concordia universities, and unless otherwise noted, interviewees are publicly named as was their preference. Oral history has a strong political commitment to putting a face and a name to the past, why should only elites be named? History lives in all of us.

Steven High, ““They Were Making Good Money, Just Ten Minutes from Home’: Proximity and Distance in the Plant Shutdown Stories of Northern Ontario Mill Workers,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 76 (Fall 2015): 11–36.



An aerial photograph of the Sturgeon Falls mill taken in the 1950s. Much of the town stands on the other side of the Sturgeon River.

Courtesy of the Sturgeon House Museum.

the mill.² Harold Stewart had a cousin and four uncles working with him. One uncle ran the crane in the wood yard. Two of his uncles worked in the hard-board mill. Another uncle was a carpenter. His cousin worked production, as did he.³ Virtually everyone we interviewed in Sturgeon Falls – a town of 6000 people located a five-hour drive north of Toronto in Ontario’s northland – had a similar story. It is therefore useful to think of the mill workers not simply as individuals but as part of “mill families” who had multi-generational connections to the workplace.⁴

This thick web of familial association and social reproduction was facilitated, no doubt, by the mill’s long-standing policy of hiring the offspring of mill employees as summer students. It was a first step towards permanent

2. Claude Lortie, interview by Kristen O’Hare and Steven High, 7 September 2004; and, 28 June 2005.

3. Harold Stewart interview by Kristen O’Hare, 23 January 2005. Subsequent references to Stewart’s interview will be indicated by his name in the text.

4. These kinds of multi-generational kinship ties are evident in other mill towns. Mill towns often had a “highly developed sense of place and formed tightly knit societies around their kin and ethnic associations,” noted Tamara Hareven and Randolph Langenbach in *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 12. See also Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, and Robert Korstad, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

employment. Students were hired on the basis of their father's or mother's mill seniority, no matter if that parent was a production worker, office worker, a mill superintendent or even the mill manager himself. Preference was given to university students, then college students, and lastly to high school students.⁵ The mill was very much a closed shop, but it was a shop that had been getting smaller and smaller since the 1960s, when it peaked at 500 employees. At its height, it was a diversified industrial complex with a corrugated paper machine, two hardboard mills, and a platewood mill. By the time that the mill closed in December 2002, only the corrugated paper machine remained in operation with 140 employees. In many ways, the Sturgeon Falls mill was a slow-death closure as one production line after another fell silent.

Still, in the early 1990s, the mill got a new lease on life when the Ontario government funded its conversion to a recycled paper mill. The community also raised a million dollars – helping to make the new recycled pulping operation within the mill a formal public-private partnership. Henceforth, its wood fibre would come from old boxes trucked in from the cities rather than the “virgin wood” cut from nearby Crown forests and private lands. New environmental regulations had made the conversion to recycled cardboard necessary, as the company was unwilling to make any major new investments in the production facility. The presence of local managers committed to keeping the mill open, particularly mill manager Wally Shisko, proved vital to the mill's success. Given the devastation wrought by the unfolding forestry crisis in boreal forest areas, Sturgeon Falls stood as a success story for years to come. It joined a handful of other area mill towns such as Kapuskasing (Ontario) and Temiskaming (Québec) – that refused to die.⁶

This positive storyline was overturned, however, in 2002 when US-based Weyerhaeuser, which had acquired the mill three years earlier as part of its purchase of Canadian-owned MacMillan Bloedel, announced its closure after a century of production. My research makes clear that the company closed the mill because it could. It was small and old, and the company could easily cover its modest output of corrugated paper at its newer and bigger US-based plants. In a free trade era, national borders no longer matter much. It is a familiar story of course – repeated tens of thousands of times across North America. What differed this time, however, was that vague corporate assertions that the mill was “losing money” proved untenable as community co-ownership of the recycling facility meant that the financial books were a matter of public

5. A large number of interviewees referenced this system. The most extensive discussion comes from the former director of personnel. Ed Fortin, interview by Kristen O'Hare, 5 August 2004.

6. For example, see Naomi Krogman and Tom Beckley, “Corporate ‘Bail-Outs’ and Local ‘Buyouts’: Pathways to Community Forestry?” *Society and Natural Resources* 15, 2 (2002): 109–27; Jack Quarter, *Crossing the Line: Unionized Employee Ownership and Investment Funds* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1995).

record.⁷ In reality, the mill was not only making money, but also had a firm order to purchase its entire output of corrugated paper for another nine or ten months. The timing of the mill's closure thus surprised and infuriated many of the people we interviewed. Moreover, the company's refusal to pay more than the bare minimum that their legal and contractual obligations required further embittered long-service workers who were close to early retirement.⁸ The mill's final shutdown marked a "crucial rupture" for the remaining mill families, tearing asunder "a social fabric that had sustained generations."⁹ Marcel Boudreau, who used to work on the paper machine, one of the best paying jobs in the mill, recalled that "I can remember lying in bed and wondering what the hell I was going to do. I mean, I basically have a grade 12 education."¹⁰ This feeling of helplessness was the immediate context in which I initiated the oral history project from which this paper is drawn.

A cross-section of mill employees was interviewed for this project including unionized production workers, skilled tradesmen, office workers, superintendents, and mill managers. Four of the interviewees were women who worked in the mill's offices, and at least one interviewee was Aboriginal. The mill's workforce was overwhelmingly white and male, with a historic linguistic divide between largely English-speaking managers and mainly French-speaking production workers. This linguistic division of labour, and the near total exclusion of Aboriginal people, were remnants of industrial colonialism in the region.¹¹ Interviewing began within a year of the mill's closure and continued for the next two years. During that time, efforts to reopen the mill fizzled out and it was demolished by the departing company. A century's worth of production records was shredded. Accordingly, each recorded interview is effectively time-stamped – as the changing present profoundly shaped what we hear and see in the interview recordings. In early interviews, for example, displaced workers expressed residual hope that the mill would reopen. This hope faded

7. The financial reports were later submitted as part of a court challenge to Weyerhaeuser's decision to close the plant, without any consultation or prior notice to the partner in the recycling facility. The reports are in the author's possession but will be donated to the Sturgeon House Museum upon the completion of a book manuscript about the mill.

8. The members of Local 1735 of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP), which represented Sturgeon Falls mill workers on the shop-floor, received severance pay of one week's wages for each full year worked (no rounding up). By contrast, salaried staff received severance of four weeks wages per year of service.

9. This was how just such a moment in South East Chicago was described by Christine J. Walley, the daughter of an area steelworker, in her thought-provoking auto-ethnography *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1–2.

10. Marcel Boudreau, interview by Kristen O'Hare and Steven High, 1 December 2003.

11. For more on this pattern, see Thomas Dunk, *It's a Working Man's Town: Male Working-Class Culture*, 2nd ed. (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

and disappeared altogether in subsequent interviews as Weyerhaeuser began to demolish the mill and the grim reality of starting over took hold.

This article explores the shifting sense of temporal and spatial proximity or distance in the plant shutdown stories told by 37 former mill workers in Sturgeon Falls. The authorial voices of historians are usually distant, writing in the first-person and the past tense to demarcate the past from the present, whereas oral historians study the relationship between the past and the present.¹² In an oral history interview, even a stationary one, there is considerable time travel as the conversation moves back and forth in time as well as across great geographic distances. Several dimensions of proximity will be explored such as the temporal proximity of the interview to the events being recounted, the perceived social proximity that prevailed before the mill closing, the remembered physical proximity of the mill in the narrated lives of residents, and, now, after the mill's closure, the spectre of forced relocation or distant daily commutes to new jobs in other towns and cities. For long-service workers, employment mobility or permanent relocation was understood to be a last resort.

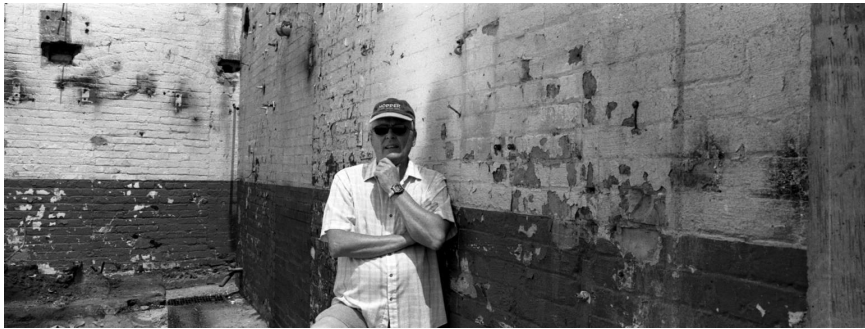
This paper is thus a sustained reflection on spatial and relational stances taken by interviewees in narrating their life stories in the aftermath of deindustrialization and a contribution to the study of employment mobility in an increasingly post-industrial era. These interviews make clear that forced employment mobility was a core concern to everyone we interviewed, not just those who actually relocated or commuted to jobs found elsewhere.¹³ Present-day fears of having to move away in search of employment permeated the interviews, influencing how our interviewees understood and composed their life stories.¹⁴ These fears had the disciplinary effect of lowering people's expectations for not only good union wages but a job nearby. As Jefferson Cowie noted in his book *Capital Moves*, capital's command of spatial relations is an important weapon in management's arsenal.¹⁵ But this paper makes the point that this advantage extends beyond capital mobility to forced labour mobility as well. As sociologist Beverley Skeggs noted more generally, "[M]obility and

12. Steven High, *Oral History at the Crossroads: Sharing Life Stories of Survival and Displacement* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014).

13. According to the 2006 census, nearly 32 per cent of Canadians worked outside of their census subdivision. This statistic is taken from the grant application for On the Move: Employment-related Geographic Mobility in the Canadian Context – a pan-Canadian research project headed by Barbara Neis, of which I am part. <http://www.onthemovepartnership.ca/>. See also Greg Halseth and L. Sullivan. "The Bright Lights of the City: Intra-Regional Migration and the Challenge for Resource-Dependent Towns," *Geography Research Forum* 23 (2003): 138–168.

14. For more on composure, see Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*. 2nd ed. (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2013). See also John Kirk, *Class, Culture and Social Change: On the Trail of the Working Class* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 149–150.

15. Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 185.



This portrait of mill worker Hubert Gervais was taken in the ruins of the former Sturgeon Falls mill. While it was being demolished, Hubert visited the site every day and took photographs of his own.

Photograph by David W. Lewis.

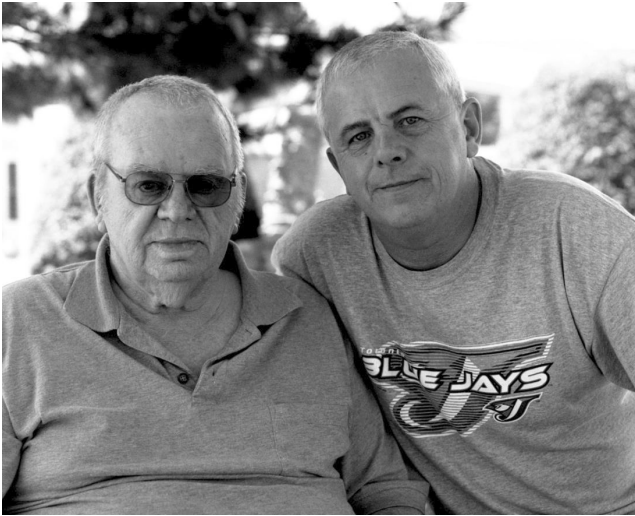
control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power. Mobility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship.”¹⁶

Proximity of the Interview

THE STURGEON FALLS MILL Closing Project grew out of my own geographic and social proximity to the story that was unfolding. At the time, I lived a short twenty-five minute drive from the mill, in the town of North Bay. The mill closed shortly after I took up a new teaching position at Nipissing University, and like everyone else in the area, I followed the story in the local newspaper. My initial role as a bystander shifted when one of my students, from Sturgeon Falls, approached me about some volunteer work. This small act initiated the project. I had wanted to do something, but wasn't sure how or what. Northern Ontario is my home region, and I strongly identified with the mill workers, their community, and their struggle. For me, the “plant closing drama” down the highway encapsulated the deep economic and political crisis facing the region as a whole.¹⁷ With the help of my student, David Hunter, I met with Bruce Colquhoun, one of two worker-historians in the mill, at the union-run Action Centre, a place where those who were displaced could get help with their job search or just be together. Interviewees like Pierre

16. Beverley Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 49. Doreen Massey made a similar point in her discussion of the “power-geometry” of time-space compression. Doreen Massey, “Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place,” in Jon Bird, Barry Curtis et al., eds., *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* (London: Routledge, 1993), 61.

17. Kathryn Marie Dudley, *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).



Ken and Bruce Colquhoun, mill-working father and son.

Photograph by David W. Lewis.

Hardy regularly dropped into the Action Centre to “just talk to the guys.”¹⁸ His wife Jane noted how much it helped him: “You’re all in the same boat there. And you can go cry on each other’s shoulder. Or get pissed off. And just vent somewhere.”¹⁹ Though it is taking longer than I expected, I left that initial meeting with Bruce Colquhoun committed to a book-length study – my third on the theme of deindustrialization.

The close temporal proximity of the mill’s closure – it had *just* happened – was evident throughout the Sturgeon Falls interviews, as displaced workers and their families struggled to make sense of what was happening to them. Emotions were often incredibly raw, and some workers told us how they frantically searched the internet looking for answers. Almost daily, rumours swept through the community about the intentions of the company, municipality, and province or the appearance of yet another potential buyer willing to reopen the mill. Would things return to normal? Would Weyerhaeuser even agree to sell the mill, or would it go ahead and demolish it? It was an emotional roller coaster. The oral history interviews that we conducted recorded the changing moment, and not some distantly remembered event. People often seemed uncertain if they should use the past or present tense in speaking of their recent experiences. When does the present end and the past begin? The vulnerability of the paper workers was most visible, perhaps, when they spoke of their current struggles to make ends meet and their feelings of uncertainty

18. Pierre Hardy, interview by Kristen O’Hare and Steven High, 5 December 2003. Subsequent references to Pierre Hardy’s interview will be indicated by his name in the text.

19. Jane Hardy, interview by Kristen O’Hare and Steven High, 5 December 2003. Subsequent references to Jane Hardy’s interview will be indicated by her name in the text.

and powerlessness. Working-class masculinity in Northern Ontario, like elsewhere, discourages men from showing their vulnerability.²⁰ Anger sometimes comes easier. As a result, their emotional fragility was often implied by the presence of spouses who hovered nearby ready to provide words of encouragement and support. Several couples were interviewed as part of this project. The close proximity of the interview to the events being recounted thus served to blur the usual distinctions in historical research between what is past and what is present.

Many of those interviewed still had to “get the anger out of their gut.”²¹ Hot flashes of anger or anguish punctuated the interviews. Sometimes all it took was the mere mention of the name of the departing company: “Weyerhaeuser.” Here is an extract from our interview with Denis Macgregor: “What do I think about Weyerhaeuser, is that what you wanted to know? Hate them with a passion. They’ve changed my way of life. They don’t give a shit about us. And like they said, it was a ‘corporate decision,’ and it’s easy for a ‘corporate decision,’ because it’s in Washington. They don’t want us. You’re destroying somebody’s livelihood, ah, get out.”²² Continuing, he noted that:

I wear this [holding up his company ring with a big “W” inscribed onto it] because I’m proud to wear it. Not because it’s Weyerhaeuser, but because it’s 30 years of service, good service. They made me live for 30 years, I can’t take that away from them. Weyerhaeuser wasn’t with us for very long and I think that’s why they did it that way. Had they been able to let us go within two months they would have done it. But I think they couldn’t. They were having a hard time. We were making money. We had a contract. It’s not as if we were losing money. We were making \$500 000, \$600 000 a month. And we had a contract til’ September 2003 and they let us go December 2002. And that’s one of the reasons we really hate them, because a lot of the guys, the average age at the mill was 47 or 48. So the guys that would have gone for another year were that much closer to their pension. I was 51 when I got laid off. I had to go to 55. Now I’m 52 past, my birthday’s in March. So I have 3 years that I have to fill. How I’m going to fill it? 52 I’m not moving. 52, nobody wants you. I’ve got a bad leg, which I picked up at the mill. I’m a heart patient, I’m a diabetic. Who wants me? You know? I’m not complaining, I’m just saying that that’s the way it is.

Anger and hurt animated many of the other interviews. Bruce Colquhoun noted that he had lost his job, “not the way I wanted to. I wanted to retire out of there.”²³ In the community, he continued, there was a great deal of “doom and gloom and a lot of anger; anger toward Weyerhaeuser that will never go away.” Naturally, these feelings led many people to decline to be interviewed.

20. For a good example of this, see Arthur McLvor, “Economic Violence, Occupational Disability and Death: Oral Narratives of the Impact of Asbestos-Related Diseases in Britain,” in Steven High, *Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015).

21. Dudley, *The End of the Line*, 158.

22. Denis Macgregor, interview by Kristen O’Hare, 26 November 2012. Subsequent references to Macgregor’s interview will be indicated by his name in the text.

23. Bruce Colquhoun, interview by Kristen O’Hare and Steven High, 18 December 2004.

Nearly half, in fact – a far higher rate of rejection than I have encountered elsewhere. Some expressed fear that they might say something that could jeopardize the (then) ongoing efforts to reopen the mill. Nobody wanted to be blamed for frightening away a potential investor or convincing Weyerhaeuser not to sell the closed mill. Mike Lacroix told us that: “People are afraid to speak up. They’re afraid to get into trouble for speaking up. I don’t care. I don’t care anymore. We’ve been screwed over enough there, I don’t care anymore. What’s gotta be said is gonna be said.”²⁴

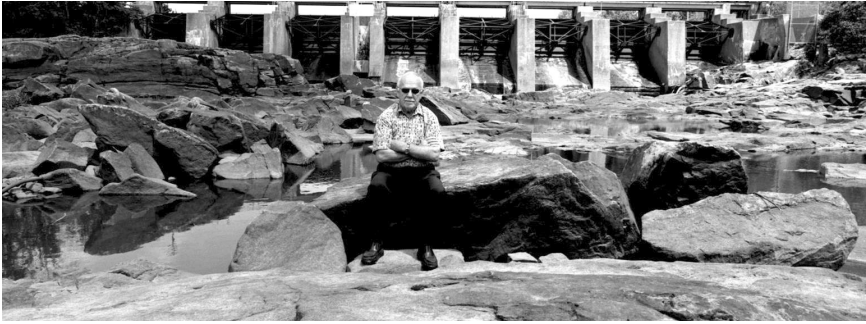
Much of the first round of interviewing was done by Kristen O’Hare, an undergraduate research assistant from the region, studying history at Nipissing. I interviewed twenty people myself. Our university affiliation provided us with a certain level of legitimacy. Even so, there were small challenges. One former mill worker, who preferred to be interviewed in our university offices, checked to see if we were using Weyerhaeuser paper in our printer when he came into the room. He later admitted that he would have terminated the interview had he found any. Quite unusually, the video recording of most of the interviews began with the signing of the consent form. The resulting recording captures some of the negotiations and “framing” conversations that usually occur before the official interview even begins. The recording of this pre-interview stage, lasting ten or fifteen minutes, revealed a great deal about the context that was developing. Interviewees repeatedly asked us questions. Who was behind the project? Did we have anything to do with the departing company? If we had, several made clear that they did not want to have anything more to do with us. The recording of pre-interview chit-chat and the signing of the consent form also allowed us to record the transition to the official interview. People often tensed up. André Cartier, for example, sat in an office chair, with his legs crossed, sipping a cup of coffee. After some small talk with Kristen O’Hare, he glances at the camera, takes a deep breath and asks: “What do you need?”²⁵ With this question, the formal interview began.

Proximity of Everyday Lives Before the Closure

THE LIFE-STORY APPROACH to interviewing asks our interviewees to frame their experience of job loss and factory closure within the *longue durée* of a life lived and remembered. This long view places the closing within the context of the “before” and the “after”, as it is now remembered in the immediate aftermath of deindustrialization. Mill workers and their locally rooted managers thus spoke of growing up, attending school, applying for work, and getting hired on at the mill. Their working lives in the mill were also explored. Interviewees recalled when “the mill” called to say they were hired,

24. Mike Lacroix, interview by Kristen O’Hare and Steven High, 4 February 2004.

25. André Cartier, interview by Kristen O’Hare, 12 November 2004. Subsequent references to Cartier’s interview will be indicated by his name in the text.



Power house worker Marcel Labbé with the mill's hydroelectric dam in the background.
Photograph by David W. Lewis.

and because of how seniority functions within a unionized workplace, they all remember their start date. Who was promoted, laid off, or “bumped” back down the employment ladder was determined by one’s mill seniority. Further into their interviews, former mill workers discussed the closure announcement, their last shift, and the uncertain aftermath.

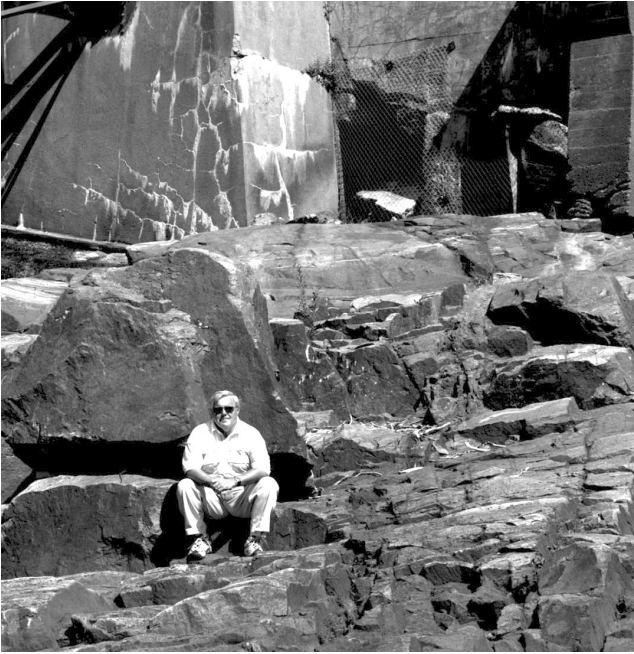
Despite its ups and downs, including a devastating sixteen-year closure between 1930 and 1946, the mill represented what Tim Strangleman has called elsewhere: a relatively “stable workplace culture” that was “intelligible to both its established members and those being socialized into it.”²⁶ As they struggled with present-day instability and future uncertainty, they looked back on their working lives before the mill’s closing as “as settled, fixed, rounded, and intelligible.”²⁷ This is to be expected. As Sean Field has noted in another context, people who have experienced forced displacement or removal often “compress” their pre-displacement memories into an “undifferentiated ‘that time,’ as opposed to the present. The memory strategies contribute to an exaggerated sense of community before forced removals.”²⁸ From the vantage point of the deindustrialized present, the industrial past appeared to be – now more than ever – locally rooted and secure to our interviewees.

For the most part, we interviewed people in their homes. This decision served to locate the past in close physical proximity to the present when people pointed next door, down the street, or across town, to where they grew up. A few grew up in the very home that they were being interviewed in. Childhood

26. This paper supports the UK findings of Tim Strangleman, “Work Identity in Crisis? Rethinking the Problem of Attachment and Loss at Work,” *Sociology* 46, 3 (2012): 411–22. See also Tim Strangleman, *Work Identity at the End of the Line? Privatisation and Culture Change in the UK Rail Industry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

27. Strangleman, “Work Identity in Crisis?” 422.

28. Sean Field, *Oral History, Community, and Displacement: Imagining Memories in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 11.



After the mill was demolished, we took former workers to the power dam as the surviving vestige of the industrial site. Here is Percy Allary at the base of the dam.

Photograph by David W. Lewis.

memories were almost always nearby. Early in the interview, Marcel Boudreau noted that his mother was born “two houses from here [points].... My uncle lives in the house, there, now.... And my mother as a young child, played in this house with the kids that used to live here, many, many years ago.... But the reason I bought this place is because it was two blocks from the mill. And I choose not to drive.” Interviewees sometimes joked that they had not travelled far in their life. Born in 1936 in a house just down the street from where he was being interviewed in 2004, Larry Shank laughed “I didn’t go very far, did I?”

When asked to recount their lives “before” the closing, former mill workers emphasized the closeness of social relations and their own deep roots within the community. “Everybody knew everybody,” recalled Percy Allary.²⁹ So when a name came up in conversation, “you weren’t talking about a stranger.” Others made similar kinds of comments. Denis Macgregor, for example, said, “Everybody knows everybody’s name, they know the dog’s name.” Those moving to Sturgeon Falls to work in the mill quickly recognized this reality. As a newly arrived manager, Gerry Stevens learned not to “say anything about anybody, because they’re probably related.”³⁰ Geographic and social proximity thus animated people’s memories of their lives before the 2002 mill closure.

29. Percy Allary, interview by Kristen O’Hare and Steven High, 9 June 2004.

30. Gerry Stevens, interview by Kristen O’Hare, 2 June 2004.

Many of our interviewees reminded us that they worked with friends and family. Percy Allary for one emphasized the many friendships he had in the mill: "Yeah. Don't forget, we were all out of high school when we went there, and we were all young, so we all hung out at the bars after and on days off. And, you know, you end up being [with] your friends, and you end up being the best man at their weddings. And when their kids come along, he's your godchild, that's your godchild. So, everybody had their own scene, like their own group. You had your friends." He noted that some friendship networks centred on hunting and fishing, others on sports. They grew up together, went to school together, and worked together. In fact, you "spent more time with the guys at work than you do with your own family. So, you know them a lot better than, probably, your own family." For many, their working lives inside the mill began in their late teens when they were first hired at the mill as summer students, or upon graduation from high school.

The close physical proximity of the mill itself was evident in the recorded interviews, even as people recalled their childhood and school years. Asked what it meant for the town to lose its mill, Bruce Colquhoun responded that the mill had been there since 1898: "You know, you look all the way down John Street, you look west down John Street, and you see the mill. It's right, you see it there. Now it's gone. And while it was being torn down, there were a lot of guys from the mill watching that, sitting in the car looking at that. Couldn't believe it. It's like most of the town couldn't believe it. They're tearing it down? Why?"³¹

The physical presence of the mill loomed particularly large for those interviewees who grew up in "the Point" neighbourhood which adjoined the mill, on the west side of the Sturgeon River. The rest of the town stands on the other side of the bridge. As a child, Larry Shank remembered playing clandestinely in the mill yard:

You played at night, there used to be big chip piles and stuff like that. You'd go, climb the piles, but you weren't supposed to, it was dangerous. And there were log piles too, eh? Four foot long pulp [logs], great big piles of that. And we used to play in there. That was real dangerous. Like, in those days, the mill, the people at the mill, they was close-knit. Everybody knew everybody, so there was no guy at the gate there with a gun. The mill was, the mill was the town, and we were the town, it's, it's changed. It did change during the years.

For older interviewees, such as Merna Nesbitt, who worked in the offices, their childhood memories often involved explorations of the mill itself when it was in mothballs from 1930 until 1946. These were the hardest of times in Sturgeon Falls, with more than half of the population on government relief. Nesbitt, who lived on the west side of the river, remembers a distinctive mill administrative building that stood across the street from the mill's main entrance: "it had a curved front, I remember that, I don't know why, maybe it's because

31. Bruce Colquhoun, interview by Kristen O'Hare, 19 July 2005.



Henri Labelle walked us through the soon-to-be-demolished mill.

Photograph by David W. Lewis

something we didn't see, and we'd run through there in one door and out the other, on the way down to the show."³²

If the mill's physicality loomed large in the childhood memories of our interviewees, the sounds of the mill also resonated later in life. When the mill was still in operation, Marcel Boudreau could hear all kinds of mill sounds from his home in the Point, it was always in the background. He could especially hear mill operations at night: "you would be sitting here and you hear [the] alarm go off, it was a paper break. I would be here, [and] say 'Uh, they're losing money right now because they are not making paper, they gotta go and start over again'.... Now, obviously you don't get any of these [sounds]." Boudreau also recalled that for many years the mill's whistle sounded the shift changes, but "then people complained" and they stopped the practice in the 1990s.³³ The silencing of the whistle is not coincidental, as the mill's place within the community was already in decline. A few years before, the mill's workforce had been cut in half when hardboard production ended. By then, many of the people within earshot of the whistle no longer had a connection to the plant.

32. Merna Nesbitt, interview by Kristen O'Hare, 10 August 2004.

33. Nobody we spoke to referred to smell, which made it a very different paper mill than the ones that I grew up with in Thunder Bay. There, the not-so-subtle aroma of "rotten egg" descended on my neighbourhood whenever the wind shifted in our direction.

Former mill workers and their families measured the value of their jobs in various ways. First, it was the highest paying job available for blue-collar workers. Consistently, the point of comparison was with manual jobs that paid less. Second, the mill was said to offer workers greater security than other jobs – it was unionized and so layoffs and promotions were governed by seniority. It also provided year-round employment. Third, the job was located within the town – its geographic proximity was prized by our interviewees. In speaking of his paper-making father, for example, André Cartier noted that the money was good – much more than other working-class jobs in the area: “So that part was good. The only thing is he was in shift work, sometimes we missed him. But, it wasn’t far from home. It’s not like, having to travel, like being a trucker or being out of town for a week.” We will return to the issue of employment mobility in the next section.

As the town’s major employer, and the one that paid the highest wages, the mill’s proximity made it difficult for young people with family working there *not* to follow them into the mill. The hiring stories shared by our interviewees indicate that the gravitational force of the mill was considerable for the next generation within mill families. Working at the mill provided young people with the opportunity to stay in the community, according to Larry Shank: “Well. You were just happy to have a job. Not to have to start looking. And well, younger people, like I said, it didn’t bother them. If you’re young and that, you go. But you know, once you’re old enough, and you bought a house or you got this and you got that, and the kids are at school, well you don’t want to get up and leave. You know, you want to stay.” Others concurred. Bruce Colquhoun “didn’t want to go anywhere else.”³⁴ Nor did Denis Macgregor: “To tell you the truth, I’ve been here all my life so that sort of shows you that I didn’t want to leave. And the opportunity of working at the mill came up [claps] I was done for life, I thought.” The caveat tucked in at the end of this quote reminds us that working lives are recalled with the knowledge of what happened later.

Larry Shank remembered that he did not know where he wanted to work when he finished school in 1956. The mill was the best paying job, locally, at least for those without a university degree. Larry Shank had uncles working there, as well as his brothers, his father, and cousins. His wife’s side of the family also worked there. “So, I didn’t see them running away, so probably I figured you know, it’s gonna be all right. In June, I got a job there, and if I wouldn’t have liked it? I would have moved on, I would have. But I didn’t have to. I always liked what I did.” When Larry Shank was hired, he did not need to purchase a car: “Two blocks, I’d walk over. You know, no expense.” Continuing, he noted that: “As far as going out of town for a job, never had to go. No.... and wages were relatively good compared to all the other jobs around town.... Never had to leave. So that’s why I stayed here 41 years.”

34. Bruce Colquhoun, interview by Kristen O’Hare, 19 July 2005.

Asked if they wanted to work in the mill as a teenager, several interviewees expressed some ambivalence. For example, Harold Stewart laughed softly when he responded to our question:

"Well, to start off with: no. I thought I was going to get a job in some far off place and make all kinds of money. But it didn't turn out like that. No, I started working at the mill when I was 19. And, it was supposed to be temporary, I thought. But, you know, when you start to work and you start to gain a little bit of seniority, and you can start to get holidays, and then you buy a car, and you've got payments to make, and hey. It's pretty hard to leave. And [nodding his head], for a small town, the mill paid pretty well. You know? About the best-paying job in town. And I was close to work.... I could be at work in ten minutes. And I knew a lot of the guys. Well, pretty near all of them."

Larry Shank made a similar point in his interview: "These were steady, good-paying jobs with benefits.... year-round, they were steady, and you had good benefits." Continuing, he noted that: "we built this house in 1960 and the mill was always here, two blocks away. I worked there all my [life], I liked my job. I liked the guys I worked with. I liked the guys I worked for. And when I was a little further up the line, I was trying to make sure that they liked me too." Their relatively high wages and steady year-round employment were sometimes a cause for jealousy in the town from those who earned less, worked seasonally, or had to commute to their jobs. As Harold Stewart observed, "They [the mill workers] were making good money, just ten minutes from home. They didn't know how lucky they were."

This belated realization was not necessarily the case for first-generation mill workers, who emphasized the fact that the mill offered wage rates far superior to anything they had seen previously. Karen Beaudette, for example, came from a poorer family that could not afford to pay for her post-secondary education. "And that was understood," she recalled. "Then I got pregnant, got married, and [then] menial job, menial job, menial job. And then '87, I went back to college [to become] an accountant."³⁵ After graduating, she handed out dozens of resumes in the area and found work in North Bay – a thirty minute drive east of Sturgeon Falls. Four months later she got a phone call from her college teacher who told her that there was a job in Sturgeon. Karen continued: "I didn't even send my resume. She sent it for me. And, they phoned me and I had an interview the next week and got the job, started January second." The new dream job was at the mill: "I hadn't ever seen money like that before, big money. I was working at nine dollars an hour, and then to start somewhere like sixteen was like 'Wow,' and it's close to home. Yeah. It was great." Later in the interview, she spoke with real pride of how her mill wages helped put her own children through college.

35. Karen Beaudette, interview by Kristen O'Hare, 7 June 2004. Her husband, Jean-Guy was also interviewed. Subsequent references to Beaudette's interview will be indicated by her name in the text.



The project produced photographic portraits of a number of former mill workers. Here is Claude Lortie (left), Marcel Boudreau (centre), and Pierre Hardy (right). Pierre's son was one of my history students at Nipissing University.

Photographs by David W. Lewis.

The Spectre of Relocation and Employment Mobility

WEYERHAEUSER ANNOUNCED the Sturgeon Falls mill closure at a mass meeting of workers gathered in a community centre in neighbouring Cache Bay. "And as soon as you came through the door," recalled Percy Allary, "to your right there were two or three big tables, all these envelopes all lined up. And that's when you say, 'well, hey, your names are on the envelopes, something's happening.' And everybody was sitting there and this guy came right to the point, the head guy..., he didn't make a grand announcement, he just said, 'you're here. And I'm to notify you that your plant is closed.'" It was a difficult morning. Karen Beaudette recalled that most were stunned by the news, unable to even think of any questions to ask. She noted that a few were "angry, like really angry." Percy Allary likewise remembered the finality of it all: "I think the majority of the guys were just stunned. And they were walking out of there and their heads were spinning. Before you went out, you went to a table, by the alphabet and there's your package. It had everything right up to date. Figured right up to when you were going to leave eight weeks from now. It was all figured out. So they didn't just do this all of a sudden." There was a great deal of security in the hall. One anonymous interviewee, for example, recalled that the company had "some goons in the audience. They thought there would be a riot."³⁶ André Cartier concurred: "They were expecting a riot or something like that." He shrugged, "A lot of people found that ridiculous. Nobody was going to riot... the Americans had to think of something like that."

36. Anonymous, interview by Steven High, 2 December 2003.



Inside the fenceline today there is only emptiness. When demolition was underway, workers would park their cars along the fence to watch its “progress.”

Photograph by David W. Lewis.

The fragmentation of relatively stable class formations is an integral part of the deindustrialization process.³⁷ The spectre of forced relocation or long commuting times thus pervades the interviews that we conducted in Sturgeon Falls. Given all of the present uncertainty, the former proximity and solidity of the mill loomed large in their minds. Many commented on how they could ill-afford to move – their spouses had full or part-time jobs, they owned their homes, and their friends and families lived in Sturgeon Falls. Many spoke fondly of the pleasure they got from weekend hunting, or fishing, and noted that this would be impossible if they moved down South. Their regional identity as “Northerners” and as working-class men often asserted itself in these moments. In Northern Ontario, working-class masculinities were very much anchored in a persistent industrial culture as well as in outdoor recreation. These were “working men’s towns,” where men wore work boots and drove pickup trucks.³⁸ Work-life interviews confirm that work occupied a central part of our interviewee’s lives but, as Arthur McIvor found in the UK, work has changed in “complex and sometimes contradictory ways.”³⁹

37. John Kirk, *Class, Culture and Social Change: On the Trail of the Working Class* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 2.

38. Thomas Dunk, *A Working Man’s Town: Male Working Class Culture* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991).

39. Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain Since 1945* (London: Palgrave Macmillan,

The fear of forced relocation loomed over our interview conversations like Damocles' Sword. Many noted that former mill workers were already leaving town, pointing to skilled tradesmen who had found work elsewhere. These departure stories indicate that mill workers were intensely aware that some work skills were more transferable than others. Pierre Hardy estimated that 90 per cent of the mill's tradesmen quickly found work out of town: "Whatever trade they were in, they found work out of town. But for the average mill worker, I can't really say, but I don't think [they have found work in the past year]." Those who formerly tended the mill's paper machine had no illusions about finding another job as a paper-maker – there were none. A number of those interviewed mentioned two tradesmen who found work at Weyerhaeuser's sawmill in Wawa (located north of Sault Ste. Marie in Northern Ontario). The rest of them "could have submitted their applications too," noted Percy Allary, "but then again, who was going to move?"

There were also several cautionary tales in circulation about the experience of these men, once in Wawa. Denis Macgregor, for example, noted those who went to work for Weyerhaeuser in Wawa were:

black-balled there because they're from Sturgeon and the people from Wawa want jobs and 'my brother-in-law's not working because you're here.' So besides having to work with the stress of being laid off and then having to move all the way over there, then the guys black-ball you because you're taking their brother in law's job. And then your family's in Sturgeon, you're in Wawa, you're traveling back and forth to see your family, and you don't know if you're doing the right thing because you didn't buy at the other end and this and that.... And slowly I guess he integrated into the group, because time heals all sorts of [things] and the families moved up.

For his part, Raymond Marcoux notes that he bumped into one of those who transferred when he returned to Sturgeon Falls to sell his house. The man told Marcoux that Weyerhaeuser's Wawa sawmill was non-union and that the company kept trying to "brainwash" employees there that unions were bad. Most of the man's new co-workers were young men, who didn't know any better. In both of these stories, and others like it, we are given to understand that it was a difficult move for everyone involved. These stories cautioned listeners to the perils of leaving, but also reassured them that staying was the right thing to do. Sturgeon Falls was where they belonged.

If the number of mill workers who actually relocated during the first two years was limited to a handful of skilled tradesmen, the fear of being forced to look for work elsewhere was intensely felt by those who could not yet retire. Asked if they saw themselves leaving Sturgeon Falls one day, Pierre and Jane Hardy answered in tandem:

Jane: Oh, possibility's out there.

Pierre: We don't know.

Jane: We don't know.



The former entrance to the mill's administrative offices is still marked by these two sentinels. It is ironic that some of the landscaping initiated in the 1980s by mill manager Cam Barrington, also interviewed for this project, is all that remains. It had been a point of some derision in the interviews.

Photograph by David W. Lewis.

Pierre: We don't know what's going to happen.

Jane: You know.

In the year and three days since the mill closed, Jane noted that her husband had applied for jobs elsewhere: "And if something was to come through he'd probably go to work out of town. Whether we would relocate, well that would remain to be seen." Pierre then noted that he only had eight years left "to my pension... I could tough it out." Many other long-service workers spoke of toughing it out to retirement.

After the mill closed, Raymond Marcoux started to look for work in the area. He had received severance pay and was eligible for unemployment insurance: "I lived on that for a while 'til I ran out."⁴⁰ His wife, who worked part-time for many years, found a full-time job and now works both to make ends meet. Marcoux felt he was too old to move and start over. He owned his own house and rented out a second one, which brought in some revenue. It would therefore be difficult to leave Sturgeon Falls. And, he shrugs, "My wife's working, she has a good job, so, what do I do?" To accept a pay cut was hardly appealing: "There's no work in Sturgeon. Very little work," and what there was, paid low

40. Raymond Marcoux, interview by Kristen O'Hare, 20 May 2004. Subsequent references to Marcoux's interview will be indicated by his name in the text.

wages. "I'm used to making big money," he admitted. Asked if it was easier for their wives to find employment than male mill employees, Raymond Marcoux replied in the affirmative: "Yes, yes. A lot of the spouses were working prior to the closure. Some of them part-time, a few had good jobs working in North Bay.... Some were working in town... So a lot of them were working – I'd say at least 60 to 75 per cent of the employees there, the spouses were working either part-time or full-time." Given all of this, Raymond Marcoux concluded that: "It'd be too difficult for them to relocate. And it's very difficult to relocate once you've been living there so long. And just pack up and leave. Most people had their house paid off. It's hard for them to sell and leave because we're northerners. You know, sure there's work down south, but it's hard, being [a] northerner to move south."

Unimpressed with these stark choices, nine of the mill workers – Raymond Marcoux included – registered for an "Oil and Gas" course at the community college. Marcoux noted that Weyerhaeuser had "something set up" a few months after the closure to "help people with their resumes, to find work, and stuff like that." The union "asked Weyerhaeuser to fund it, and that's how he found out about the course. This was the first year that the full course was being offered by the college. At the time of the interview, he was taking two courses to get his certification as a gas and oil technician: "half my week is oil, the other half is gas," he said. Once certified, he hopes to start his own business and start contracting in the area. "At my age, I can start getting my reduced pension at 55, which will be in four years.... If I start contracting, stay small, and draw my pension for a few years, I should be all right." He preferred to "stay small" to reduce the red tape – "So that's the way I look at it." He was hopeful. Once his course ended: "I'll start looking around North Bay, and Sturgeon Falls, and maybe Sudbury, but I won't relocate." Laughing, he also noted that he is an excellent carpenter, as his father was a carpenter. So he has already been doing some carpentry jobs around town since the mill closed. It "kept us going, really."

André Cartier was another one of the mill workers who sought retraining, this time as a nurse. Even getting into the program was a remarkable achievement – well worth repeating here. The mill closing was announced on 8 October 2002 and on 11 October he signed up for adult education to finish high school in order to qualify for the nursing course. Laughing at the memory, he recalls that in those last two months in the mill he had to bring his homework in with him. Smiling, he repeated the date, 11 October, with real pride. He had just got into the nursing program at the college: "I had grade 10 and I needed my grade 12, Biology, Chemistry and all that, and the nursing course started in September, September 4th, and I got my grade 12 two weeks before that." To do this, he explained that, "a lot of time I was doing homework before the sun come up." Eleven subjects had to be completed, starting in October – one per month: "Well, I worked!" Kristen O'Hare then asked him when he realized that he wanted to become a nurse. To this, André Cartier quickly replied that

"I knew I wanted to do the nursing [from] every time that there was first aid, CPR, and all that. They always interested me. [I] always signed up for first aid, CPR, stuff like that just interested me... My wife's a [nurse]. Reading her books and all that. By the way, two of my buddies in '91 when they lost their jobs when they shut down the hardboard operation, they took the course and they work at the site, doing good. So I just went."

Bruce Colquhoun was another one who quickly retooled, this time as a driving instructor. In August 2002, he foresaw that the mill was going to close from a Weyerhaeuser publication which promised major cuts in production from their division. As Bruce Colquhoun tells it, he began to ask a co-worker whose wife once worked as a driving instructor if she had liked it:

He said, 'oh, she loved it.' I asked him a question one day, a few weeks later ask him another question. And then on October the 7th, I asked him, I said, 'why did she quit doing that job?' He told me why. And then he says, 'why are you asking me all these questions for?' I said, 'cause you never know what's going to happen with this damn mill.' An hour later, he's walking around giving everybody in the shop a paper. Show up at the Cache Bay community centre tomorrow, 'cause they're gonna make a big announcement. So they made the announcement. And I went home and told my wife. She went into a bit of a panic. Me, too. Then, she said, 'well, call,'... I said, 'no, I don't want to be rejected anymore. I'm not in the mood for someone to say 'no, you're not getting it.' So two weeks later, my wife came up and said, 'here's the damn phone book. There's her number. Call her, now!' [He responded:] 'Fine. Get you off my back.' My daughter's sitting here, my wife's here, and I'm here [indicates side by side with hands] on the couch. Got the cordless and I called. I said, 'Hi, I'm Bruce Colquhoun, this is what's happening at the mill, and I'm wondering if you need a new driving instructor?' And she says, 'oh, perfect timing,' she says, 'the one we have now for West Nipissing wants to get back to North Bay.' I said, 'you're kidding.' So we talked, I'm looking at my wife, I'm going like this [thumbs up]. Kathy and my wife, Sue are just freaking out, eh? 'Dad's got a job!' So then I had to meet with her that week. It was on the Friday, I met with her 11:30, we got out of there at two o'clock. And when we talked on the phone, at first she said, 'I want to meet with you, I want to know that I can trust.' And I said, 'when will I know?' She said, 'you'll know the day of the meeting.' Okay, so I went to North Bay. She said, 'I feel like a coffee. What do you feel like? Do you want a coffee?' I said, 'I've had nothing to eat or drink all day.' She says, 'why not?' I said, 'I'm too nervous.' My first interview in thirty years, you know. I said, 'I'm a nervous wreck.' She says, 'how are you feeling now?' 'Oh, ok, I'll have a coffee.' So we finished the coffee, she said, 'you're hired. Go to school and take the course and you're hired. I'll hire you.'⁴¹

When he got back, Bruce Colquhoun had to prove to Weyerhaeuser that it was a real job offer in order to get them to pay for part of his training course. In January 2003, he took a month-long course in Ottawa, and started his new job: "And been doing it ever since. Two and a half years. And now I got a job I love."⁴² Years later, he returned to the mill's hydroelectric power house – all that remains, but now operated by the city. There, mill seniority still prevails and he was eventually called back to work. As I write, he is working there with a handful of other mill workers.

41. Bruce Colquhoun, interview by Kristen O'Hare, 19 July 2005.

42. Bruce Colquhoun, interview by Kristen O'Hare, 19 July 2005.



The mill's power dam is still in operation and is being operated by a handful of former mill workers. As workers retire, the next union member is called back based on their mill seniority. Bruce Colquhoun was recently called back.

Photograph by David W. Lewis.

Other interviewees were not as fortunate and had to commute long distances to new jobs in other towns and cities. Before the mill closed, Karen Beaudette earned \$25 or \$26 per hour at the mill. "That's pretty good," she noted. "I'm making twelve dollars an hour now." She found work in Sudbury, but after eight months decided it was too far to drive each day, with winter coming: "I was getting stressed out, cause I wasn't sleeping at night worrying about 'Can I get to work tomorrow?' Then at work I was stressed out about, 'Oh I gotta drive home.'"

Marcel Boudreau was interviewed first in December 2003 and then again in June 2005. These two conversations allow us to track his changing situation. He got hired on at the mill two or three years out of high school. In time, he went from earning seven dollars an hour to twenty dollars an hour as a machine tender, "the top job on the paper machine."⁴³ Asked in the first interview if he was considering moving away from Sturgeon Falls, he replied in the affirmative:

Yes, I am. I've applied for a job up at Temagami. Temagami Forest Products. That new mill that, I guess, was announced probably about a month ago, month and a half ago, I guess. Made the front pages of *The Nugget*, there in North Bay. I've applied there. And if they hire me I'll call my brother, 'get your ad in the window' here, and 'sell my house.' He's told me

43. Marcel Boudreau, interview by Steven High, 23 June 2005.

there's some nice places for sale up in Temagami. And I've been up there probably four or five times, fishing. And Temagami's not a bad place to live. It's better than being down in that rat race down in Toronto, where you risk a chance of getting shot, you know. I don't want to live down south. It's too mental. I mean, I've lived in a small town most of my life. I don't want to go to a [pause]. If I had to go down south, I think maybe, maybe, it would be London or something like that. But there's no way I'm going to Toronto, Hamilton. Leave that for the freaks down there. I don't want nothing to do with that.⁴⁴

In our second interview, we learned that he had found work in the village of Sundridge, located south of North Bay. At first, they wanted him to start immediately but he told them that he could not start that soon, as he had "to borrow a vehicle just to go down there for the interview." He had always worked in Sturgeon Falls, within walking distance. He never needed a vehicle until now. They gave him a week to purchase one.

In his new job, Marcel Boudreau worked twelve-hour shifts from Friday through Sunday. He had to leave home at 4:20 a.m. to arrive at work at 6:00 a.m. It was a 90 minute commute each way. It was tough work, "I hadn't had to do manual labour in a long, long time. It was a shock to my system."⁴⁵ As he was about to be laid-off, he found full-time factory work in North Bay – which was considerably closer. But the wages were only half of what he made at the Sturgeon mill. He liked the fact that the twelve hour shifts reduced the amount of commuting, though it was sometimes difficult driving in the winter months: "I was fed up, but, it's not a bad place to work. I mean it's [an] industrial setting, and I am used to that, and shift work doesn't bother me." But he had been "comfortable" at the Sturgeon mill, and "enjoying what I was doing. I just entered my peak earning years, another ten years I would have been retired." In all, four of the mill workers are now at the North Bay factory. They "went from making rolls of paper to rolls of fabric. Do I like the job? No, not really. Prefer making paper, but ... [trails off]" He also found his old job at the mill less stressful: "I am still not comfortable, a year on, almost a year on and, well I feel a lot better doing it. It took a long time." He doesn't want to move to North Bay as the payments on his house mortgage are less than what he would be paying for rent there. So he commutes.

Reflecting further on his situation, Marcel Boudreau noted it was hard not to think of "what ifs." He used to make \$50,000–\$60,000 a year, "and I lived two minutes' walk from work. I didn't have to travel 200 miles, 300 miles to go to work." He no longer feels secure in his employment: "No. No I don't feel secure. It's an American owned company so anything can happen." In the face of rumours, he has told his North Bay co-workers: "I've told them 'Just because you're making money doesn't mean a damn thing. If they say you're gonna shut down, you're gonna shut down, ain't a god damn thing you can do about it.'" If the place shut down, there was "not a chance" that he would picket the

44. Marcel Boudreau, interviewed by Kristen O'Hare, 1 December 2003.

45. Marcel Boudreau, interview by Steven High, 23 June 2005.



The Sturgeon Falls paper mill shortly before its demolition.

Photograph by David W. Lewis.

place like he had in Sturgeon Falls: “Not a chance; I am not driving to North Bay every day just to go to the picket line.” The Sturgeon Falls mill closing had changed him. He had grown “accustomed to a certain lifestyle” but now took home half of what he used to make. If he worked on public holidays, before the mill closed, he could earn four times his hourly wage. They were working twelve hour shifts, so if he could work two of those overtime shifts per week, “that’s 2400 dollars... and that was *our* doing.” He once thought that he would spend his entire working life in the mill, but no longer. Despite everything, he still considers himself “a paper maker, I’m proud of it... Local one, seven, three, five. CEP. And, I make paper for a living.”

Conclusion

THE SENSE OF ECONOMIC SECURITY at the mill did not last. Some now believe that it never existed. For as long as Percy Allary could remember, people told him: “‘Oh, they’re going to shut that down,’ or ‘They’re going to shut this down.’ ‘Why are you applying here? Why did you come work here? You’re not going to be here long, they’re going to shut it down.’” These rumours were not empty, Allary insisted: “We started losing departments. When I first started there we were over 500 men and at the end we were 120.” By the early 1990s, the tradition of intergenerational employment at the mill had largely broken down. Layoffs had ensured that only high seniority workers remained. Nor did the mill hire summer students any longer. Percy Allary wouldn’t want a child of his to work there, as it “wasn’t stable... unless they were stuck.” Others like Raymond Marcoux lamented the changing times: “My father worked there before me. My kids were gonna work there, but not now.”

These changed circumstances were visible when our interviewees responded to our question: did you want your children to follow you into the mill? What they wanted, was no longer much of a factor. Many of the sons and daughters of our interviewees had moved away. For Larry Shank,

[Sighs] Well, I wanted to have a better job than my dad, [and] I wanted my children to have a better job than me. So I tried to give them the education they needed. But if they were to stay here in Sturgeon, if they had to stay in Sturgeon, well that was the best-paying job and for benefits. Sure, I'd like them to work there. I never suffered, why should they? It was a good job. My two sons worked there. Well, one son worked there for 10 years. And, Michael, he's the oldest son, he worked there for 10 years 'til they shut it down in '90, '92, something like that. So he went to Tembec. But my other son, Brian, he's the youngest son, he worked there a little bit like, in the summertime....

Others interviewed went further, suggesting they wanted something more for their children. When asked if he wanted his children to follow him into the mill, André Cartier smirked: "Absolutely not." He explained that he wanted to see his kids "have a career, a challenging career." Whenever "career" was mentioned in the interviews, it was invariably used in reference to white-collar employment. Mill work was not viewed as a career per se, unless you were salaried staff or an engineer. Several of those interviewed spoke of how they pushed their children to go to university or college, so they could "better themselves" or find a "better job." Jane and Pierre Hardy were also asked the question of whether they wanted their children to pursue jobs at the mill. Jane said "no" first, with Pierre saying "Not really, no" soon after. Jane continued: "I can't see any future in it for my kids." Others like Harold Stewart hesitated before answering, eventually replying "no." Asked why not, he explained that the "times are changing, I couldn't see a future there for them." He went on to express his own relief that he managed to retire shortly "before they, they shut it down." His kids had worked there as summer students, "which was great. But for a lifetime thing – no." Shaking his head, Stewart concluded by saying that "as it's turned out, it's a good thing they didn't."

Notably, earlier in each interview, we asked the same interviewees if they thought that they would end up working at the mill. More often than not, they emphasized that the mill paid considerably more than other blue-collar jobs in the area. The mill also provided year-round employment in close proximity to where they lived. Clearly, their employment horizons were more bounded by class and locality than that of their children. What is interesting here is the extent to which working people's expectations appeared to be changing. Randy Restoule was one of those who did not want his sons to follow him into the mill. Asked why not, he replied after a long pause: "I wanted them to improve themselves. I found it was a kind of a dead end place.... there is monotony on the job because it's production, and the only way I guess that we went through all that is because you know the people in there, in the mill. I guess you could say they provided friendship and made the job interesting at times but the job itself was pretty monotonous."⁴⁶ Clearly, industrial work does not hold the same public value that it once did.

Work-life oral histories such as the ones found in this paper offer us a way into the shifting sands of culture and economy. Our Sturgeon Falls interviewees

46. Randy Restoule, interview by Kristen O'Hare, 5 August 2004.

were born into what David Byrne calls a “culture of industrialism.”⁴⁷ Entire families were firmly embedded in mill-work. In time, it was what people knew and understood. For historian John Kirk, “people don’t simply recall in some spontaneous fashion the contents of a life lived but are shaping and composing remembrance, reviewing it, constructing it in the light of subsequent experience; experience lived at the level of self but always in some sense articulated in the midst of the wider collective which involves relationships of all kinds.”⁴⁸ While this culture survives, we see its precipitous decline within the life-time of our interviewees. But no place is merely local.⁴⁹ The signs of the wider societal post-industrial transformation are evident throughout the oral narratives recorded for this project. Though a key moment, the 2002 plant closing only confirmed a long-term fragmentation of a relatively stable class formation. Sturgeon Falls stands out not for its uniqueness or prominence, but rather as a typical example of the very human cost of deindustrialization.

I want to thank the interviewees who agreed to share their stories with me, particularly Bruce Colquhoun, Hubert Gervais, and Wayne LeBelle who helped in other ways: reading drafts, and so on. I also benefitted enormously from the help of Kristen O’Hare, a student at Nipissing University, and my ongoing collaboration with photographer David W. Lewis. The specific focus of this article originates in my subsequent participation in the “On the Move” employment mobility project, led by Barbara Neis, which encouraged me to approach this interview material in a new way.

47. David Byrne, “Industrial Culture in a Post-Industrial World: The Case of the North East of England,” *City* 6, 3 (2002): 279–81.

48. Kirk, *Class, Culture and Social Change*, 161; 152. We can come to better understand the “deep ideological structure” of oral history narratives, and individual and collective processes of composure, by turning to Raymond Williams and the idea of structures of feeling. This has become a “central analytical tool” for a growing number of deindustrialization scholars, particularly in the United Kingdom.

49. Joy Parr, *Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environments, and the Everyday, 1953–2003* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), 3.