

“Oral History and Deindustrialization: The Plant Shutdown Stories of Displaced Sturgeon Falls (Ontario) Paper Workers”

“I guess Sturgeon will always be Sturgeon. But this town has been known as a paper mill town. It was always a situation when you pulled into town – didn’t matter where you were coming from – you always saw steam coming out of the stacks there. When you saw steam coming out of those stacks, you knew you were making money.”

- *Marcel Boudreau, former mill worker, Sturgeon Falls, Ontario*¹

In this chapter we shift our focus from “spectators” and “urban explorers” and towards the plant shutdown stories told by displaced workers themselves. What did “economic change” mean to those who paid the social and economic price? How did people and place change as a consequence of the mill’s closure? The chapter attempts to answer these questions through a case study of Sturgeon Falls, Ontario. This small French-speaking mill town of 6,000, located between Sudbury and North Bay in Northern Ontario, was typical of the single industry towns that dot the Canadian Shield.² The town’s corrugated paper mill was the centre of local life for more than a century. The decline of the mill came gradually with one production line after another falling silent over a thirty year period. When the future of the mill was cast into doubt in the early 1990s, Sturgeon Falls’ residents rallied to save it. With the generous support of the Ontario New Democratic Party government and a million dollars raised locally, the mill was converted to one hundred per cent recycled paper.³ Its future seemed secure until American-owned Weyerhaeuser purchased MacMillan Bloedel in 1999, and with it the Sturgeon Falls operation. The paper mill closed three years later. Raymond Marcoux explained the closing this way: “They got everything in a box.... Eventually they will

¹ Marcel Boudreau interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. 1 December 2003.

² According to the 2001 census, 5978 people called Sturgeon Falls’ home. This represented a drop of three per cent from 1996. The town had a strong French-speaking majority (4,140) and was overwhelmingly Roman Catholic (5,115).

³ The groundswell of local financial support for the mill – coordinated by the West Nipissing Economic Development Corporation (J.P. Charles, Denis Gauthier, Dan Olivier, Ron Beauchamp) – amounted to one million dollars in interest free loans, locked in for five years. This story will be explored more fully in another book that focuses on the mill’s history and closing, being written by Steven High.

sort out what they want and discard what they don't want."⁴ Disposable places. Disposable people.

We conducted seventy-nine life course interviews with former mill workers and managers, their spouses, and municipal officials between 2003 and 2006, including nineteen follow-up interviews.⁵ The first interviews were conducted while attempts to re-open the mill were still underway, they continued as the mill was being demolished in 2004, and ended when all that remained was an empty field and a hole. At first, many people declined to be interviewed and others chose to remain anonymous. This reaction was very different from my earlier experience interviewing men and women who experienced job loss (elsewhere) back in the 1970s and 1980s. The open wounds left by the mill's closure in Sturgeon Falls continued to fester and many people just did not feel like talking about it. Some said that they would not be able to contain their anger. Others were afraid that they would say something that might jeopardize the continuing efforts to re-open the mill. No-one wanted to be *the one* who convinced Weyerhaeuser not to sell the mill to another owner. "People are afraid to speak up," admitted Mike Lacroix - the Vice President of Local 7135 of the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP).

In this chapter, I argue that the plant shutdown stories recorded in Sturgeon Falls reveal a deep disconnect between mill workers and their families on the one hand and the larger locality on the other. Mill workers and their families were displaced not only to the economic periphery by Weyerhaeuser's decision to close the mill but to the cultural periphery as well. In addition to the sundering of local community, the plant shutdown stories reveal the limits of class solidarity beyond the locality. Many Sturgeon Falls workers spoke bitterly about the "ho-hum" reaction they got from unionized Weyerhaeuser workers in other parts of Canada. In the era of continental free trade and global trade liberalization, their appeal to the nationalist sentiments of Canadians likewise

⁴ Raymond Marcoux interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 20 May 2004. The recordings of the Sturgeon Falls interviews are in the possession of the author. They will be donated to the Concordia Oral History Research Laboratory in Montreal, Quebec and to the West Nipissing Public Library in Sturgeon Falls, Ontario upon the completion of a second book project that will focus on the Sturgeon Falls story exclusively.

⁵ A life course interview is an open ended interview that explores the entire life story of an interviewee.

failed to stir the politicians or the people to action.⁶ The story of the mill's closing therefore played itself out on the pages of the *West Nipissing Tribune* and the *North Bay Nugget*, not the *National Post* or the *Toronto Globe and Mail*. Despite the best efforts of the mill workers and their union, few people outside the immediate area would ever hear of Weyerhaeuser's decision to close the mill. Economic restructuring makes liminality a "pervasive experience" among mill workers and their families.⁷

Central to my analysis is the concept of place. Place identity is, according to geographer Doreen Massey, constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together. When the places that define us change we ourselves change. Recent studies have shown us that the old tendency to cast the political struggle against deindustrialization as one pitting "community" and "capital" hid a far more complex local struggle over power and place identity. Industrial towns were not homogenous places and longstanding class divisions often intensified in the aftermath of major mill and factory closings. If place attachment is a symbolic bond between people and place, this bond is often severed at times of sudden social or economic upheaval.⁸ People then attempt to re-create these attachments by remembering and talking about these places.⁹ Narration is central to this process.

The politics of place has been usefully examined by Kathryn Marie Dudley who has found that we tend to view the shift from industrialism to post-industrialism in linear or evolutionary terms. Yet from a "cultural standpoint" this is not an orderly or a smooth transition. The closing of the Chrysler (AMC) auto assembly plant in Kenosha, Wisconsin in 1988 "dramatized a deep cultural antagonism that has long divided the city

⁶ A very different story played out in Canada before the Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement came into effect in 1989. For this story see Steven High. *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969-1984* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

⁷ Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 28-29.

⁸ Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low, eds. *Place Attachment* (New York: Plenum Press, 1992), 3; see also, Julie Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998), 3.

⁹ Setha M. Low, "Symbolic Ties that Bind," in Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low, eds. *Place Attachment* (New York: Plenum Press, 1992), 167. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has shown that symbolic power "is the power to make things with words". Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power," *Sociological Theory* 7, 1 (1989), 20-23. See also Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), xiii.

of Kenosha.”¹⁰ For blue collar workers, the closing of the auto plant represented the end of an era. For white collar workers, however, the plant closing was seen as progress. Several of Kenosha’s teachers, for example, expressed their hope that their working class students would now take their schooling (and thus their teachers) more seriously.¹¹ The “new Kenosha” that arose from the ashes banished the town’s working class to the past and put workers in their place: that “place” now being on the margins of local politics and culture.¹²

Oral sources are a particularly rich source for historians interested in memory and meaning. I have been interviewing displaced industrial workers about job loss since the mid-1990s. Long-service workers have all spoken with a great deal of emotion about their strong attachment to people, place and product. This strong attachment to the industrial workplace and to workplace communities has struck some commentators as surprising. From a middle class perspective, mills and factories are alienating and polluting places. For some, these are nothing more than “dark satanic mills”. For others, industrialism is simply passé and therefore subject to fits of nostalgia.¹³ I have therefore, occasionally, faced intense questioning at conferences about the “nostalgia” and “romanticism” of the plant shutdown stories recorded.

There is of course a real danger of falling into the trap of “smokestack nostalgia” - an empty lament for lost industry that assumes unity, and silences conflict and resistance. Displaced workers *do* look back on their lives before the mill’s closing through gold-tinted lenses. And why not? Their lives *were* often better before the mill or factory closed. If displaced workers can be forgiven a bit of nostalgia, there is a far greater danger when historians trade in nostalgia for the purpose of generating sympathy for the “victims” of economic change (see the following chapter). Nostalgia empties out history

¹⁰ Dorren Massey quoted in Kay Anderson, *Vancouver’s Chinatown* (Montreal: MQUP, 1991), 322.

¹¹ The town’s white collar politicians celebrated the changes underway. “You know, the world is right: they’re finally being punished for their non-education, and I can feel glad that I’m not like that,” said one city councillor. Quoted in Dudley, 34.

¹² Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo have similarly found that memory was a point of contention in deindustrializing Youngstown, Ohio. Without a unifying storyline, competing and separate communities of memory took hold: “While economic struggle was at the heart of deindustrialization, a parallel struggle emerged over representation itself.” Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo, *Steeltown USA: Work & Memory in Youngstown* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 133.

¹³ For a fascinating look at nostalgia and transformative change in the context of the French Revolution see, Peter Fritzsche, “Specters of History: On Nostalgia, Exile, and Modernity,” *American Historical Review* (December 2001), 1587-1618.

of meaning and, ironically, serves to de-politicize the past. Nostalgia invokes the past only to bury it alive.¹⁴ I am therefore intensely aware of how I interact with and present the oral narratives of displaced workers. Memory is “not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings”.¹⁵ As a result, oral historians must work on both the factual and narrative planes, as well as on the past and on the present.

And yet there is also a danger in middle class academic audiences assuming that the warm memories of working people are *nothing but* nostalgia. This, too, serves to depoliticize – and to effectively silence a group of already marginalized men and women. At its worst, it belittles working people’s attachments to their work and to their cultural worlds. In their recent introduction to *Beyond the Ruins: The Meaning of Deindustrialization*, for example, Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott called on labour historians to avoid smokestack nostalgia: “we have to strip industrial work of its broad-shouldered, social-realist patina and see it for what it was: tough work that people did because it paid well and it was located in their communities.”¹⁶ The message, here, it seems, is that to say that work typically meant *more* to industrial workers than this bleak happenstance is to deal in “broad-shouldered, social realist” image-making. I strongly disagree. Let’s now turn to the plant shutdown stories told by Sturgeon Falls paper workers.

Place Attachment and Identity in a Working Man’s Town

Working at the mill was once central to the economic and social life of Sturgeon Falls. The history of the mill and the history of the town were one and the same in the oral narratives. When the first pulp mill opened in the 1890s, the town thrived. When Abitibi Pulp and Paper closed the mill from 1932 until 1947, the town was devastated. Old timers interviewed such as Ken Colquhoun recall seeing tens of thousands of logs being run down the Sturgeon River past the closed mill to Lake Nipissing where they

¹⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 117.

¹⁵ Alessandro Portelli. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Buffalo: SUNY Press, 1991).

¹⁶ Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, *Beyond the Ruins: The Meaning of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), see the introduction.

were fed to a sawmill in Callandar, across the water.¹⁷ The town of Sturgeon Falls only came back to life when the mill re-opened after the war. In 1947, the corrugated paper line re-started. In 1951, the mill diversified into hardboard and in 1956 into platewood. The 1950s were thus remembered as a “happy period” by many interviewees.

The mill’s smokestack and water tower physically dominated the town and loomed large in the oral narratives. Several interviewees noted that they could see the mill from the windows of their homes. “Smoke has been coming out of those stacks for as long as I can remember,” said Mike Lacroix.¹⁸ It was also the best paying job in the area and the largest employer. “If you have to earn a living,” said Marc Coté, “it was the best.”¹⁹ When Denis MacGregor first walked through the gate in November 1972, at age eighteen, he thought that he was set for life.²⁰ Sturgeon Falls was quite simply, Pierre Hardy asserted, a “single industry town”.²¹

The mill was treated as an actor in these oral narratives. Virtually everyone referred to it simply as “the mill”. When asked about entering the plant gates for the first time, several of the narrators spoke of the time when “the mill” called to offer them a job. “My Mother told me, ‘the mill called,’” recalled Raymond Marcoux.²² It is noteworthy that almost nobody interviewed referred to the mill by its corporate name. The “Weyerhaeuser” name was used in its most narrow sense to describe the company – an outside entity that controlled the mill and therefore their destiny. In part, the clear distinction drawn between the “company” and the “mill” may have been due to the fact that Weyerhaeuser owned the mill for just three years before closing it down. MacMillan-Bloedel, the previous owner, operated the mill for only twenty years, having purchased it from Abitibi in 1979. As a result, most of those interviewed had worked for three corporate bosses over their working lives in the mill. For these narrators, this was their mill, not the company’s.

¹⁷ Ken Colquhoun interviewed by Steven High. June 2005.

¹⁸ “Lives ‘ripped away’ by shutdown – workers,” *North Bay Nugget* (30 November 2002).

¹⁹ Pierre Hardy interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. 12 December 2003. The follow-up interview in June 2005 was conducted by Steven High.

²⁰ Denis MacGregor interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. 17 June 2004.

²¹ Pierre Hardy interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. 12 December 2003. The follow-up interview in June 2005 was conducted by Steven High.

²² Raymond Marcoux interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. 20 May 2004.

There was a palpable sense of pride expressed in the plant shutdown stories. One salaried interviewee who wished to remain anonymous noted that ‘We were making a good product. It was well recognized in the market.’ Photographs taken during these celebrations and preserved in the mill newsletter attests to this pride in the mill’s efficiency and in its profitability.²³ Almost everyone emphasized that the mill continued to make money until the end. Marcel Boudreau even referred to it as “That little gold mine on the Sturgeon River.”²⁴

Though the paper mill offered the highest wages in the area, it also generated social division along class and language lines. For much of its history, the mill was run by English-speaking managers recruited from outside the region. Its labour force, however, was drawn mainly from local French-speaking Roman Catholics who represented the overwhelming majority of the area’s population. English was nonetheless the language of work inside the mill; there were few French-speaking managers until the final years of operation. The workplace community that took root, here, was thus a class community reinforced by gender and language that grew up – to some extent – in opposition to the Anglo-Protestant management of the mill.

This social division was most apparent in the oral history interview conducted with Wayne LeBelle. University educated, with a degree in sociology and a keen interest in the history of the region, Wayne LeBelle has written several books documenting the history of Sturgeon Falls and the surrounding townships.²⁵ Originally from Kapuskasing, Wayne moved to Sturgeon Falls in 1967 to become a reporter for the *North Bay Nugget*. In Sturgeon Falls, he said, “you only got one place to go and work and that is the mill.”²⁶ In a series of interviews, LeBelle emphasized the monopolistic hold that the Anglo-Celtic mill managers, brought in from outside, and set apart in company homes in the “compound” beside the mill, had on the indigenous French-Canadian community. For

²³ Among the documents that we have gathered, or copied, from people’s basements are copies of the mill newsletter, “The Insider”. All of the documents collected will be donated to the West Nipissing Public Library upon the publication of a book length study of the Sturgeon Falls mill closing.

²⁴ Marcel Boudreau interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. 1 December 2003.

²⁵ He was commissioned to write a book on the history of Sturgeon Falls for the town’s centenary in 1995. The book was a huge seller in the region: virtually every family has a copy. It presents a compelling narrative of the town’s development. Wayne F. LeBelle. *Sturgeon Falls, 1895-1995* (Field, Ontario: WFL Communications, 1995). The history of the surrounding villages is explored in Wayne F. LeBelle. *West Nipissing Owest* (Field, Ontario: WFL Communications, 1998).

²⁶ Wayne LeBelle interviewed by Steven High. December 2005.

him, it was a form of economic colonialism that made people dependent on the company to provide for them. As a result, the company and its Anglophone managers acted like they owned the place. According to LeBelle,

“The mill became their mother, their father, their accountant, their priest, their banker, their mortgager, their, their, their. It became like their whole life. And many people never left town [during lengthy layoffs]. Maybe never became the people, got to be what they could have been. There could have been more doctors, more lawyers... but a lot of people just chose to go the mill with their lunch pail. It really was very hurtful... that was the way it has been for a hundred years. They would work in the mill and they would cut pulpwood.”²⁷

The mill may have created jobs but it “had a very crushing force on the French Canadian population here.”²⁸ In LeBelle’s mind, the mill was a destroyer of people.

This interpretation is supported to some extent by a public controversy that erupted in the early 1970s when local Franco-Ontarians demanded a high school of their own. Unbelievably, the only high school in Sturgeon Falls was English. Faced with these demands, Cam Barrington, the long-time plant manager, threatened, or at least strongly implied, to close the mill at a public meeting rather than pay the higher school taxes that would accompany the proposal.²⁹ Many in Sturgeon Falls were outraged and a protest march descended on the mill the following day. Upon seeing the approaching parade, Ed Fortin, the mill’s personnel manager, and one of the few Franco-Ontarians to have made it into the ranks of management, turned to Barrington and said, tongue in cheek, “they’ve come to get you.”³⁰ The crisis passed when a French high school came into being, but the authority of the English managers would never be the same again.

²⁷ Wayne LeBelle interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. 6 September 2004. When Wayne LeBelle reviewed his quote he said that in 2004, when the storm over the closure was still raging, he empathized strongly with the employees at the mill. However, he said that he was not demeaning of people who work for a living, but rather that over time, the mill became their economic trap. When it collapsed, many of them collapsed as well and were definitely not ready for the work place that faced them. It was an unintended consequence he said of “having had a good paying job - they were not prepared for the new market place and as one man said, who wants to hire somebody in their 50s without a trade? LeBelle said this same story is being replayed now in Smooth Rock Falls in Northern Ontario.

²⁸ Wayne LeBelle interviewed by Steven High. December 2005.

²⁹ This story was repeated by several interviewees and was largely supported by newspaper coverage at the time. The incident did not get raised in my first interview with Cam Barrington. In the second interview, I raised the issue directly. Cam Barrington quietly answered that the controversy did occur, but that he did not overtly threaten to “close the mill.” Cam Barrington interviewed by Steven High. June 2005.

³⁰ Ed Fortin interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. 5 August 2004.

If language reinforced class divisions in Sturgeon Falls, gender served to bridge them. There was a deep sense among former mill workers that Sturgeon Falls was a working man's town. The forest industry is a male dominated sector to be sure; the fundamentally gendered nature of forestry towns is evident in the oral history interviews.³¹ Percy Allary, for example, told us that "You spend more time with the guys at work than you do with our own family."³² It was a place where blue collar men drove pick-up trucks and went to work with a lunch bucket and work boots.³³ The mill workers were family men for the most part, with a handful of women working in the mill office. Those women who found part-time work in town, usually in the service sector or in the town's hospital or schools, were deemed to be on the margins of the town's economic life. Randy Restoule summarized it this way: "There are teachers and the hospitals, but the reason why they are there is because of this mill."³⁴ While the mill employed mainly men, a few women worked in the offices. Ruth Thompson was the mill manager's secretary until Weyerhaeuser took over. In her narrative, she makes a distinction between "company people" (salaried staff) and "workers" (union wage earners) as well as between "company people" and the two "company girls".³⁵ The male breadwinner ideal, at least discursively, reigned supreme in Sturgeon Falls.³⁶

The connection to the mill ran deep in many families. These bonds were so deep that interviewees frequently referred to themselves as "mill families" in their oral narratives. The reason for this is not difficult to find. "Our dads worked there... we worked there... our kids worked there in the summer," Marc Coté recalled.³⁷ Lawrence Pretty' father worked in the mill since it re-opened in 1947. "He worked his life in there

³¹ Brian Egan and Suzanne Klaussen, "Female in a Forest Town: the Marginalization of Women in Port Alberni's Economy," *BC Studies* 118 (1998), 6; Trevor J. Barnes and Roger Hayter, "Economic Restructuring, Local Development and Resource Towns: Forest Communities in Coastal British Columbia," *Canadian Journal of Regional Science* 17, 3 (Autumn 1994), 289-310.

³² Percy Allary interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 9 June 2004. The follow-up interview in June 2005 was conducted by Steven High.

³³ Gender relations in Sturgeon Falls were strikingly similar to those described by anthropologist Thomas W. Dunk in Thunder Bay, Ontario. See his: *It's A Working Man's Town: Male Working-Class Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), especially chapter one.

³⁴ Randy Restoule interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 5 August 2004.

³⁵ Ruth Thompson interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 22 June 2004.

³⁶ The same situation held in forest dependent localities in British Columbia, see: Trevor J. Barnes and Roger Hayter, "Economic Restructuring, Local Development and Resource Towns: Forest Communities in Coastal British Columbia," *Canadian Journal of Regional Science* 17, 3 (Autumn 1994), 291.

³⁷ Marc Coté interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 30 January 2004.

and I worked mine,” he told us.³⁸ “I went into work and stayed there. Thirty-eight years later I came out.”

The mill also had a policy of hiring the sons and daughters of employees for summer jobs. Once in the plant, these students had an inside-track for permanent employment. Sons followed fathers into the mill and sometimes, as in the case of Ruth Thompson’s son, followed mothers as well. Mill employment was therefore effectively closed to other families. Over time, it became an increasingly insular workplace community – thus the saliency of the everyday term “mill families” – disconnected from the wider locality. Marcel Boudreau fondly called it “our little mill”, but the “our” in this statement was getting smaller and smaller.³⁹

Memories of Loss and Resistance

Pride in work and service and anger at Weyerhaeuser for closing the mill collided in the thirty year ring. Denis MacGregor, a machine tender, put in his thirty years and received in return a ring symbolizing his loyalty and service. Denis got his ring on 11 November 2002 and he got his “walking papers” on 6 December 2002.⁴⁰ The problem was that the men’s ring was emblazoned with a large “W” for Weyerhaeuser:

Denis: “I usually wear that [30 year ring], but the guys at the mill give me a hard time. But I say, ‘hey, I earned that.’ So nobody is going to tell me if I can wear it or not. I could take the insignia off, maybe I would because I really hate those guys. I don’t hate the States. I hate Weyerhaeuser.... What do I think about Weyerhaeuser? Is that what you want to know?”

Kristen O’Hare (interviewer): Yes.

Denis: I hate them with a passion. They have changed my way of life. They don’t give a shit about us and like they said it was a ‘corporate decision’ and its easy for a ‘corporate decision’ because it is in Washington. They don’t know us... I wear this [thirty year ring] because I am proud to wear it. Not because it is Weyerhaeuser, but its 30 years of service – good service. They made me live for 30 years. I can’t take that away from them. But Weyerhaeuser wasn’t with us for very long and I think that is why they did it that way. Had they been able to let us go within two months [of buying the plant in 1999] they would have done it.”⁴¹

³⁸ Lawrence Pretty interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. 22 June 2004.

³⁹ Marcel Boudreau interviewed by Steven High. June 2005. The initial interview was conducted by Kristen O’Hare. 1 December 2003.

⁴⁰ Denis MacGregor interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. 17 June 2004.

⁴¹ Denis MacGregor interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. 17 June 2004.

Denis' story, I think, reminds us that the mill may have been owned by Weyerhaeuser, but workers who spent a good deal of their lives inside its walls were strongly attached to the place and developed what could be described as a proprietary interest.

When a mill or factory closes, job loss is a collective experience. This is especially true in a single-industry forestry town. For Mike Lacroix, the local union vice-president and 24 year man, it was a like a family: "We were born and raised together. We worked together every day. It's hard to see your other family suffer."⁴² In the interview that we conducted with him, he added that: "Our lives and our children's lives have been ripped away....I've left the best years of my life back at the mill... we've all left part of our lives there."⁴³ The ordeal began at eight o'clock in the morning on 8 October 2002 when the company convened a meeting at the community centre in neighbouring Cache Bay a predominantly English-speaking community. Interviewees recall that this was one of the coldest Autumn mornings to that point. Expecting trouble, the company had engaged a private security firm to be present that morning. Many of the workers were unimpressed. One interviewee who wished to remain nameless recalled that the company had "some goons in the audience. They thought there would be a riot." It sent a nasty message to everyone present. An out-of-town official from Weyerhaeuser made a brief announcement that the mill would close on 6 December and directed workers to pick-up a personally tailored package that detailed what each person would receive in terms of severance pay. In the question period that followed, the company made it clear that it would not sell the plant "at any price." This uncompromising position was bitterly resented by all the mill workers interviewed.

Not surprisingly, the announcement came as a shock. Dan Pigeau, one of the youngest employees at age 26, told the *Tribune* that those working the night shift speculated about what would be announced that morning.⁴⁴ They knew it had to be something big as the company announced it would shut down production for the day. Many of those interviewed thought Weyerhaeuser would announce a layoff. Several others thought that the company might announce the mill's closing, but in a few years

⁴² Brandi Cramer, "Severance Packages, EI running out for former Weyerhaeuser employees," *North Bay Nugget* (22 January 2004), A2.

⁴³ "Lives 'ripped away' by shutdown – workers," *North Bay Nugget* (30 November 2002).

⁴⁴ Dean Lisk, "Weyerhaeuser to close in December," *Tribune* (15 October 2002).

time. Nobody expected the company to announce that the mill would shut down for good two months later. One employee after another told us that the mill was busy until the day it closed. Weyerhaeuser had an “evergreen” contract to supply all of the corrugated medium that the mill could produce until the following summer. The company had three corrugated paper mills, but the other two were located in the United States. To stop production when it did, Weyerhaeuser reportedly had to pay a stiff penalty to the customer. Naturally, this did not sit well with the displaced mill workers.

The Sturgeon Falls workers were “like Zombies” for the next eight weeks.⁴⁵ To keep production going until the end, Weyerhaeuser offered them a \$5,000 bonus. However, as Pierre Hardy noted, the bonus came “with strings attached”: it was tied to production and safety. If there were three recorded “safety incidents” or accidents, Hardy said, the payment would be zero: “Some bonus! Talk about stress!”⁴⁶ Small accidents were therefore left unreported. Any talk of occupying the plant in protest was also quashed, the workers would have lost their \$5,000 bonus. Nobody was willing to lose this cash. It would come in handy over the coming months and years. In effect, Mike Lacroix sighed, the bonus bought their silence.

Memories of the final shift were sometimes painful, sometimes wistful. The mill closed on December 5th, a day earlier than planned. Not surprisingly, the atmosphere was subdued. “We were kicked out after lunch,” said Dean Pigeau. “Guys began filing out after they were told to leave.”⁴⁷ Percy Allary recalled that everybody brought in some food for a “big feast”. Photographs that were taken that day show workers gathered around the last roll of paper produced by the mill and then signing their names to it. Allary took a final walk through the mill and at 12:30 p.m. management told them to go home. Marcel Boudreau recalled that other guys had tears in their eyes. Not him. “I took what was mine and left,” he said. Yet he described his last shift as a “good shift”:

“It was a Thursday. I started my long weekend. I had worked the Wednesday, Thursday. We were on 12 hour shifts. I was done. My relief was in at twenty to seven. I went down, took my shower, emptied my locker. Went upstairs, emptied out my locker there. I had three lockers to empty out. I walked out of the mill at 7:30. I got to the end of the driveway, at the end of the mill property. I turned

⁴⁵ Anonymous Interviewee (staff member) interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. June 2004.

⁴⁶ Pierre Hardy interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. 12 December 2003.

⁴⁷ Dean Pigeau quoted in Dean Lisk and Susanne Gammon, “West Nipissing Marches,” *The Tribune* (10 December 2002).

around and took a look. Steam was coming out of the stacks as it always did. Turn around and that was it. I haven't been back in the mill ever since."⁴⁸

Pierre Hardy's description of his last shift in the mill was broadly similar to other people's accounts: "It was a long shift, put it that way." Pierre did not want to shut the paper machine down. "There was no way I was going to do it. Get some other guys to do it.... I am not going to shut the machine down. Get someone else to do your dirty work."⁴⁹ But, as it turned out, his last shift was not the mill's last so it was somebody else's job. "Thank God", he exclaimed. He did go back, however, to see the last roll and to take some pictures. He cut off a sheet of the paper and wrote "last shift." On his locker he wrote: " 'I'll be back', just like Arnold", he laughed.⁵⁰

The median age of the mill workforce at the end was 47 or 48 years old. Ten of the workers, aged 55-58, were caught in the "three year zone" and had to accept a rolled-back pension in order to retire immediately. "That hurt," Raymond Marcoux said.⁵¹ Those unable to retire expressed their fear for the future. A profound sense of loss permeated the oral testimonies. Marcel Boudreau, like many others, once thought that he had a job for life: "I can remember lying in bed and wondering what the hell I was going to do. I had a grade 12 education. It took me 6 years to do it.... When I got hired in the mill I was told by the guys that were working there that 'this was a job for life. You just have to put up with the layoffs in between.'"⁵²

Resistance was also a key theme in the interviews. The national CEP declared Friday December 6, a day of action. Six Sturgeon Falls workers were sent by the union to speak to workers at other Weyerhaeuser owned mills in Canada: Pierre Hardy was sent to Miramichi, New Brunswick; Louis Benoit to Kamloops, British Columbia; Renald Robert to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan; Rene Lebel to Edson, Alberta; and Marcel Boudreau to Dryden and Ear Falls in Northwestern Ontario. There they met with local trade unionists and participated in informational picket lines at these plants. Pierre Hardy was kind enough to let us photocopy the written text of his speech to Weyerhaeuser

⁴⁸ Marcel Boudreau interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 1 December 2003.

⁴⁹ Pierre Hardy interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 12 December 2003.

⁵⁰ Pierre Hardy interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 12 December 2003. This was raised again in the follow-up interview conducted by Steven High. June 2005.

⁵¹ Raymond Marcoux interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 20 May 2004.

⁵² Marcel Boudreau interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 1 December 2003.

workers in New Brunswick. The text read in part: “I am here to give the Sturgeon Falls mill a face and a voice and ask for your support. This is an organization that has NO values, NO vision, and NO commitment to the people or the environment – just the opposite of what they preach. For those of you that work for Weyerhaeuser, don’t be fooled, you may next.”⁵³ This was a prescient warning.

By all accounts, the men received a mixed reaction. Even though the Kamloops local of the CEP donated \$1,300 to the Sturgeon Falls workers, it was the story of the cool reception that Marcel Boudreau got at the plant gate in Dryden that circulated most widely within Sturgeon Falls. This is the story that is told and re-told. It went something like this: The union sent Marcel Boudreau to carry the message of union (or class) solidarity and defiance to Weyerhaeuser’s paper mill in Dryden. At the plant gate, however, Boudreau received a disheartening response to his appeal. Most of the paper workers that he encountered in Dryden simply shrugged their shoulders and said that the company was treating them well. Boudreau could not get anyone to say anything bad about Weyerhaeuser. They were indifferent to the plight of Sturgeon Falls. “Better them than us” seemed to be the reaction of many. The account ends with the storyteller, often pausing for dramatic effect, saying that five hundred Dryden workers were laid-off by Weyerhaeuser in October 2003. The moral of this story is clear. The mill workers telling the story wanted us to draw the same conclusions they had. First, the story tells us that it was foolhardy for the workers in Dryden to believe that Weyerhaeuser would treat them any better than they had their employees in Sturgeon Falls. This was a heartless American company that was loyal to no one. Second, in the absence of union or class solidarity, the story communicates just how isolated Marcel Boudreau and the other mill workers felt. The Sturgeon Falls workers were on their own.

While Pierre Hardy, Marcel Boudreau and others were pleading their case in forestry towns across Canada, one hundred and fifty people gathered in Sturgeon Falls to protest. They marched on the closed mill carrying signs and banners declaring “Weyerhaeuser, free Sturgeon Falls” and chanting “Free the mill. Free the mill. Weyerhaeuser go home”.⁵⁴ Among the dignitaries in attendance that morning were the Vice-President of

⁵³ The text of the speech is in the possession of Pierre Hardy. 6 December 2002.

⁵⁴ Phil Novak, “Mill Employees Punch Out for Good,” *North Bay Nugget* (6 December 2002).

the National CEP, the President of the Ontario Federation of Labour, the Mayor as well as the local members of the provincial and federal legislatures. What is surprising, here, is how few ordinary people attended the rally. The *Tribune*'s headline of "West Nipissing Marches" therefore seems like an overstatement.⁵⁵ Wayne LeBelle rightly noted that "you never saw a whole bunch of community people out there supporting them." This public protest, and the even smaller ones that followed, was attended almost exclusively by mill workers and their families.

The union's picket line went up at the plant's main gate on Monday December 9. In the days and months that followed, Marcel Boudreau, who lived nearby, arrived at seven in the morning with seven or eight picket signs.⁵⁶ As the first to arrive, he was in charge of setting up before the other guys showed up. A core group of ten or fifteen showed up every day, while a couple dozen others showed up less regularly. What of the others? Some found work in Sudbury or North Bay. A few moved away. A variety of reasons were offered by the stalwarts. In recognition of the changing gender division of labour within many mill families, perhaps, Marcel Boudreau said that one man couldn't come out because "his wife wouldn't let him go on the picket line."⁵⁷ Marcel "drank an awful lot of coffee last winter".⁵⁸

Pierre Hardy was another regular on the picket line, arriving soon after Marcel. There was no fire set up on the picket line for the first two or three weeks. One day someone brought a barrel. The fire kept the men warm during the winter months. Pierre Hardy started the fire each morning and stayed until twelve noon when there was a shift change on the picket line and another crew took over. Marcel Boudreau insisted he never set the fire, because he was "never cold." Asked why not, he replied: "I had a purpose. I had a reason for getting up. I wanted them to see my face."⁵⁹ More to the point, Marcel wanted the "mill babysitter" from Weyerhaeuser to see him walking that line. "It was one of

⁵⁵ It is significant that the news of another protest of some fifty people in September 2003 marking Weyerhaeuser's decision to demolish the mill received the following headline: "Union rallies outside mill". The mill's connection to the community, explicitly stated in December 2002, had been cut. Dean Lisk, "Union rallies outside mill," *Tribune* (9 September 2003).

⁵⁶ Marcel Boudreau interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 1 December 2003.

⁵⁷ This comment hints at the shifting gender roles in mill families as women often became the breadwinner in the wake of the closure. Marcel Boudreau interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 1 December 2003.

⁵⁸ Marcel Boudreau interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 1 December 2003.

⁵⁹ Marcel Boudreau interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 1 December 2003.

those things that has to be done,” he explained. Boudreau was bearing witness: “When guys were showing up for work I was already there. I was there before they were. I wanted them to see my face. I wanted them to know that I’m not going anywhere.”⁶⁰

The men on the line spent the cold winter months of January, February and March as well as the Spring months of April and May contemplating their futures. If the picket line provided these men with time to think, the line was also a space of confrontation as the mill workers blocked the vehicles of Weyerhaeuser staff from entering the front gate before letting them in. Mike Lacroix recalled that there were several incidents on the picket line with vehicles trying to force their way through. Passing cars would often honk their horns.

In retrospect, Pierre Hardy wished the picket line had been set-up on the other side of the mill, facing the main highway. As it was, the mill’s main gate faced the town itself. The advantage of the highway-side, he mused, was that this would have been far more embarrassing to the company as hundreds of cars pass by each day.⁶¹ The main gate, however, was a more natural location. It was where the mill workers went to work each morning. It was also where the “mill babysitter”, to borrow Boudreau’s phrase, would see them.

While the fight continued, the CEP campaigned to save the mill. Press releases were issued and court action undertaken. To bolster their case, the national and local unions wrapped themselves in the Canadian flag. The press releases issued by the union and their public utterances during these months teemed with nationalist indignation. On 29 November 2002, for example, the union announced that it had initiated a political action campaign to “focus national attention on what happens when a large American corporation is allowed to exploit the resources of a small Canadian town out of sheer greed.”⁶² The public comments of the leaders of CEP Local 7135, recorded in the *Tribune* and the *Nugget*, pushed the same buttons. In February 2003, for example, local union President Denis Senecal called on the Ontario government to intervene: “Is he going to let American companies dictate how to do business in Ontario? This is not only our

⁶⁰ Marcel Boudreau interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. 1 December 2003.

⁶¹ Pierre Hardy interviewed by Steven High. June 2005.

⁶² “Union more determined than ever” *CEP Press Release* (29 November 2002), found in the records of Pierre Hardy.

fight...it's the province's fight."⁶³ The anger directed at Americans was deeply felt. It had become personal. The plant shutdown stories of a clear majority of the mill workers bristled with nationalist barbs. Many are convinced that a Canadian company would have done things differently. Several interviewees even suggested that the mill would still be in operation had MacMillan-Bloedel not been acquired by American-owned Weyerhaeuser. The picket line continued until June 2003, but it was becoming clear that the mill could not be saved. Demolition began in June 2004.

One of the most painful topics discussed in the oral interviews was the demolition of the mill. Restoration Environmental Contractors, based in Southern Ontario, was given the contract to demolish the 300,000 square foot facility as well as to provide environmental abatement.⁶⁴ The reaction of the interviewees to the mill's demolition was mixed. Hubert Gervais visited the site every day in order to visually document the demolition with his camera.⁶⁵ He took thousands of images. Marcel Labbé also watched the demolition crews at work, but from his parked car outside the fence.⁶⁶ The mill's smokestack had special significance for Marcel: "What we're watching is the chimney. You know the tall chimney. When that goes down that will mean something because that's where we worked. It's bad."⁶⁷ Ruth Thompson, agreed: "It was a little mill. It was like another era gone by. Now, it is going to be torn down just like part of your life is being ripped away. That's how I felt."⁶⁸

Not every former mill employee, however, wished to witness the demolition. Several of the workers interviewed were repelled by the sight of the mill's demolition. In fact, Pete Hardy has avoided setting his eyes on the mill ever since they began tearing it down. "I wanted to see the mill as it was," he told me.⁶⁹ This was not an easy task in a

⁶³ Quoted in an article by Gord Young, "Former Weyerhaeuser Employees Want Province to Join Fight," *North Bay Nugget* (Friday February 7, 2003), 1.

⁶⁴ "Weyerhaeuser Pulp and Paper Demolition," *Canada News Wire* (17 June 2004), 1.

⁶⁵ Hubert Gervais interviewed by Steven High on multiple occasions, 2004-2006.

⁶⁶ Marcel Labbé interviewed by Steven High. June 2005.

⁶⁷ In a second interview conducted months later, Marcel Labbé told us that had been tipped off about the demolition of the stack by the guard at the gate, a local woman. It was a cold day and the town had not been notified beforehand. There were therefore not many people at the site. He took photographs of the demolition crew cutting the base of the stack – "like a tree" – and the rising dust after the stack hit the earth. He expressed disappointment that his camera was unable to record the falling stack itself.

⁶⁸ Ruth Thompson interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. June 2004.

⁶⁹ Pierre Hardy interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 12 December 2003. Follow-up interview by Steven High. June 2005.

town as small as Sturgeon Falls. Other workers looked, but did not like what they saw. Randy Restoule found it hard to watch Weyerhaeuser removing equipment.⁷⁰ Mike Lacroix told us that his father still swears every time he passes the mill site, such is his anger.⁷¹ In one final act of resistance, Mike Lacroix successfully halted demolition temporarily in July 2004 when he filed a complaint to the Ontario government that the demolition company was not following proper procedure in removing asbestos from the building.⁷² To counter this bad news story, a spokesperson for the demolition company attempted to explain it away by saying that “there’s a lot of negative public feeling and animosity about the closing and now demolition of this plant by former employees in the community.”⁷³ No kidding.

Economic and Cultural Displacement

In this section, I would like to turn to the changing meaning of place in Sturgeon Falls, Ontario. When Weyerhaeuser closed the corrugated paper plant, mill workers and their families continued to believe that the paper mill remained at the economic and cultural heart of the town. To them, it was a mill town. They were therefore convinced that its closing would be a disaster not only for themselves but for Sturgeon Falls as a whole. In letters to the editor and in published interviews with the media, they warned that the closing would result in closed businesses, lower house values, an exodus of young people, and put into question the future of the town itself. The mill’s closing is “like taking a page out of history and closing the book” said Marc Coté. “When you shut something like that down you take a little bit of the heart of the town.”⁷⁴

The mill’s closing has had a devastating economic impact on most of the mill families. There were few jobs to apply for in Sturgeon Falls and fewer still for middle aged men with a high school education. “Who wants to hire a 50-year-old with no trade?” asked Pierre Hardy. Even before the mill’s closing, the town’s unemployment rate stood

⁷⁰ Randy Restoule interviewed by Kristen O’Hare.

⁷¹ Mike Lacroix interviewed by Steven High. December 2005.

⁷² The story was picked up by newspapers across the province. “Ministry puts brakes on mill demolition,” *Sault Star* (13 July 2004), B3; Maria Calabrese, “Mill Demolition Will go On: Air-Quality Monitors Focus of Concern,” *Sudbury Star* (15 July 2004), A2.

⁷³ W.D. Lighthall, “Demolition of Former Mill Back on Track After Delay,” *Daily Commercial News and Construction Record* 77, 144 (28 July 2004), 1.

⁷⁴ Marc Coté interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. 30 January 2004.

at 16.3 per cent far higher than the rate that then prevailed in Ontario.⁷⁵ In part, the high unemployment rate was the result of the end of hardboard production at the mill which resulted in the layoff of 150 workers. If Sturgeon Falls was a working man's town before the mill closing, it now threatened to become a "retirement town" or an "old age home".⁷⁶ There was also a gender dimension to the changes underway. The major employers in the town were now in the public and retail sectors – two areas that traditionally employed women. As a result, it was sometimes easier for the men's wives to find work than it was for former male breadwinners.

If the mill families struggled with the economic consequences of job loss, life seemed to go on in Sturgeon Falls without the mill. Many mill workers expressed genuine surprise when the mill's closing did not have the devastating economic effect that they had always expected. House prices did not plummet; businesses did not close overnight. At first, J.P. Charles, a former Reeve of Springer Township, thought that the mill's closing would be "tough" on Sturgeon, but "the town is busy."⁷⁷ The town's proximity to North Bay and Sudbury allowed residents to commute to jobs, located east and west. The effect of the mill's closing was therefore most obvious to residents when it came to the town's finances. "It's a massive revenue loss," said the town's chief administrative officer Jay Barbeau.⁷⁸ The mill had generated \$700,000 in direct revenues annually: \$150,000 for municipal garbage removal, \$200,000 for water and sewerage services, and \$350,000 in taxes. The municipality responded by raising taxes.

Despite the mill's central place in the lives and memories of the mill workers and their families, its economic and cultural centrality had eroded over time. Over a thirty year period, one production line after another was halted until only one remained. The workforce went from a peak of 700 to just 140 at the end. As each production line fell silent, younger workers were laid-off. For many years, someone interviewed remarked, "the place was really unsteady. There was no guarantee of a good future here." Brian Lefleche could attest to that. He was laid-off in 1969 when the platewood mill closed, but

⁷⁵ The mill's closing of course made a bad situation worse. It is estimated that forty per cent of the 140 mill workers were still unemployed in January 2004, two years after the mill's closure. The estimate comes from Mike Lacroix, a counselor at the Action Centre, quoted in Brandi Cramer, "Severance Packages, EI running out for former Weyerhaeuser employees," *North Bay Nugget* (22 January 2004), A2.

⁷⁶ See, for example, the interviews with Raymond Marcoux and Lawrence Pretty.

⁷⁷ J.P. Charles interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 10 August 2004.

⁷⁸ Anna Pickarski, "Loss of Mill Has Cost town \$1.4 million," *Sudbury Star* (20 July 2004), A2.

eventually called back only to lose his job again in 1972. At this point, he had enough and he went into sales.⁷⁹ The closing of the hardboard plant and the corrugated paper machine's shift from virgin wood to 100% recycled paper in 1991 was particularly difficult. The mill's workforce was cut in half and the mill lost its longstanding connection to the surrounding rural townships which provided the wood. Gerry Stevens, a former mill superintendent, remembers what it was like walking through the plant in the final years. Entire sections of the mill were abandoned.⁸⁰ As the years wore on, Brian Lafleche noted, "the mill diminished."⁸¹

The mill's closing therefore did not have the impact that it would have, had it closed thirty years earlier. "It would have devastated the town," said Brian Lafleche. In the early days, "the mill would have been *the* employer in the town. If the mill closes the town is dead, that used to be the saying."⁸² Others agreed with this assessment. It had not made "the kind of impact that you would think" mused Wayne LeBelle.⁸³ While the mill continued to be a key source of tax revenue for the town, its centrality in the lives of many local families was long past.

By 2002, the 140 remaining mill workers found themselves isolated. "A lot of people were envious of us for working there," asserted Pierre Hardy. Lawrence Pretty could also remember people saying to him "Oh, because your dad worked there that's why you work there." The distinction drawn between "mill people" "mill workers" or "mill families" on the one hand and "townspeople" or "the community" on the other ran through the oral narratives of mill workers and their spouses. When the mill closed, it was therefore believed that the envy of some residents turned to glee. Marcel Boudreau, for example, was convinced that many townspeople "felt we were too well paid for what we did. I know for a fact that there is a number of people who were quite happy to see the mill shut down and have us all lose our jobs. 'Welcome to the real world.' Jelous people."

But how did Sturgeon Falls residents not closely associated with the mill really feel? Did they embrace the socio-economic and cultural changes underway? There was of

⁷⁹ Brian Lafleche interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 3 June 2004.

⁸⁰ Gerry Stevens interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 2 June 2004.

⁸¹ Brian Lafleche interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 3 June 2004.

⁸² Brian Lafleche interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 3 June 2004.

⁸³ Wayne LeBelle interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 6 September 2004.

course a wide range of responses. What is clear from the evidence collected thus far is that the mill was no longer the dominant economic and cultural force in the town. It had lost its centrality. The gradual decline of the mill's workforce was offset to some extent by employment growth in the public sector. A new local office of Statistics Canada employed 250 and the hospital another 238. At the same time, the mill's ties to the surrounding rural townships were cut when the mill shifted from virgin wood to recycled cardboard in the early 1990s. Until then, the mill relied almost exclusively on area farmers and area sawmills for its supply. Wayne LeBelle put it bluntly when he said: "For us in Field, it means nothing. For the majority of West Nipissing it means nothing." It only meant something to those who lost their jobs. To everyone else, even locally, it "means very little." Hammering home the point, he continued: "It sounds like a huge tragedy and it is for some individuals. It is a big smack. In the bigger picture of West Nipissing its not. The world does not revolve around Sturgeon Falls. It does not. Ask all those questions in Verner, in Cache Bay."⁸⁴ However harsh this assessment may be, it is hard to ignore. In many respects, Sturgeon Falls had ceased to be a "mill town" even before the mill closed in December 2002. The town's shift away from industry had occurred gradually over several decades. The mill's closing simply marked the completion of this long-term process.

And yet, this economic and cultural shift had largely escaped the notice of the mill workers and their families. Time and again, the men and women interviewed expressed their genuine surprise that the closure of the mill did not have a more visible effect on Sturgeon Falls. "It doesn't appear to have affected the town too much," observed Marcel Labbé. Others thought that townspeople would be surprised when the situation eventually worsened. "People don't truly understand the impact on the community," cautioned Mike Lacroix. In this context, mill workers could not help but feel that the town that they knew was dead. For Randy Restoule, "The writing was on the wall. We just didn't see it.... We were sold out."⁸⁵

Several of the mill workers interviewed drew a contrast between the local community's energetic – even heroic – response to the threatened closure of the

⁸⁴ Wayne LeBelle interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. August 2004.

⁸⁵ Randy Restoule interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 5 August 2004.

corrugated paper mill in 1991 and the inaction of 2002-2003. The town council focussed its energy on purchasing the mill's hydro-electric generating plant, not on saving the mill itself. According to Marcel Boudreau, the "community sure pulled together to try to do something then. But they didn't do a god damn thing to do anything about it this time around. I'm not ashamed to say it either. I walked the picket line all winter last year. I would say there was not much help from our local councillors here." As far as Pierre Hardy is concerned, "the community never did anything for us... [19]91 and 2003 it is like night and day." Several workers suggested that the *West Nipissing Tribune*, the bilingual weekly newspaper serving the locality, was far less supportive of the mill workers' and their efforts to re-open the mill in 2003 than the *North Bay Nugget*. "We had more backing from North Bay than we had from Sturgeon", recalled Mike Lacroix. "I don't know why. Even the *Nugget*, they came over and covered the stories. Our own people... they wouldn't. Why aren't you backing us? We are trying to keep this place going to make money for the community?"⁸⁶

While the reasons for the changed response to the mill's closing are many, and far too complex to detail here, three points need to be kept in mind. First, the old town council of Sturgeon Falls – which would have been ready "to fight to the death for its 'industry' – had been amalgamated in January 1999 with the adjoining townships.⁸⁷ The new municipality of West Nipissing had a very different style and focus and was no longer wedded to the mill. The political players had also changed. The second point that I would like to raise is that in the ten or eleven intervening years the mill's workforce had declined to 140 from 300. With these diminished numbers, it became possible to imagine a Sturgeon Falls without the mill. This was still not the case in 1991-92. Finally, the successful effort to keep the mill open in the early 1990s, converting the mill to recycled paper, only to have it close a decade later sapped the town's will to resist. Several interviewees spoke of an "exhausted" community unable to respond to Weyerhaeuser's decision to shut the mill.

The oral narratives are supported by a series of letters to the editor published in *The Tribune* between October 2002 and March 2003. At first, the voices of mill workers

⁸⁶ Mike Lacroix interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 4 February 2004.

⁸⁷ This point was emphasized by Wayne LeBelle in a private communication.

and their families predominated. However, starting in March 2003, other residents began to challenge the legitimacy of their claims. At issue in this debate was nothing less than who had the right to speak on behalf of Sturgeon Falls and the “community.”⁸⁸

In their efforts to mobilize public opinion and state power (if only the municipality), the mill workers and their supporters appealed to place attachment, nation and the environment. Two letters, one by a mill worker and the other by a spouse, will be analyzed here. The first appeared shortly after the closing was announced on 22 October 2002. Bruce Colquhoun, a mill worker, urged the “whole community” to respond as it had in 1991 when the mill’s future was last threatened. He appealed to local “community” sentiment and challenged those who would not defend place:

“This closure doesn’t just affect us who work at the mill. It will have a great impact on everyone here. There is a lot of money generated into our economy that will be lost. Families will be forced to move away, because, let’s face it, there sure isn’t much work around here to be found. Property values will decrease drastically, and property taxes will increase because of the lost taxes from the mill. There are a few people who laugh at us, because we’ve ‘had it so good for so long.’ Laugh all you want, but what is the town without the mill? We will ALL soon find out, won’t we.”

Bruce Colquhoun’s community of identification, however, was not tied exclusively to place. He also saw the mill’s closing as a matter of concern to all Canadians. This nationalist appeal was made explicit when he challenged Weyerhaeuser’s refusal to sell the mill as a going concern: “Typical Americans. And they wonder why they are hated throughout the world. They are going to tell us Canadians what to do with our mill.”⁸⁹ He thus appealed to two communities of identification at once - one national and the other local.

The letter from Jane Hardy, who identified herself as the spouse of a 27 year man, invoked the same two themes. Published on 10 December 2002, a few days after the mill closed, the letter blamed “American corporate greed” for the closure and noted that the mill’s profits had been diverted to the company’s headquarters in Washington State, USA.. Once again the nationality of the employer loomed large in Hardy’s mind:

⁸⁸ For more on the notion of community see: John Walsh and Steven High, “Rethinking the Concept of Community” *Histoire sociale/Social History* 17, 64 (November 1999), 255-74

⁸⁹ Bruce Colquhoun, “Mill closure will affect us all,” *Tribune* (22 October 2002).

“Is it because this is a multi-national American company, that they can just lock the door and pack up, return to the States and carry on their business as usual? Should they be allowed to operate in this manner? They have left their wreckage scattered all over Sturgeon Falls, Ontario and area and this will never be forgiven or forgotten! Is this the American way of doing business in Canada?”⁹⁰ She wrote that when Weyerhaeuser announced the mill’s closing on October 8th, “those Americans might as well have dropped a bomb on Sturgeon Falls.”

With the image of Americans dropping a bomb on Sturgeon Falls, Jane Hardy neatly shows just how intertwined national and local identities had become. In the post 9/11 world, one would be hard-pressed to find a more loaded analogy than the one employed by Hardy.

If place attachment and national sentiment were not sufficient motivators to readers of *The Tribune*, Colquhoun and Hardy added a third reason to care – the environment. Now, it might seem surprising that paper mill workers would invoke the environment in their own defense. It is common knowledge that paper mills are amongst the worst polluters of the environment. But as Jane Hardy noted in a subsequent letter, this mill was “unique” in so far as its source of wood fibre was recovered paper rather than virgin wood. As a result, it was a relatively clean mill and reduced the waste flowing into Ontario’s landfills. Bruce reminded his readers that only a short time earlier the mill produced its one millionth ton of recovered paper: “That is 1 MILLION TONS of material that has been diverted from landfill sites. 1 ton is 2,000 pounds. That’s a lot of paper and cardboard. We are a 100% recycling mill. I am surprised that environmental groups haven’t come forward yet.”⁹¹ In so far as the Sturgeon Falls mill produced 100 per cent recycled cardboard, it was responsible for keeping paper out of landfill sites.

Not everyone in Sturgeon Falls, however, agreed with the mill families. Vera Charles, for example, wrote a toughly worded letter in response to Jane Hardy. In it, Charles wrote: “there has been much boo-hoo-ing and feeling sorry for ourselves, which is mostly due to a big lack of understanding of how a business operates.”⁹² Weyerhaeuser was not a “charity.” She agreed that it would not be easy for workers to find new work, “but these are the realities of modern life.” Charles then suggested that the mill workers

⁹⁰ Jane Hardy, “Weyerhaeuser’s Not Fooling Anyone,” *Tribune* (Tuesday 10 December 2002).

⁹¹ Bruce Colquhoun, “Mill closure will affect us all,” *Tribune* (22 October 2002).

⁹² Jane Hardy, “Weyerhaeuser’s Not Fooling Anyone,” *Tribune* (Tuesday 10 December 2002).

had no cause to complain as, unlike non-union or part-time workers, they have been “employed for years at salaries most of us can only dream about” and received severance pay, career counselling, and “eventually, pensions!” Mill workers, she said, should “count their blessings” and be “thankful to receive such benefits when they are out of work.” Adopting the same rhetorical device that Jane Hardy used against the female spokesperson of Weyerhaeuser, Vera Charles went on to say

“ ‘Corporate greed’ says Jane Hardy, that’s exactly right! That is what for-profit businesses in a free market are all about , and for that matter, most individuals as well... Rather than whining, complaining, and shame shaming Weyerhaeuser like little children, we would do well to take our share of the responsibility and learn from this. Have we not watched as other single-industry towns suffered the same misfortune? Did we not know that plant closures, lay-offs, and cutbacks are common in our time, and that an individual now passes through 5 careers in a lifetime? ... Instead of bemoaning what we lost, we should think positively about where to go from here. Other towns have bounced back; so can Sturgeon Falls. It seems to me that the enormous amount of energy spent in outrage and grief could be channelled to better use elsewhere.”⁹³

While few other letter writers would be as uncompromising, Charles was not alone. Other letter writers urged readers to put the town’s industrial past behind them. “Now let’s accept the reality of the situation and move on,” said Mike Parsons.⁹⁴

The desire to move-on was expressed repeatedly in the oral interviews conducted with people outside the orbit of the mill families. Several of these interviewees believed that these changes would ultimately be beneficial to Sturgeon Falls. Interviewed in July 2004, Ronald Beauchamp, a key figure in the West Nipissing Economic Development Corporation, who contributed to the saving of the mill in the early 1990s, now concluded that he was representing the:

“interest of the municipality which is not exclusively the interest of employees. The employees would have like for us to buy the mill, but that is not in the best interest of the municipality. To buy a mill that will not be producing. Or, that there are too many question marks. It’s a world market. Nobody came forward with the expertise. People would say, ‘look at Tembec.’ Well when the employees bought Tembec, the managers were there to buy into this. Here, all we had were the employees. They were telling us ‘ok, that machine is fine.’ ‘That machine.’ That is not the problem. The problem is the world market. Can we sell this

⁹³ Vera Charles, “Time for Action, Not Whining,” *Tribune* (17 December 2002).

⁹⁴ Mike Parsons, “Weyerhaeuser Not So Bad,” *Tribune* (18 March 2003).

product? Can we compete in the world market? So there was a lot of friction between the municipality and the employees.”

The interests of the town and the mill employees had become decoupled. The end result of the mill’s closing, he said, will be “very positive”. As for the mill site, there was “nothing to do” with the mill buildings. They had to be demolished:

“I was convinced there was nothing to do with that plant. It was just too old. You are not going to put a 200 million dollar modern machine inside an old building whose foundation was built a hundred years [ago]. If you are going to buy a Rolls Royce the building [of] a new garage is not a problem. You are not going [to] park the Rolls Royce in an old garage that is going to fall. There are much better properties in the area for building a new plant where there is no underground pollution. Where you have access to services. There is just no logic to building a new mill where the old one is.”⁹⁵

If the mill site had no future as a site of industrial production, it did have other uses. It was “prime real estate” for tourism, Beauchamp said. “By the river, there is all kinds of possibilities. So our objective was not to save the old mill.” He wants to build a park in its place.

Beauchamp’s vision was in large part adopted by the Community Adjustment and Recovery Committee (CARC), headed by Royal Poulin, a leading Tory. The committee was asked to identify the opportunities for development and to fund selected projects. In June 2003, CARC produced a report entitled “Let’s Grow Together”. Sturgeon Falls’ future, it reported, was to position itself as a commuter suburb for North Bay and Sudbury, to make Sturgeon Falls a family-oriented wilderness destination, and to develop specialized retailing.⁹⁶ This report represented a massive re-definition of place, just six months after the mill closed. Even though efforts to re-open the mill persisted, the town’s leadership had already turned its back on the town’s industrial past and embraced its post-industrial future.

The mill families had lost their central place in the economic and cultural life of the town. They had been displaced to the periphery and were now outsiders looking in. Reflecting on the legacy of the mill, Wayne LeBelle told me: “Drive around town and say ‘Okay. What is the legacy they [the mill] left behind? What did they leave behind?

⁹⁵ Ronald Beauchamp interviewed by Kristen O’Hare. 8 July 2004.

⁹⁶ Dean Lisk, “CARC releases road plan for West Nipissing,” *Tribune* (24 June 2003).

They're going to leave behind some flat territory. They are going to leave behind a big huge parking lot."⁹⁷ It is as if the mill had never existed.

Drawing Conclusions

What does the future hold for Sturgeon Falls, the mill workers and their families? What becomes of a "mill town" without the mill? Whose town is it? It is impossible to know the answers to these questions for certain. Time will tell. When asked about the future of Sturgeon Falls, former mill workers continue to struggle with the idea that there is a future for Sturgeon Falls without industry. Randy Restoule spoke for many when he said: "I think we do need an industry here. We can't just be a bedroom community for North Bay and Sudbury. We need an industry to be our base, a tax base."⁹⁸ The town's location within commuting distance of Sudbury and North Bay has certainly saved it from the dismal fate of more isolated towns of no-industry. The town's tourism strategy is also proceeding apace. The unfolding Sturgeon Falls story, like the one that unfolded in dozens of other deindustrialized towns and cities across North America, is one of contestation and liminality –being caught betwixt-and-between.

If the physical evidence of more than a century of paper production has been largely erased, former mill workers risk losing their past in another way. In the course of demolishing the mill, Weyerhaeuser shredded most of the mill records and shipped the remainder out West or to the United States where they are off-limits to researchers. Except for a scattering of records secreted away in peoples' basements and a handful of items donated to the local museum, a century of production records have effectively ceased to exist. It was as if the mill's history was being demolished too. This deeply offended several interviewees. In the words of Hubert Gervais: "I think they should have come to us, the two historians, Bruce Colquhoun and myself, because there is a lot of files, old files, that they threw out, which was part of history. Boxes and boxes and boxes... they threw out an awful lot when they closed the mill. I just couldn't believe it.... Boxes and boxes of our history. Why didn't they leave it here?"⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Wayne LeBelle interviewed by Steven High. December 2005.

⁹⁸ Randy Restoule interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 5 August 2004.

⁹⁹ Hubert and Bruce are worker-historians who compiled the "Mill History" binder. This massive binder is a living memorial to the mill community. Hubert Gervais interviewed by Kristen O'Hare. 12 March 2004.