

## **How Lincoln moved beyond the mill**

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Every day at noon, the winding wail of an air siren tells the time.

Depending on one's proximity to the horn, a relic of the town's mill days, atop the town hall on Main Street, conversation must cease for a good 40 seconds, while the shriek pierces the air, echoes off the mountain tops and burrows into the soul. After that, the day returns to ordinary.

For the uninitiated, the sound is alarming, but for longtime residents, many of whom remember the era when the siren marked the lunch hour at the bustling paper mill, it is a comfort and a reminder of from whence they came.

"The mill was the preeminent workplace in Lincoln," said Peter Gould, who was president of the Franconia Paper Company, the last owner of the mill that loomed over the center of town. It was he who had to break the news to hundreds of millworkers in 1979 that their jobs were gone and would not be coming back.

A few years later, many watched curiously as Gould and others, including former Gov. Sherman Adams, breathed life into the old mill complex, sliced out slopes for skiers and polished the gem of the town in a way few ever imagined.

Carved out of the Pemigewasset wilderness, in the western White Mountains, Lincoln was granted in 1764 and named for Henry Clinton, the ninth Earl of Lincoln, although it would be nearly 20 years before it saw its first settler.

As word got out about such wonders as the Flume Gorge and its amazingly suspended boulder, the Indian Head profile and the Basin, hotels began popping up in Lincoln and neighboring Woodstock to cater to intrepid tourists.

At the same time, sawmills were set up to accommodate logging operations along the East Branch of the Pemigewasset River.

In 1892, JE Henry came to town, buying thousands of acres of virgin forest in the nearby mountains and developing a paper mill. Lincoln was a rough and tumble company town, with the mill owning the stores, establishing the school and a small hospital, housing and everything else to take care of the mill workers.

Henry died in 1912, and up until the mill closed in 1979, there had been just six owners. By then, government agencies were drawing up rules and regulations to protect the environment. The Lincoln mill closed down a couple of times in that decade, reopening on waves of hope that it would find its way through modern times.

Gould came to town in 1974, to take the helm of a mill that, at its height, employed more than 500 people and had a payroll of \$4 million. By then, it was more than 70 years old and moving away from the traditional pulp method of paper making to recycling newsprint.

"Our concept was to recycle paper and we did not discharge into the river," he recalled this month on a visit to the town, where his mother, Trudy, still lives. "We were the only non-polluting paper mill — we even made the cover of (an environmental publication) because of it."

According to newspaper accounts of the day, the mill owners invested \$5 million to convert the equipment, but it was plagued by technical problems and the mill closed in August 1976. It was later reopened on a limited basis and then relaunched with hope and fanfare in May 1979.

But it was not to last, and shortly after, hundreds of millworkers had no jobs. The mill was shuttered, never to make paper again.

Stuart Wallace is an associate professor of history at the New Hampshire Technical Institute in Concord and former director of the New Hampshire Historical Society. He did not grow up in Lincoln, but he did marry a local gal, Ruth Weeden, the daughter of the late police Chief John Weeden, who kept law and order in the town during the final years of the mill operation. The two men talked often over the years about the evolution of Lincoln.

“There were a lot of people who were left behind when the mill shut down and they were in a state of despair,” Wallace said. “Many people had to leave town because they had to have a paycheck.”

Like in Berlin, paper making in Lincoln had a long decline, but at the same time, forces were evolving, and reviving, to cater to tourists.

“Route 3 brought people north before the interstate and northern part of Lincoln was called the Gold Coast,” Wallace said. “There were old cottages, and places like Woodward’s (motel) and the Indian Head (resort) were where money was being made. Then, in the village, was the mill.”

By the late 1950s, two roads that had been dead ends in the middle of the Pemigewasset wilderness had been connected and in 1958, the Kancamagus Highway, connecting Lincoln and Conway, opened.

“It was phenomenal,” Wallace said. “Suddenly, there was a paved road and through traffic.” Adams, who was also the chief of staff for President Eisenhower, opened Loon Mountain in 1966, which began drawing skiers to its slopes a couple of miles east of the mill village. Meanwhile, work on Interstate 93 was pushing north.

Gould did not leave Lincoln when the mill went out. Instead, a couple of years later, he and other investors had the opportunity to acquire the old mill, “so we did.”

About the time they were trying to decide if retail stores were a viable way to redevelop the mill, McDonald’s had done its own study of the area and put up the golden arches, a further indication that Lincoln was poised for change.

In 1985, the Millfront Marketplace opened with 100 percent occupancy, Gould said.

“If we had known then what we know now, it would have never been built,” he recalled with a chuckle, conceding that more people than not thought it was a crazy idea to turn the mill into small mall.

“The preeminent asset was I-93,” he said. “That made it a two hour trip from Boston — that was most significant — and the area became a three-season resort.”

Lincoln had long known tourists — Clark’s Eskimo Sled Dog Ranch, which became Clark’s Trading Post, opened in 1928 and the Indian Head resort, with its tourist cottages, was a popular summer destination.

“Lincoln had Route 3, so it always had tourism,” Wallace said, noting that while Route 16 runs through Gorham and on into Berlin, many travelers don’t push north the seven or eight miles from the intersection with U.S. Route 2.

“I think that was key for Lincoln — the interstate was bringing people north from Plymouth and the timing was fortuitous.”

While the town overcame the devastating mill closure, Gould said there was no magic, especially for the workers who lost their jobs.

“The transition of the town to where it became a resort was not smooth,” he said. “Many people lost their primary income. The work (that followed) was different and so was the pay. A lot of people left town — they went to the mills in Groveton and Berlin. Lincoln had wonderful paper makers. Their skill level was a big asset.”

Those who have stayed in town, Wallace said, have watched the dramatic rise in real estate prices.

“I don’t think that when the mill closed, that people saw the impact the Kanc would have or Loon,” he said.

As much as Lincoln has, as Wallace said, “tidied its past,” the community has moved forward but remembers its heritage.

The North Country Center of the Arts, founded in 1986, has its stage home in Machine Room #1 of the old mill. High school sports teams coming to town take on the Lin-Wood Lumberjacks. Shoppers and diners at the Millfront Marketplace pass by enormous photos taken in the same mill decades ago, of paper workers toiling. The old time clock from those days is still in place.

Several old mill buildings are losing the battle with time, their roofs caved in and machinery long forgotten. A Massachusetts developer, Dennis Ducharme, is working to raze several of them, to make way for new shops and hotels. His designs incorporate the facade of the old mill buildings, and he has been working closely with some old-timers to preserve pictures and other parts of town history.