In early September 1951, just shy of my sixth birthday, I found a place to sit at the back of a crowded classroom. I was barely seated when the teacher, a Sister, excitedly asked aloud, “Who wants to go to Grade 1?”. I and the boy next to me raised our hands. Why not? But to no avail. We had to stay, while those seated in the desks, the previous year’s class, moved on. We then took their places as the new kindergarten class.

It is only now, all these years later, that I discovered that kindergarten was not the ordinary experience of boys and girls starting school at that time in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Unbeknownst to me then, it wasn't just kindergarten that made my life so extraordinarily different compared to many children my age all around Newfoundland.

The fact that I was living on an island surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean, but I had not yet seen a bay, cove, or harbour, let alone the limitless view of ocean was again extraordinary. That view of the sea’s infinite horizon became a first time experience for me when I was in grade nine.

It wasn't just the salt water that was absent from my life. I had no inkling of the centuries old

fishery which was the mainstay of most of our coastal communities. I hadn't seen nor did I know about nets, flakes, jiggers, stage heads, splitting tables, or all the other things that most Newfoundlanders took for granted. The fishery saturated our history, politics, language, economy, music, songs, poetry, plays, traditions, language, and folklore. But it was not a reality in my young life.

I was born in Grand Falls and, as a child, I had no idea what lay beyond the river, the hills, and the forest. In a sense, life in the interior, was life in a foreign land. A mere forty years before my birth, Grand Falls existed only as the name of a waterfalls on the Exploits River.

Although people had lived around coastal Newfoundland for hundreds of years, the interior of the island was a total wilderness which only became readily accessible by the completion of the trans-island railway in 1898. However, that event alone didn't spark the creation of a new town in the wilderness.

The impetus to form a community at the Grand Falls began with the failed Lewis Miller lumber mill (1900-03) which had been built at the headwaters of the Exploits River, on the shores of Red Indian Lake. That failure prompted William Reid (Reid Newfoundland Railway), H.M. Whitney, and Harry J. Crowe to form Newfoundland Timber Estates Ltd. The trio of entrepreneurs purchased the Miller operations with the intention of finding a market for the large stands of black spruce growing all throughout the Exploits valley.

Crowe went off to London, England and met with the newspaper publishers, the Harmsworth brothers, Alfred(Lord Northcliffe) and Harold(Lord Rothermere). The Harmsworths had need of a secure supply of newsprint, and were convinced by Crowe to explore the possibility of a newsprint mill in Newfoundland. That possibility quickly turned into a reality in 1904 when the Harmsworths purchased Newfoundland Timber Estates and struck a deal with the Bond Government in St.John's to open up a newsprint mill in the interior of the island. The Anglo-Newfoundland Development(AND) Company was incorporated on January 7, 1905 and thus the birth of Newfoundland's first mammoth construction project in the interior's heartland.

The Harmsworths sight manager, Mayson Beeton, began work on the multi million dollar project almost immediately. The design and construction of the Grand Falls project was led by a core of professionals from England, Scotland, Sweden, and the United States with even a few from Newfoundland. However, the bulk of the construction workers came mostly from the great bays such as Notre Dame, Bonavista and Trinity. The years of arduous work finally came to fruition on December 22, 1909 when the first saleable newsprint was produced at the mill.

Once the mill was up and running many of the foreigners went back home. By 1913, ninety-seven per cent of the AND Company's workforce were Newfoundlanders.

By the time I entered kindergarten the mill had expanded from the original three paper making machines to seven. As well, the company was the owner of the pulp mill operations in Bishop's

Falls and another non-completed mill and its timber limits at Glovertown. The Grand Falls and Bishop's Falls mills were supplied by logs harvested from a forest empire that stretched from the shores of Red Indian Lake eastward to Terra Nova. And the icing on the cake for the AND Company was its joint partnership in a mining operations in Buchans.

Along with the power plant, the mill, the railway and the shipping facilities at Botwood, the AND Company built a well planned and laid out town for its employees.

The Grand Falls of my kindergarten year was still a company town. It was by then well established with homes, churches, schools, retail stores, tailor shops, drug stores, hotels, and a hospital, dental office, law office, library, barber shop, jewelry store, restaurant, bank, radio station, community newspaper and even a dairy.

Other amenities that added comfort and charm to living in the town included paved streets, street lighting, decorative red rock walls, water and sewage, garbage collection, an artificial ice rink, baseball field, tennis court, golf course, parks, a theater for movies and live productions, an outdoor swimming pool and a town club with a bowling alley and pool room. For a child in primary school it was our very own Shangri-la in the wilderness.

Along with the AND Company facilities, there was plenty of private ownership, particularly the business establishments. By 1951 most of the homes had been sold to mill employees.

But it wasn't just the facilities, and the layout of the town, and year round work that made the place so different compared to most places in Newfoundland. The smells, the sights and the sounds of everyday living added to its uniqueness.

The rotten egg like smell of sulphur emitting periodically from the mill was our inland industrial offal. Townspeople took it in stride, but visitors were taken aback by the ghastly smell. Along with that smell, and others, were the sounds of loud hissing steam, the steady roar of machinery coming from the mill complex, and the rumble and tumble of logs as they were stripped naked of their bark in the rolling drumbarkers. As well, from spring until the winter freeze up, there was the clack, clack, clack sound of the huge, almost vertical steel stackers that pulled the logs up their tracks, then dropped them into storage piles. That drop, logs bouncing off logs, added more noise.

Along with huge piles of logs in the mill yard, a seemingly endless supply of logs floated down the river towards the mill. That spectacle began each spring, and lasted until the fall. And the sky was often blackened with smoke arising from the giant brick smokestack that dominated the mill complex and the town's skyline. Smoke and hissing steam were also a daily occurrence from the coal fired trains as they shunted in the mill yard or made their way to and from Botwood.

The work force, with the exception of the nurse and clerical staff, were all men. A large contingent of the men worked permanently on day shift, 8 am to 5 pm, with 12 noon to 1 pm,

lunch break. For many others it was a work life of constantly rotating shifts of; 8-4, 4-12 and 12-8.

Other than at midnight, the blowing of the mill whistle meant the start of a shift for some, and the end of the shift for others. The whistle's loud whispering sound could be heard all over town and miles up in the country when you were hunting, fishing, or picking berries.

With so many men working different shifts, it meant many workers had to eat at the mill and even on the job. So, by the time of kindergarten, a firmly established and highly recognizable tradition at mill was the use of lunch baskets. The oval shape wooden basket was large enough to carry a meal, but at the same time small enough to be carried comfortably on your arm.

Lunch baskets were sold at some local retail stores, but there was niche market for homemade lunch baskets. A renown lunch basket maker was the late Angus Gunn whose first line of work was as a paper maker at the mill.

Angus began his labour of love with the use of broken off hockey sticks salvaged from local hockey games. He meticulously cut the handles into thin strips, and soaked them in water to make them pliable for weaving. Once they were ready, the thin strips, were interwoven around staves that were attached to a solid wooden bottom. A wider band of pliable wood circled the finished top. To make the basket even more secure, the outside bottom was reinforced with a thin ribbon of steel strapping. The basket cover was a solid piece of board, hinged, so that it could be easily

opened and closed. The two attached, rounded handles, made from pliable strips, were used to carry the lunch basket. The hinged handles folded down so that the top lid could be opened.

Lastly, the lunch basket was stained to make it waterproof.

Angus was a true craftsman and his handiwork along with using homemade parts, had him caring for the environment in his own special way. To top it all off, he charged only a modest amount for the fine-looking baskets. The owners of the lunch baskets took such good care of them that they often lasted a lifetime of work at the mill.

My first memory of a lunch basket was my father's. As young children we would check his basket once he came home from work, looking for leftovers. These days it is hard to imagine a piece of bread, a sweet or plain biscuit, lighting up a child’s life. Other times the lunch basket was used for play. It was filled up with whatever adventure was going on in a our minds.

The Dictionary of Newfoundland English has no listing for lunch basket, nor a listing for sample, another creation closely affiliated with lunch baskets and the work life at the Grand Falls mill.

A sample was typically made from three or four sheets of customer size newsprint, ripped off a finished roll. The larger sheets were then neatly folded like a map. A half dozen or so samples made up a bundle which was often carried home squeezed in on top of the lunch basket, under the carrying handles. Or it was just tucked underneath your arm.

Samples had a wide variety of uses such as emergency curtains or as covers when painting inside of the house. But their most common use was as a disposal table cloth on the lunch tables in the mill and on some kitchen tables at home. And of course they were used to pack lunch baskets.

Some workers always carried their lunch basket to mill. Other workers had theirs delivered by school children or adults. Others had their lunch basket delivered to the mill by taxi. Some lunch baskets were delivered to the mill by a car that looked just like a taxi, but was locally known as a bus. A taxi you had to call, but a bus usually plied a fixed route between Grand Falls and nearby Windsor. Some bus drivers had regular customers for whom they delivered lunch baskets to the mill.

Workers on the midnight shift carried their lunch basket to work. But many day shift workers (8 to 5 or 8 to 4) had a lunch basket, a hot meal, come to the mill at noon time. As well, some of the 4-8 workers had their lunch basket brought to the mill around 5 o'clock, just when the regular full-time day shift workers were going home. Thus, during every work day in Grand Falls, the mill was like a bee hive, with lunch baskets brought in, and lunch baskets brought out.

School children were dismissed well before the noon whistle so that they could hurry home to take a family or neighbour's lunch basket to the mill. I was a lunch basket carrier. At times I would arrive at a neighour's house before the basket was ready. So, I would sit in the kitchen, wait

and watch, the final process unfold.

Soup would be put in bottles and covered. Stews, fish, boiled dinners, and other meals would be put in a bowl, and covered with a small plate. Both would then be firmly wrapped with a sheet or a piece of sample and gently laid in the basket. A piece of cake, bread or buns were usually wrapped in a piece of wax paper. Tea was made in a glass bottle and sealed with a reusable rubber stopper. To finish off the packing, a top layer of sample was tucked in to make things even snugger. The lid was closed, handles flipped up, handed to me, and I was on my way.

The walk to the mill was about 10 minutes. On a warm sunny day it was an enjoyable jaunt. But a rainy day or the misery of winter made the trek less than welcomed. Sometimes you met another carrier on the way and had a chat, but you didn’t waste time or fool around. Whether alone or in the company of another you focused on keeping the lunch basket evenly on your arm to prevent the meal from slopping around. A heavily loaded lunch basket meant a shifting from arm to arm as you walked.

School children usually took only one lunch basket at a time to the mill. But the adult mentally delayed men were noted for carrying multiple baskets at a time to the mill.

Once at the mill, you headed straight for the punch office. It was a huge room with adjoining corridors that led to other offices. It also contained the watchmen's (security) offices. But the main

business of the place was for workers to punch-in and punch-out of the mill. Walls of time cards along with punch clocks were the dominate features of the room. A worker on his way into the mill took his card from his slot, and hardly stopping, inserted it in the open slot of the clock, punched the time, removed the card, put it in his slot on the other side of the clock and continued on into the mill. On his way home he did the opposite routine.

But the punch office had another very important purpose. Along the left wall was a long row of wooden benches, much like the ones you would see baseball and hockey players sitting on, but instead of for sitting, these were mainly for lunch baskets. A carrier would lay the lunch basket on a bench and head back home. Sometimes the owner of a lunch basket would be sitting and waiting for you. On nice days he might be outside on the punch office steps waiting for you to show up.

By the time I finished carrying lunch baskets the pay was 25 cents a basket or $1.25 for the five day shift. Your father's or brother's lunch basket was duty, no pay. When I was much younger my father would surprise me now and then with a nickel. On the way home that precious nickel made for a lovely treat at Hayward's Candy Store.

My father's lunch basket was never left on the benches. I would wait near the huge rectangle archway that led from the punch office into the main body of the mill. If I arrived before the noon whistle, I would stand to the side, knowing once it blew, it was like hitting an emmets nest with

workers scurrying from all sides in a mad rush to punch-out and get home for dinner.

The mill area just inside of the archway was always bright during the day because the ceiling was practically all skylights. High up near those skylights was an attached mobile crane that was used to move freight in and out of railway cars from the siding below. Freight was often lifted to a nearby fenced-in, open top, supply store. The railway siding was often closed off from the outside with its huge, rolling top, doors.

The railway siding was surrounded on three sides by a platform that was used as a walkway by the mill workers. If you turned left once past the wire fence and the dead end of the railway siding, it meant you worked in areas such as the machine room or finishing room. A right turn meant you worked in the maintenance department, in the machine shop or moving from there to do repairs all over the mill. Some workers made a quick right turn once past the archway and headed for an outside door. Once outside, they walked away from the mill, up to the water intake for the power plant, the forebay, or to the log haul where the logs began their journey towards becoming paper.

At times, as I waited for my father, I saw young workers come out of the mill. They walked up and down the line of benches, took one or two lunch baskets, and then headed back into the mill. Later, as a summer worker, I would learn that the mill was too big, too spread out, to take lunch baskets to men who worked outside of your area.

On warm summer days, especially at noon, as you approached the punch office, you would see men sitting or standing outside, often having a smoke, waiting for their basket. If you arrived just as the whistle blew, you would witness a verbal boxing match between those going home and those

waiting for their lunch baskets.

They joked with each other, poked fun, made wisecracks, all without swearing or foul language. Gales of laughter would be heard whenever someone scored the best punch lines in all the jousting. The banter also went on with the taxi and bus drivers. And the razing also went on with the mentally delayed men who often in their own gentle way scored the biggest laughs of the day. It was all good fun, no meanness, no crossing the line to hurt the feelings of fellow workers, drivers or the mentally delayed men. It was all over in minutes. But for a young boy, it was a joyous, uplifting sight to see men having so much fun with each other.

As you grew up you saw, quite regularly, men carrying their lunch baskets. You saw them so often you knew who they were from a distance, by their gait, their coats, or their hats. Some men you could not ignore because, to you, they looked like walking giants. Others stood out because they were always dressed like gentlemen, shirt and tie, walking straight, walking tall and proudly carrying their lunch basket on their arm.

Many of the mysteries of the mill evaporated once I worked there for three summers. The good

wages helped to pay my expenses at university. The added bonus was to learn about a magnificent industry right in your home town. Even as a summer employee, you either carried your own lunch basket to the mill or had one come to you. Our dear mothers, bless their souls, kept us well fed. That’s for sure.

Summer work took you to all parts of the mill. Besides learning the intricacies of a massive industry you got to work with many of the men you had seen over the years, going to work and coming home. You got to see how these men bonded with each other, and how they appreciated, admired and respected each others abilities. They depended upon each other not just for the production but, for their lives. A mistake could mean serious injury or even death.

As a summer employee you got to sit around with them in the lunch rooms before work and at meal breaks. The job at times was exhausting, boring, hot, noisy, grueling, but it didn’t deaden their lightning quick sense of humour. You heard them laugh, talk , argue, discuss, gossip and tell comical tales of fishing and hunting. You heard them called by their nicknames whether it was Pickles, Windy, Sparky, Rusty, Happy, Hooker or Red.

You heard them tease and torment each other and saw them play practical jokes on each other. Often the lunch basket was the instrument of a joke. It was not uncommon to find something in a lunch basket, such as a piece of metal, to make it overly heavy when a worker was about pick it up and head for home. However, it was no joke to take food from another man's lunch basket without permission. But that did happen at times. A known culprit would be taught a lesson, one way or

another.

Mill workers were in each others company, week in week out, year in year out, until retirement which could easily mean forty years or more of service. As well, they hunted, fished, played cards,

billiards and sports with or against each other. They went to dances and socials in each other's company. And each year they celebrated with great joy, Labour Day, with all its festivities for adults and children.

Sometimes, their personal and close relationships ended in tragedy. In high school, a classmate's father was one of three mill workers that drowned on a fishing trip. A few years later, three more, on the way home from playing darts were killed in a collision with the company's train.

A large contingent of mill workers went off to both World War One and World War Two. Overseas many of them fought side by side, in the air, on the ground and on the sea. All too many of them, for such a small town, never lived to come back home to enjoy those good times again.

In the nearly one hundred years of operations the mill produced millions of tons of newsprint for the world market. During that time the workers paid hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars in income taxes, sales taxes, tobacco and alcohol taxes, gasoline tax, property tax, and all the other ways governments squeeze a dollar out of a working man or woman.

Besides all the taxes, mill workers generously gave away millions of dollars of their take home pay. They dug deep in their pockets to help build a new hospital and gave more over the years to equip it. They also collected money to help fellow workers off sick or those in the community that needed medical help out of town or out of the province. They gave money to families in need, such as after a house fire. They supported community projects and sponsored sports teams. And they provided funds for scholarships to encourage their sons and daughters to pursue an education that would make them more employable at home or elsewhere.

But like every work place, they weren’t all angels. The mill had its share of workers too lazy to pull their weight on the job, and others who, brazenly, stole company property. Others didn't get along well with other workers. But most of the men I worked with were honest, decent, dedicated and hardworking men who were highly skilled at their jobs. They gave the company their all, and all too often wore themselves out after decades of service.

The price of making paper at times took a heavy toll. In the work life of the mill, the woods operations and shipping, 37 men were killed on the job while another 13 men were severely injured. Along with those deaths and severe injuries, countless men suffered many other injuries including broken or crushed bones, cuts, burns, sprains and falls. And many a man who retired from the machine room had hearing problems from the decades of working around the extremely noisy machines.

The death and injury toll of making paper was very personal. My father's brother was killed in the mill in 1937, and my mother's brother was seriously injured in 1957. And my dear father was burned by a hot rivet during the construction of the stadium which was built by the AND Company.

Beginning in 1967, mergers and automation stepped into high gear and thus began the peel down of the work force, jobs that had been in some families for three generations. Thousands of jobs disappeared in the mill, in the woods, at Botwood and with the shut down of the company's railway. Office jobs were lost to the head office whether it was Montreal or Toronto. Even the great paying summer jobs for students vanished. But even in the end days of producing newsprint, there were almost 800 jobs tied directly to the mill, the woodlands and the shipping.

Along with all those changes the punch office disappeared. With that disappearance went the sight of school children and mentally delayed adult men taking lunch baskets to the mill. Workers on all shifts brought their lunch baskets to the mill.

The lunch basket wasn't just about food. It was a symbol of a good job, good wages and good benefits. The lunch basket was a part of the culture of the mill, a culture of work, a brotherhood. The lunch basket was all about year round work, permanence and stability.

However, the permanence came to a grinding halt on March 28, 2009. The mill got caught in the

squeeze, the ongoing pressure to cut the cost of production in a newprint industry in a downwards spiral. And it didn't help matters in the last big squeeze that the employer was in deep, serious, financial trouble. That trouble has yet to play out its final conclusion. But even to the bitter end, men were seen carrying lunch baskets.

The mill now lies idle, permanently closed. No smoke, no steam, no production, except for the power plant which produces electricity for the island's power grid. The silence of the mill is broken by the sounds of nature, the steady roar of the Exploits River as it cascades down over the remnants of the Grand Falls, bouncing off rocks, meandering through the gorge, and flowing on down to Bishop's Falls to generate even more electricity before its final run to the sea.

The final chapter on the mill that started in Grand Falls in1905 has yet to be written. But it is safe to bet that one of Newfoundland's greatest industrial superstars will never again produce newsprint.

And never again will we see men carrying lunch baskets.

Pity.