

## CHAPTER 26

### MY FIRST FULL TIME JOB

Suggestions have been made that I add some vignettes about my personal life to the autobiography. This chapter is the first of this series.

In the early 1940s after I graduated from high school, I tried to earn some money to ease the financial burden on my parents of my college education. Costs were modest then by the standards of 2007. I believe that the tuition at Penn State University was just over \$500.00 per academic year. The time I started college was the end of the Great Depression, although no one knew it at that time. I was able to obtain a job roofing houses. Heights have always bothered me, so I lasted just a few days. Then I started a job at the Hamilton Paper Company in Miquon, Pennsylvania, between Conshohocken (my home) and Philadelphia.

I was machine tender on #6, which produced quality paper for stationary. My job was to stand at the end of the machine and throw defective sheets into a bin behind me. The unblemished paper was taken away periodically, but I did not know where it went or what happened to it. When my replacement for the next shift came, I would transport the discarded paper to a huge vat where it was transformed into pulp. I have no idea what happened to the pulp – it was not my business.

The paper mill ran three 8-hour shifts per day (midnight to 8:00 a.m., 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., and 4:00 p.m. to midnight), seven days each week. The shifts rotated weekly, which was not good for one's biological clock, but I was young and very resilient. Work on weekends earned time and a half, and, every third week, I worked 16 hours at time and a half on one extended shift. Stopping and starting processing machinery was simply too expensive; therefore, if too much processed paper accumulated, the mill simply shut down until the reserves became low. Stopping production never occurred during the summer I worked there. The work schedule was good for the bank account but not good for one's social life, although my social life was minimal, so it was no big deal. In my free time I went fishing or rode my bike. Fortunately, I could use the family car to go to and from work. So, reading and fishing were my major recreational activities.

The paper mill was very hot, very humid, and very noisy. The big machines that produced huge rolls of paper thundered away ceaselessly. Verbal communications consisted of shouting with your mouth close to the other person's ear. Salt tablet dispensers were everywhere, and water fountains were never far away. I am sure a bathroom was accessible, but I do not remember going there, nor do I remember eating lunch. This summer was many years ago, so I probably did both, even though I cannot remember.

I probably had some type of interview when I applied for a job, but I cannot recall it. Once employed, I said "hello" to the people at the time clock when I checked in and out, but no one lingered – on the way in, each of us had someone to relieve, and, on the way out, each of us was anxious to get home. I had shouted exchanges with the shift foreman, but nothing that could be called a conversation or interaction. Neither do I recall the presence of any women, except the ones who did office work. I could not join the group headed for a bar after work because of my age; I would not have spent my hard earned money for liquor anyway. In short, I knew practically nothing about my fellow workers. Some undoubtedly left, as I did, for better employment opportunities, but most probably stayed there until they retired or the mill closed. The wages were attractive for those who could tolerate the working conditions.

Years later, the Hamilton Paper Company had trouble with *Escherichia coli*-type organisms growing in the warm water of its waste treatment vats. Even though the organisms were not fecal *E.*

*coli*, they tested as if they were. Since the Schuylkill River, Philadelphia, water plant was downstream from Miquon, the Academy of Natural Sciences was asked to study the problem, and I got to work at Hamilton Paper Company again, but as a scientist. Fortunately, the *E. coli* responding organisms in the paper mill treatment system were not pathogenic. What a difference 11 or 12 years made in the time since I was a machine tender in the paper mill to returning as Assistant Curator of Limnology at a research organization, the Academy of Natural Sciences.

My summer employment in the paper mill was a valuable experience since it helped with college expenses. It also increased my sympathy for blue collar workers more than just living in a mill town had already done. It was a hard life, even for a teenager. Details that I expected to remember are forever forgotten, and the people I could have gotten details from are dead.

Thanks to my daughter Heather Chambers, I have *The Paper Mills of Trout Run* to help my memory. Paper was made at the Trout Run Creek Site for 250 years (1746 to 1995). I worked in the W. C. Hamilton and Sons Riverside Mill. The building I worked in was torn down in 1998 (see <http://www.paperindustryweb.com/rivermill/miquonvisit.htm>) and is now River Park, a large office complex. From 1951 to 1966, Jeannie and I lived across the Schuylkill River in Gladwyne, Pennsylvania, just a short distance upstream from Miquon. For some reason, I never visited Miquon, although I now regret not doing so.

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