

## THE MILL PARTY: Unwrapping a gift from childhood

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of an aristocracy in our county, no family who wasn't touched directly or indirectly by the fortunes of the mill. We were all in it together, come what may, and we never went hungry.

None of that has ever left me. If anything, those days are so deeply ingrained that I can't smell fresh-sawn lumber without thinking of my step-dad's work clothes hanging in the laundry room, see his battered blue hardhat sitting on the dryer next to his worn-out old gloves, or see in my mind's eye the towering decks of timber sitting in the summer sunlight, watered by sprinklers, waiting to be fed into the sawmill.

And there were good times, too.

In this season of giving thanks, I am grateful for memories of the Mill Party, a Christmas bash for the sawmill men and their families when the lumber industry was humming, before it was sacrificed to know-it-alls in the special-interest and political cabals, then crated up and shipped off-shore to support other families, in some other country, somewhere else in the world.

For the Mill Party — which to a young boy was the biggest single event of the holiday season — families would gather at the fairgrounds, hundreds of people in their modest Sunday best, and each child was called up to the front of the room by a huge man dressed as Santa Claus to receive a present.

Santa would draw your name out of a hat, or a box, or whatever it was, and you walked up there in front of everyone to embrace a gift that not only meant something about Christmas, but about what it meant to live in a community of people who knew what hard times really look like, knew how to spread the wealth when things were better, and worried fiercely about the future of an industry they had invested their lives and the fortunes of their families in seeing succeed.

And I can remember those years, which was most of them, when I would ask my parents when the Mill Party was, and they didn't have an answer. As an adult I can see that silence for what it really was, and I am grateful for the strength and the grace they had to shield their children from the worries they carried in their chests like a hot, heavy stone.

The mill is gone now, mostly torn down to a rusty shell of its former self. It is the way of things. But I will never be able to pass that place between the train tracks and the Susan River without hearing the noon-whistle, or remembering that long walk down the aisle toward an exhausted lumberman dressed as Santa Claus, who handed me a present with a smile. And I know now that whatever it might have been when I was a small boy, a Tonka truck or a brace of silver six-shooters, I will be unwrapping that gift for the rest of my life.

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