

Hands of a City

by David Ackley

“All factories must close one day, but there's something particularly brutal about a factory closing because its owners have found cheaper labor elsewhere.”

Somerdale to Skarbienz, an article by James Meek, London Review of Books, April 20, 2017.

It always surprises me when this comes as news. Where Philip and I grew up in Nashua, New Hampshire, the textile, shoe and paper mills that had dominated and largely supported the cities along the rivers of New England from Rhode Island to northern New Hampshire had been shutting down and moving south in search of cheaper labor since the 1920's. Places like Nashua began to decline back then and the process didn't begin to reverse until around 1960.

In the middle came the *coup de gras*: the Great Depression of the 1930's when national unemployment was around 25%. It's no wonder Philip's trade, if you can call it that, was “Night Watchman;” the only paying job left: to watch over the sleeping machines in vacated factories so whatever steel and copper wasn't bolted down wouldn't be scavenged and sold for scrap.

Like farm and ranch workers, those who worked in factories were originally called “hands.” In a history of Nashua “workers,” are simply “men who work with their hands.” This dates from a prior time when working with the gifts of your hands was still both common and esteemed.

In the early 19th century, Philip's birthplace gained a reputation as an incubator of inventors and small shops—factories—that could engineer the inventions to manufacture, and others that turned the invention to either production, as in building the printing presses that could print playing cards; or to product, like the mechanical sheep shears that revolutionized fleece production. Mechanical sheep shearers and barber shears; printing presses for playing

cards; Railway spike machine; dust ring for watches; barber's clippers; automatic piano; fire escape; railway signal; butt hinge--all came from the minds and hands of Nashua's workers.

Nearly every such product concentrated the imagination, the mind and the clever hands of design, crafting and manufacture of an individual inventor/entrepreneur and a crew of skilled workmen. Thanks to the Lawson and Robbins Armory of Windsor, Vermont, which in the 1830's used such inventiveness to create the exact duplication of parts by machine that became "mass production," (In the manufacture of rifles for the U.S. Army, eventually to be used in the Civil War.) the clever hands cleverly replaced themselves with machines and the small shops of Nashua fell away to the god of productivity in the form of large factories, with men and women tending the machines.

Largely usurped was the work of the hands; but the respect and occasional need for their talent remained. Like most, you probably could have built a house with hammer, saw, square and level. You certainly could have changed the points and plugs on the car, the fan belt, timing belt, alternator, muffler and tail pipe, radiator and maybe the upper half of the engine, the head and gaskets. And not so long after, those same hands, respected and clever, calming and deft were bandaging and most likely, stitching up a wound, 1,2,3 just like that.

We are designed so that there's pleasure in working with our hands. The line is clear and continuous from a worker in a small shop, carving, shaping, milling, polishing wood or metal with tools in hand, through the craftsman pressing clay on a wheel into the shape of a cup or pot or bowl, to a sculptor chipping legible form from a boulder. Our hands want to make.

The Nashua of another day, the time when workers were "hands," and it meant exactly that, was mostly lost by your time to the hegemony of the textile mills with their spinning, their powered looms and whirling bobbins, and workers became "machine tenders," —of the giant machines which had usurped the work of hands. A few small shops remained, vestiges of an earlier time,

where things were shaped on pedal-operated metal presses, cut and fitted together, bolted and welded in place. I remember two, both I think on the far side of Broad Street, where it shaded briefly from residential to commercial before the intersection with Amherst at the cemetery. One was a place that made overhead doors, and the other was "White Mountain Freezer," which made the old-fashioned ice cream freezers of wood and cast iron. Even now a lot of people still have them, though no-one I know uses theirs; they've gone from function to the sort of ersatz antique that people use for doorstops.

I think you might have worked at the overhead door place—for a time. But no work was certain or lasting in the depressed years. And between jobs, the looking, the asking, the waiting—empty-handed.

But the strain of those who like the feel of tools in their hands and have learned the skills of using them rightly, seems in you revealed. That's the identifier hunting and fishing expose, affection for the tools of the sport, the smooth curve of the rifle's stock in your palm, the click of the bolt cocking, the tremor of the sights as you bring them to bear and still your breathing, the unity of finger, trigger, eyes and sights and recoil and target in the moment of firing. Or that controlled almost breathless stillness as the fly bobs down the current, the lightness of the cork grip, and the once-living bamboo trembling with the line's movement over the water's ripples and swirls; then, the electric strike! A trout, muscle to muscle telegraphed through the palm and delicate tips of your fingers.

Your souvenir rifle was not only a trophy—the shapely Mannlicher-Schoener-- it was a beautiful, purposeful tool, for hunting rather than war. In a way the rifle ties you and its previous owner together, hunting with it, the feel of it in each of your hands, something akin to a handshake across all the provoking differences of place, belief, history. The touch of hand to hand is the signal of commonality, the acceptance of kind, the refuting of distance and difference. More than we know, such things may explain why soldiers don't necessarily hate their enemies, and why in some part, peace is able to succeed war.

