

Parchment

My friend Mark and I park the car behind a bush and hop the fence. Mark's got his camera ready – he's been scouring the outskirts of Kalamazoo for weeks now, searching for artistic inspiration. A week ago he found the plant in Parchment, Michigan. It's abandoned, has been for years by the look of it. But he didn't want to go in by himself, so he dragged me along – pulled me outside the K-College bubble for some academic exploring. We walk fifteen feet to the first structure and climb in through a broken window; shards of glass lie on the ground, intermingling with the weeds and shrubs that force their way through slabs of broken concrete underneath our feet. The room we entered smells like rain and insulation, maybe drywall. Trash litters the floor. There are work orders and safety manuals from 1995, grimy 7Up bottles and smashed bricks, what looks like asbestos ceiling tiles piled in a heap near a broken office chair, damp with must and mold. The hallway leading from the room is dark. Mark snaps a few shots for his photography class and we move on. He thinks his professor will enjoy the photos he's taken of the city's empty industrial sector. As I follow him into the next room, I can't help but wonder – who worked here and what was made; why was it abandoned?

A trip to parchment.org – the city's official website – answers a number of my questions. For example, in 1909, Jacob Kindleberger started the Kalamazoo Vegetable Parchment Company a few miles north of town; “The company made parchment paper and hence the City's name of Parchment,” reports the site. There are photos of employees and old buildings, paragraphs describing Kindleberger's plans for the community. In 1939, the 184 citizens of Parchment voted to become a 5th class city – then their history stops. The website has nothing left to say about . . . well, anything that happened after 1939, let alone the circumstances that led to the decline of local mills.

I call the city directly and arrange an interview with Curt Flowers, Parchment's city clerk. Curt is slightly paunchy, somewhere in his late fifties. He's bald on top with gray hair lining either temple, has a trim white mustache, and sports a pair of thin-framed glasses. As a young man, Curt worked in the paper mills that gave Parchment its name.

“I think everyone in town worked there at one time or another,” Curt chuckles to himself. He was in the lab for two years with quality control, and made sure that incoming pulp was up to code. I ask him why the mills shut down. “The mill was started by one person and run by one person,” he replies matter-of-factly, “but then when that person died, when Mr. Kindleberger died, the mill combined with another company, and other conglomerates buy it, and then a lot of the equipment gets antiquated. Most of the buildings have been empty since 2000, I think. It just got too expensive.”

Curt shows me several architectural sketches that illustrate the city's plan to build new neighborhoods where the empty buildings stand. Within the next five years, bulldozers and cranes will tear down the longstanding monuments of Parchment's industrial past, and for the first time in its 101 year history, the factories – withered husks though they may be – will be gone. As he speaks, I can't help but feel Curt's confliction. Like other citizens of Parchment, he has a strong empathetic connection to the city's namesake. The mills are more than empty buildings.

“Suddenly, it was just quieter in town, there was always the hum of the mill there,” he smiles in fond remembrance. “I remember laying in bed at night, cause I live just up

there, a couple blocks up the hill, and if it's summer and you had the windows open, I could hear the guys driving the mill trucks, and you could hear them "beep beep" at semis and stuff like that. Some people would say it's noise, 'It's disturbing me,' or 'It's bothering me,' but now I wish I heard that again, because that would mean the place was up and running."

I ask Curt if he knows anyone in town that could have more information regarding the history of the mill. He refers me to an older gentleman named Joseph Chadderdon. I arrange an interview with Mr. Chadderdon at his home on the outskirts of Parchment. He answers the door in faded jeans and a collared shirt; his eyes are milky blue, cloudy. Mr. Chadderdon is 90 years old; he worked as a lab technician in the mill for 50 of those years, and is writing a book about the history of Parchment that he hopes will be available sometime this summer.

"Kindleberger treated his employees like family," Mr. Chadderdon says, "and if you got a job here, you had a job for life. He planned the city, expanded the plants – there was nothing out here before he came." I ask Mr. Chadderdon about the decline of the mills, and what that meant for Parchment, "The Paper City."

"Well, Kindleberger died about 1950, and then his assistant, Ralph Hayward, had a heart attack less than a year later, and no one else was ready to run the plant. The board of directors hired Dwight Stocker as manager – he was an outside hire, I'm not very kind to him in my book," he remarks. "He partnered the plant with another paper company, then a gravel company out in California. These other companies pulled the plant into debt, then unions got involved. Ultimately, bad business and shoddy management cost us the mills. I'm gonna miss the buildings; I think a lot of people are. But times change and people move on. I've lived a long life, I've seen a lot of changes come and go –that's the way life is."

After our interview, I drive back to the abandoned plant and hop a fence; feels like I need to see it one more time before I write the article. I think my journalism class will like the piece; details of a city they never knew existed, just miles from campus. The buildings in this part of the mill were more recently abandoned. I find a photo album sitting in a cubicle. It's filled with pictures of a company picnic. There's a shot of a woman in a yellow shirt with Urkel glasses standing next to a pig roast. Another with children playing outside; one child has a water balloon in his hand. As I move further into the album, the pictures are more damaged; water and dust makes the photos look like someone's colored in the rims with waxy crayons – oranges, yellows, reds, and purples. Someone left these photos behind – packed up their things, left their cubicle, and abandoned them. I can only assume they've forgotten about them by now, that they don't dwell on lost possessions like an album, or a mill.

I suppose Mr. Chadderdon's right – times change and people move on; that's the way life is.