



# OCCASIONAL PAPERS Of The Willsboro Heritage Society

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Our old friend, Tom Spierto, a member of the Heritage Society board of directors and chairman of the Adsit Cabin committee, has once again given us a fun reminder of what it used to be like in Willsboro. Little peeks into our past such as this will be invaluable to the historians of tomorrow, we welcome them being sent to us.

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## The Whistle at the Mill

The pulse of the community of Willsboro was for many generations, regulated by the whistle at the mill. The town's people did not have to look at their watches and timepieces during the daylight hours for many years. They could depend on the mill whistle to inform them as to the correct time throughout the day. The purpose of the whistle was to inform the workers at the paper mill as to the time their work tours would begin and end. The whistle itself was located in the powerhouse and was operated by the men on duty in the workplace at the time. It was a steam whistle placed on top of the powerhouse roof. The worker pulled a wire attached to an arm that operated the whistle. The whistle blew at 7:00 a.m., 12:00 noon, 1:00 p.m., and 4:00 p.m. to indicate shift changes. It also aided the townspeople as to the time of the day as many did not have watches. When the wind was in the North it could be heard as far south as Essex. And if the wind was blowing from the South it could be heard on the end of Willsboro Point. Ed Collins Sr. was in charge of blowing the whistle on his shift for some 35 years. Sylvia Hayes Couling remembers Will Stanley coming to work at their house early in the morning, and when the whistle blew at 7:00 a.m. he would head for the wood yard to begin his tour of duty. When it blew again at 4:00 he returned to the Hayes' and would work for another hour until 5:00 and he would head home for supper.

This whistle was also used to alert volunteer firemen to report for duty. When the whistle blew at other than appointed hours, people would listen

attentively and immediately go to their whistle charts that were usually tacked to the back of a cupboard or cellar door. The chart indicated by coded blasts the location of the fire. A certain code meant Main St. or another code might be for the Station Rd., Middle Rd., etc. Three longs might be for the Essex Rd., Judith Frenier Sloper a resident of the West Rd. remembers that code being a long and two short blasts. Townspeople memorized the codes for their streets if they were out of their homes so they would immediately know if their homes might be in danger. The first fireman to reach the fire hall would write the location of the fire on a chalk board hanging by the door. Drivers and firemen would board the trucks and head for the fire. Other volunteers arrived by car as a result of the coded blast indicating which road the fire was on. This whistle chart seems to have disappeared with the closing of the mill in 1965 and the advent of radios and better communications.

As a youngster, when the whistle would blow, I would take off, on a dead run, for the fire department to check the chalkboard to find out where they had gone, and then report home to my parents as to the location of the fire.

The one time I heard the whistle blow endlessly was on VJ Day, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1945 when Japan surrendered to the allies ending World War II. It was a joyous time for all. Fire trucks were driving all over town, blowing sirens.

The whistle code was replaced in the 1960's by a system of sirens at the fire hall. The whistle blew its final time on August 19<sup>th</sup> in 1965 when Georgia Pacific closed the mill, ending a nostalgic way of life in Willsboro.