

## INDUSTRY

I made most of these pictures in the late 80's when I was a Research Associate for the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Over the preceding decade, America had become what historians call a "post-industrial" society. Many factories from the rust belt's glory years were abandoned but still standing, and I was tasked with taking a sort of inventory of these soon-to-be-demolished facilities.

I concentrated particularly on steel mills. I photographed some operating mills (a very few of which operate still, although in much reduced form). Most that I visited, however, were closed and awaiting demolition. With my Smithsonian credentials, I was lucky enough to receive permission to wander unescorted through empty mills for days on end.

Particularly for a country boy such as me, so-called "integrated" steel mills (that is, mills that refine steel from iron ore) are stunning in their scale and complexity. Most were founded in the late 1800's or early 1900's. Their subsequent expansions and modernizations often incorporated the older structures and processes already on-site, making the mills a jumble of building styles and technologies – wonderful to photograph but inefficient to operate, which is one of the reasons that many mills closed.

Integrated steel mills can cover hundreds or even thousands of acres, and some in their heyday employed tens of thousands of workers; they were factories the size of cities. Indeed, most had many of the features of a city: police and fire departments; medical clinics; power stations; stores and restaurants; water and sewage treatment plants; and (of particular interest to me) photography studios and darkrooms (I have several great photography books that I rescued from abandoned mills). Some even had amenities such as chapels and newspapers. While no mill that I visited had residential facilities, several had swallowed up surrounding neighborhoods in their expansions, so that deep within a mill complex one might find houses serving as offices, surrounded by huge factory buildings.

Generally speaking, it's cheaper to re-melt and reuse existing steel than it is to make steel from iron ore. The closed mills themselves were made almost entirely of steel. They now have been chopped up and fed back into furnaces around the world.