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Down by Town's Old Mill, Hopes of a Revival Surge

By DAN BARRY

NEWTON FALLS, N.Y., Nov. 25 — Nearly two months have passed since the people of this remote hamlet, in a remote town in a remote county in the northern Adirondacks, gathered to do something they had not done in a very long time. They flexed some emotional muscles that had gone slack, and they cheered.

Noise of any kind is rare these days in Newton Falls. For a century, life was lived to the welcome sounds that more affluent communities might rail against: machine groans and truck whines and train clatters, the cacophony of commerce. But the paper mill shut down two years ago, ending its status as the area's largest employer and provoking the resounding silence.

Until those cheers, that is, which rang through the pines one late September day, when dignitaries announced in the mill's parking lot that a Canadian company had bought the plant and expected to hire as many as 129 people here — roughly the number of those who had lost their jobs when the mill shut down.

Finally, it seemed, one of the rare rumors of hope being whispered by men hunched at the bar of the Newton Falls Hotel was coming true. Just when upstate factory shutdowns had become almost a cliché, here was a startling news flash:

Upstate Mill to Reopen.

The announcement did not include an opening date, highlighting the gap between words and action. But another upstate mill bought by the

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The paper mill in Newton Falls, N.Y., shut down two years ago. Now there is talk of its reopening.

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same owner has already opened, giving people here more reason to assume that the good news is real.

"It's a huge deal for us," said Christopher Westbrook, the president of the economic development committee for the towns of Clifton and Fine, whose combined population

of 2,400 includes the few dozen residents of Newton Falls.

The news quickly made its way 200 miles to Tom Manchester, one of the area's many sons and daughters to leave home for a far-away job. He has asked economic development officials in St. Lawrence County to include his name on the list of former mill employees interested in coming back.

For him and his wife, Jackie, the reasons cannot be more basic. "Pretty much our whole families are up there," he said.

But for now, at least, he is staying put. Like all mill veterans, he has not forgotten how brutal the paper business can be.

Stuart Belkin, the president of Belkorp Industries, the company that now owns the mill, has bought four other mills in the Northeast over the last year or so, including one in nearby Deferiet. The plants will work together to produce high-quality recycled paper, he said, but many things must fall into place, particularly a greater demand for recycled goods.

That was why his comments on that gleeful September day in Newton Falls were so tempered.

"These people have been through a hard time," he said later, "so their optimism and expectations have definitely been kindled. It's a serious responsibility, because people are certainly counting on a turn for the better."

Two of Mr. Belkin's five plants are operating — including the one in Deferiet — and company officials are not yet sure which one to open next. Maybe it will be the one in Newton Falls, maybe by July; maybe. Until that decision is made, far from Newton Falls, people around here look and listen for signs.

"There are more lights at the mill now," said Anne Hynes, a Newton Falls resident whose father worked in the mill and whose uncle once served as its president. "It's not a lot; it's not like it used to be. But there's activity."

More lights would be nice for the towns of Clifton and Fine. They have taken their fair share of upstate's economic blows — a steel mill's shutdown in the 1970's cost several hundred jobs — but the last two years have tested the community's emotional infrastructure more than any storm of winter.

There was the closing of the paper mill in late 2000; 125 people out of a job and a smokestack gone cold. There was the fire that destroyed another source of local pride, the firehouse. And there was the death of Shannon



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Adams, a graduate of the small Clifton-Fine school district and just 25 years old. He had been so proud of the address on his business card: Tower One, 101st Floor, World Trade Center.

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