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South Bend Tribune

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Photographer evokes last days of the Oliver factory

WEEKEND: ART EXHIBIT

By JULIE YORK COPPENS
Tribune Staff Writer

The photographs depict an old factory slated for demolition, but D. Brent Miller's real subject -- as one poignant image of a broken clock makes clear -- is time.

You can see it in the columns of empty slots that once held dozens of workers' punch cards. For generations of Oliver Chilled Plow Works employees, here is where each day's labors began and ended.

You can see it in an extraordinary image of the factory's floor, the shattered concrete below a skylight covered in a blanket of brilliant green moss.

And you can see it in the snow-covered bricks, some a century old, ultimately liberated by the wrecking ball and carted off for some other human purpose.

"Nature has a way of taking and healing what we manage to do to it," observes D. Brent Miller, whose photographs of the Oliver plant in its final days are now on display at the Northern Indiana Center for History. He points to "Powerhouse in Fog" as



"Moss-Covered Floor," the image seen here behind photographer D. Brent Miller, was one of the first he captured in the documentary project "The Last Days of Oliver Chilled Plow Works," now on display at the Northern Indiana Center for History.

Tribune Photo/SANTIAGO FLORES

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another example of the visual poetry that can result when industrial enterprise, nature and time collude. The ghostly image seems to capture the very moment when memory loses its grip and solid things fade away.

Miller spent more than a year documenting the factory's ruin, after reading about the city's plan to demolish and redevelop the property. A freelance photographer with a regular gig shooting for the South Bend Silver Hawks, Miller had no commission beyond the city's blessing, no realistic hope of ever seeing any financial return on his investment of time and film. (He used both an analog and a digital camera for the project; the prints in the NICH show are all high-quality digital, and Miller has donated them to the museum.)

"Last Days of Oliver Chilled Plow Works: A Documentary Photography Project by D. Brent Miller," through Oct. 26 at the Northern Indiana Center for History, 808 W. Washington St., South Bend. Also on display: the companion photo exhibit "Lost Landmarks," through Oct. 26, and "Veiled Illusion: Vintage Bridal Gowns," through Sept. 28. Museum hours are from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays and noon to 5 p.m. Sundays. Admission costs \$5 for adults, \$4 for senior adults and \$3 for children age 2 and older (through college). Guided tours of Copshaholm house and "Veiled Illusion" cost \$8 for adults, \$6.50 for senior adults and \$5 for children and students. Call (574) 235-9664 for more information.

Still, after touring the doomed Oliver plant for the first time, Miller knew he and his cameras had to return.

"What drew me to the project was the documentary nature of it, the opportunity of preserving a piece of history -- even though it's such a minute piece of the overall history of the Oliver Factory and of the manufacturing history of South Bend," he says.

A small piece, maybe, but a symbolic one. Miller has heard from a lot of people who either worked at Oliver themselves or who had family members and friends who did. They're grateful that Miller cared enough to save, in photographic form, some of the walls, floors, pipes, signs and machinery that defined their days at the plant.

"You can't walk through a building like that without feeling the presence of the spirit of the place and of the thousands of people who worked there," Miller says. "You start to wonder what their lives were like and what kinds of contributions they made to the South Bend community. It's all connected."

And time, the photographer is convinced, won't change that.

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