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DuPont built a community

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DuPont's corporate headquarters in Wilmington.

By Vic Brown

More than anything else, I can still clearly see the little girls in their white dresses and veils, and the little boys in their nice blue suits. They were there with their families, sprinkled

throughout the Green Room restaurant in the Hotel DuPont in Wilmington.

That's what happened in those days, on a May Sunday morning following First Communion at the local parishes. The families would not throw parties but would opt instead for an elegant family breakfast in the most elegant restaurant in town.

It was a tradition followed by families all over the city. Since I came from a large Irish Catholic family, I experienced the magic six times.

There are many other memories I have of growing up in a town that was dominated by the historic DuPont Co. My mother worked there during World War II, and most of my relatives provided for their families by working at "the company" over life-long careers.

They played golf at the DuPont Country Club, took us as children to see the modest origins of the company along the banks of the Brandywine River, now enshrined as the Hagley Museum, and always spoke well of their employer.

The DuPont presence and the company's philanthropy supported downtown Wilmington, with office buildings that marked the center of town. The centrally located Hotel du Pont served as the place to stay for visiting business executives, as well as housing the popular Playhouse Theatre for touring Broadway shows.

Most of all, DuPont was a great source of pride for all of us living in the "chemical capital of the world." Its products were innovative and widely adopted - nylon, Teflon, and too many others to mention. There also seemed to be a high degree of professionalism associated with the company, an example of which I experienced as a teenager on one memorable occasion.

As high school

sophomores assigned

to interview "somebody of note in the community," my buddy Joe and I asked for - and were graciously given - an hour with Irénée du Pont Jr., a high-ranking executive and son of the company's former president.

Mr. du Pont could not have been nicer or more generous with his time for two local kids. He rearranged his schedule so he could meet with us on Washington's Birthday, when we didn't have school. We spent the time in his office and private laboratory (where he demonstrated the properties of DuPont's just-announced Teflon product), asking all sorts of no doubt probing questions, I'm sure much to his quiet amusement.

I've dealt with many other senior-level executives over the years, but none have come close to exhibiting his grace and kindness. Perhaps it was no accident that I decided to major in chemistry and spent a career in the chemical industry, although not with DuPont. Given a choice of staying in Wilmington or embarking for the bright lights of New York City, I chose the latter and spent a rewarding career with FMC Corp.

But that was all a long time ago, and times have certainly changed.

I thought the beginning of the end might have occurred when DuPont, bowing to media-fanned environmental pressures, stopped the routine use of its tag line "Better Living Through Chemistry." That line exactly described the company's mission and goals - bringing good things to the booming postwar economy. And certainly good chemistry was nothing to be ashamed of.

More recently, DuPont senior executives seem to have danced on the strings held by Wall Street speculators, and the company has been steadily losing its traditional identity. Now, if the plans announced by DuPont and Dow go through, DuPont will join the likes of the once mighty Union Carbide Corp., Pan American World Airways, and so many others quickly fading from memory.

First will come the megamerger, followed by spin-offs into three new entities, each one to then add and subtract businesses until nothing is recognizable of the company that served us so well for so many years. Jobs will be lost, the city of Wilmington will continue its recent economic erosion, and a large void will remain in the heart of town, not to mention in the hearts of many of us.

Sad as this all may be, I am glad for what DuPont gave so many of us over the years - good products, good employment, and pride in our city. And, of course, the sight of those pretty girls

and handsome boys enjoying their First Communion family breakfasts at the Hotel du Pont.

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