

**MILL WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE**

Ray D'Amour
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

BCOH# 001
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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Ray D'Amour at his home at 64 Lowell Street in Lewiston, on April 8, the year 2005. This is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History Project, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could you start just by giving me your full name and spelling it?

Ray D'Amour: Okay, it's Raymond, first name, G, which stands for Gerard, D'Amour, D-apostrophe-capital A-M-O-U-R.

AL: And where and when were you born?

RD: I was born in Lewiston, at St. Mary's Hospital.

AL: And the date?

RD: January 20th, 1925, which means eighty years old.

AL: And did you grow up in Lewiston?

RD: Yeah, I did, yes. Lewiston and a few years we moved to Auburn. My folks had bought an apartment building, and we lived there. Fact is, I lived there until I got married, which was back in 1951.

AL: And so, were your parents both from Lewiston as well?

RD: No, my mother was born in Canada, at Saint-Hyacinthe, and my father was born way up beyond the St. Lawrence in a little town by the name of Matane, M-A-T-A-N-E, I guess he always spells it. But when he came to the United States, like all the French Canadians at one point, he was naturalized and became an American citizen. I don't know if it was soon after he got here, but that's the way it worked out.

AL: Well, what brought your parents to Lewiston?

RD: Well, like everybody else at that time, people were coming here to work because, you know, in Canada the farms, the farmers were really getting nothing and they were more or less starving, and so I suppose the recruiters for the businesses in this area here were up there looking around to see who wanted to come to the United States and work. So that's, probably that's the way it worked out.

AL: Did your parents work in the mills?

RD: No. That's the funny part of it, no. Fact is, my mother never worked. But my father was in the shoe industry all his life, so that's the way it worked out.

AL: And what were their names?

RD: My father was Charles, Charles Phillippe, and my mother was, real French, Antoinette, I don't know what her full name, but her family name was Robitaille, so that was, that's the way they came to the United States at that point. But my mother was never naturalized. She had a permanent, I don't know if a permanent visa for visiting, or for staying, but anyhow, it never came about. So, that's the way it is.

AL: Now, if you were born in 1925, you were a teenager at the time the Depression hit.

RD: In 1929, yeah.

AL: Do you have recollections of that time?

RD: I sure do. It was unbelievable to think this now. You, you know, you almost fought for a penny, or two pennies in order to, for what you thought you might work for or, you know, any little job, anything, because there was no work and things were hard. It was unbelievable. But, people in the United States survived, you know. It was like the wars we have, we go and we come back and we move on. But it was a rough period. Seems though it dragged on until I would say the mid forties, 1930s. It was a rough time.

AL: How did it affect your family?

RD: Well, my father had built the home we were living in, and he built it as he had the money, so there was no debt, there was no mortgage to it. So we owned a home, and we had large gardens, because we had quite a lot of land, so we had a lot of gardens. So, you know, as far as food and vegetables and things like that, we had our own supply.

And the neighborhood (*unintelligible word*) further up on Main Street, the neighbors were all real nice, and those that did kind of shared with those that didn't. So it was a happy time, when you think about it, also because of people getting together and sharing things. It was, when you look back on it, you know, there was pleasant memories. It's not like you were living in some place and everybody was against you. So, that was in that period of time.

AL: Now, did you go straight from high school to work in the mills, or how did that come about?

RD: My junior year in high school, I was drafted, and I was in the service for three years, I was down in the South Pacific for three years. And going back in time, from the time I can remember, I could pick up a pencil or a pen and I could draw anything I could think of, you know, I just put it on, you know, on a piece of wood and, burn it into the wood, or do anything.

So while I was in the service, I did some artwork for the military newspapers, you know, and when I got out of the service, one of our neighbors right across the street was one of the top executives at Bates. And he said, you know, I always see you with a pen or a pencil and you seem to be able to draw anything that you think of, he said, would you think of considering of going to the Bates to draw the designs for bedspreads and draperies? I said, well, I never gave it a thought, you know, because at that time I was just getting out of the service and I had nothing in mind. So I said, I don't know, so I said I'd think about it.

So he kept, every time he'd come across the street to visit he'd talk about it, and he says, have you thought about it? I said, well, I'm giving it some thought. He said, okay, he said, if you want I'll make an appointment with you with the plant manager at the Bates division where the bedspreads were made, and he says, you go. And at the time, the plant manager was John Collins, John Collins.

AL: And who was the person who lived near you?

RD: Fritz Newton. He was the head and the chief engineer for the whole mill complex. So he made an appointment, I went to see the plant manager, and of course when you have somebody that's giving you a little bit of help, kind of nudging you, it makes a difference also. So he said, well, how about coming back and, say, next week some time, and bring some of your artwork, you know, whatever it is you want.

So I went back the following week and they looked at it, and he said, well, I'll bring you out to the head of the, the director of designing right now, which was George Mills, and he said, let him take a look at it and you talk with him, and he said, he's expecting you. So I went out and sat down with him and he said, yeah, he says, fact is, we have an opening right now because one of the older veteran designer has just died a couple weeks ago.

And I mean, they were super designers, because they, they two head designers were German, and I mean they were real high tech. So it was a great area to go into, because there was one of them left, of the two brothers. So I said, he said, if you want to come in, he said, we look at all your art work and everything, he says, you know, in your case it would be better to start hands-on, the actual experience, than trying to go to some design school or something to get it from a book, they said, here you're going to get the actual so, he said, what do you want to do?

So I said, I don't know, I'll give it a thought. So I went back to I guess the plant manager and he said, well, what do you think? I said, well, I'm interested. So he said, when do you want to start? And I said, well, let's put it this way: this is the last part of October, I've been away for three years and I'd like to go hunting for the whole month of November. So he said, well, that's no problem, so we'll see, I'll see you the first week of December. This was back in 1946, and the first week in December I showed up and I started. And I just kind of fell right into it, you know.

AL: So you worked very closely with the remaining German designer?

RD: Yeah.

AL: And who, what was his name?

RD: (*Name*) Lehman. And he was as efficient in high tech as his brother was. The older one was Arthur. And, you know, if you made a mistake you backed up and you corrected it, you didn't let it slide. I mean that, because when you're designing something, everything has to be on a graph because everything has to work out well on the loom. There's no room for mistakes, because the one mistake that you make will be one mistake on the loom, which will be one bedspread they'll have to throw away.

So, I learned from, you know, Dave wanted to, you don't make, if you do make a mistake you come back and you correct it. Or you ask, you know, what's the right way to correct this. And it, when I look back on it, I couldn't have found a better life, you know? I mean, it wasn't hard work, you just sit there and you put your ideas on paper.

AL: So you got to create your own ideas for designs, or did it always go through the other one?

RD: Well, the way it was way back in time, Bates was number one in the country, or in the world as far as making bedspreads at the time, and all these companies were coming, like J. C. Penney, Sears, whatever, back in there, they would come to us, not their sales people but their marketing people, and they'd come to us and they'd say, you know, the trend this fall or this spring is going to be with this type of flower, or this type of motif or so forth, can you give us a bedspread with this type of idea.

So whoever spoke with these people at the time made out a sketch if they were, you know, really interested, and you'd say, how about something like this? And they'd look at it and say, well, yeah, yeah.

Maybe a little bit of this, a little bit of that here and there. So before they left you had a working idea for a commitment to them.

So you put this on point paper, graph paper, and you painted it out and you show, you know, sort of a working design, and then when you get everything processed for the cards for the loom, for the weaving, you send it out and a sample weaver wove one bedspread as a trial to see, to look at and see what you had. And if everything looked all right you shipped that to the customer, and they looked at it, and most of the time we'd get a call a couple days later saying, yeah, go ahead with this.

And you got so many sizes of this color, and so many sizes of that color and so forth, so we used to run twins, doubles, queens and kings, so, you know, they'd say, well, we'll start off with fifty thousand units, or a hundred thousand units. So you get together with the accounting people in the main office and the people who organized for production so you could set up for many thousand units, and this is what you're going to, here's your design and your pattern, and go ahead. And this would be, say, for J. C. Penney's or Sears, or whoever else the account was. So that's the way it worked.

AL: Were there other departments within the mill that you worked really closely with?

RD: Well, yeah, the weaving department, yeah. And we always had our own sample weaver. In other words, he was probably the best weaver around, that we acquired just for this purpose, and that's all he did, just weave our ideas.

AL: Oh, and then you could really see it, and then know whether it was something you wanted to go with.

RD: We'd tell him, you know, just weave a little strip of this so we can see just this area, and bring the piece in so we can take a look at it. That's the way it worked out, so this weaver, or this person, whoever was doing it, that's all that he was doing. So, if he had to weave just a little strip, say, first thing in the morning, and we didn't need anything else the rest of that day, he could sit down. Sometimes we'd kind of lure him out to the weaving area in case they needed some help, but that's the way it was set up.

There was a lot of people around to do even minor things in that period of time. It wasn't like today, you know, everything with a skeleton crew and, you know, this person has to do fifteen other things while he's doing this. Each person had their own speciality, really. And over the years, just the design area, we had a staff of about twelve, we used to have about twelve people. In other words, we had the design core of, say, the artists or the designers as such, and we usually averaged, oh, between four and six designers at any given time. And they were both male or female, so there was no discrimination, even back then.

I remember, in the summer time over the years we'd have students come in that were interested in designing. And one of the students that came in quite a few summers, Elaine Libby from Libby Mills, she would come in, we'd get a call by the time her spring college session would be coming to a close, and she'd say, can I come for the summer? Oh sure, come on in. Fact is, that's the way I got in contact with the Libby complex over the years, and did a lot of freelance work for the Libby Mills.

AL: Were they in competition with the Bates Mill at all, or was it just very different?

RD: No, because when you think about it, the Bates fabrics people, we were weaving cotton, we were in the cotton field, for cotton bedspreads and cotton draperies and anything else. Libby Mills across the street was in the woollen area, so there was no, and most of their patterns and designs was aimed at the Indian motifs and that kind of, and gradually we kind of worked it into plaids later on. We thought, well, it's time to face away from, you know, let's get with it, and we got them to go into the plaid area, which they

did extremely well after that.

One of the things with the Libby Mills was that the week before they were going to start up a whole series of brand new looms they had bought to weave this type of plaids, which were still in the woollen area, we had just completed a whole series of designs for them. And that's when they had that big fire over there, and it burned all the new looms and everything that had just been set up. So that was the kind of downfall of Libby's, you know, they couldn't come back after that.

But that was excellent, too, you know, freelancing with the Libby, because Bates was aware of this because, you know, it was kind of a neighborly thing because there was no competition. And they just said, you know, this is your free time, you can do what you want with it. So that's, and of course when you freelance the money's real good.

AL: Now, in your department were there mostly Franco-Americans, or was there ethnic diversity within the design area?

RD: Well, you take like Bill and Arthur Lehman, they were German, they were pure German, yeah, they were from German originally, they were born both in Germany. Herbert Hecker, he was, you know, I don't know exactly what the nationality was there. And we had Canadians, we had, or course Libby was, I don't know if she was Irish or English. And then we had George Mills and Harold Mills.

AL: Yankees?

RD: Yeah, so there was, and we had one or two Italian people at one time. So it was, you know, it wasn't exactly one nationality. So it was, it was a mixture of such.

AL: Do you know, did different ethnic groups tend to be in different, certain areas of the mill, or were they, that you recall?

RD: No, it's funny, the thinking wasn't like that. It was a case of, this is your qualifications, you are well suited to do this type of job, and that was it. So it wasn't, you know, you get a whole bunch of Irish people over here and a whole French Canadians over here, it didn't work out that way. No, it was, everybody kind of worked together.

Of course, like any other place, you always get one or two people that mix up everything for everybody else, but it was like everywhere else, you know. Over a period of time you kind of keep an eye on him, first thing you know it comes an opportunity, so, here's your severance pay.

AL: Were there social activities connected to the mills that people who worked there got involved in?

RD: Okay, one of the things, hockey. Bates had a championship, world championship hockey team way back in time. Rachel's got some photos there at the museum you can check on. We had bowling leagues, we had softball leagues, we had baseball leagues, we had camping trips, you know. We had our own newspaper; it was published, I think most of the time it was on a weekly basis. And we had monthly magazines, and we had trade magazines that we put out, I think it was like a cycle, the spring, midsummer and the fall, and so.

AL: Oh, wow, did you belong to any of those?

RD: I belonged to the bowling league. Fact is, I had started when the big ball bowling alleys came, first came, I had made contact with them and we started a bowling league right there and then. And then it kind of built up and had different divisions or the Bates complex, you know, like the Bates division, the Hill

division, the Androscoggin and the Edwards division, and we kind of (*unintelligible phrase*) have our own inter leagues.

AL: So you got to know people who you didn't necessarily work closely with every day, in another, by being on those teams.

RD: That's right, yeah, you got to meet people from all the areas of the same complex, you know, the same, so. But, no, like I say, it was a great life.

AL: Did it feel like more than just a job? Or how, did it feel like a community in some ways?

RD: Yeah, it did, yeah. I wasn't like you said, well, now I got to go to work today, you know, you said, you got up in the morning, hey, I'm ready to go, let's, what's going to happen today. And in my case every day was different. You know, you walk in and somebody would say, you know, you got a message here, this customer or this, you gave him an idea or you sent him an idea last year, or last week, and they, you know, they're interested. Can you elaborate a little more on this idea.

So, you'd see down and look to see if we had anything going. If we had a design or a project going that we needed to expedite, well then that had to be out of the way, and then I'd come back. Every day was different. Get a call from the New York office and say, hey, they're going to send somebody down there and they want to talk to you, because, you know, you spoke to them over the phone or something a couple weeks ago, or something. So it was always like that.

AL: And you stayed until 19-?

RD: I retired from Bates in 1989, okay? This is when there was a big turnover. The mills were real low as far as money, and the (*unintelligible word*) was to borrow a large sum from the government, or sell out and try to keep it going, whoever's going to buy it. This is when the two Chinese brothers came in, Thomas and Eric Chang. In other words, they're more or less investors. In other words, they were backed by billions of dollars coming out of Hong Kong, and they had more money than they knew what to do with it.

So they heard of this because they had acquired a mill in North Carolina by the name of Minnette, Minnette Mills in Grover, North Carolina. It's just about thirty-five miles south of Charlotte, where the airport is, North Carolina. And they came in about that time, and what they offered was to buy the shares of all the stockholders of Bates at the time. Not buy the company, buy their shares, which means the minute they bought the shares, they control, they didn't have to buy anything else.

They acquired it, that way there, without buying everything. They acquired their shares, this meant they had the controlling interest by about sixty or seventy-five percent, so they owned it without buying it. I don't think they spent more than, if I can remember right, seventy or seventy five thousand dollars. And there was nothing you could do about it, it was legal.

Just prior to that we had become an employee owned corporation, but it just wasn't working out. We had money on loan, and we just couldn't make the payments and this, because business at certain times of the year was, like January, business was always real low, and other times. But then at that point it was almost year round, you know, we were, we couldn't attract much of anything because I guess the whole market, the big companies were going from woven bedspreads to the comforters and other types of bedding, so the turnover, we just didn't fall into that area at the time. Because we hadn't anticipated, because we didn't have the money to go into that development for that area at that time, so it kind of ruined us at the time.

So when these two brothers came in, it was like, you know, everybody on the upper echelon thought, oh, this is great, you know. But thinking about it, like some of us that knew about this, we were thinking about it and said, no, this is not going to work out. And so anyhow, it went through, they acquired the ownership by this stock majority that they acquired.

And at the beginning, of the two, one was an older Chinese from the old type of family, you know, he believed in family and the good things. The younger one, he was a playboy. He was brought up in all that money, and he had no responsibility, he had no background.

As an example, one time he went out and bought a Rolls Royce convertible, you know, a Rolls Royce, bright red with a tan top, and never made a payment on it. The repo companies would come along and say, would you know about Mr. Tang's car? What car, you know, I'd say, you know, we've seen it in the beginning when he first came in with it but we haven't seen it since. So eventually, checking here and there, it was hidden in somebody's old garage behind some house. Never made a payment. But that's the way he was. He bought boats this way, sailboats. He had a nice one at Freeport Yacht Basin, you know, probably \$2, \$2.5 million job. Never made a payment on it. But that's the type of person he was.

But the older one just couldn't get him to get on the right track. Because the older one, in a Chinese family, the older brother is always the keeper of the younger ones. And whatever they do, you try to correct it and you try to get them on the right track. But if you don't, he doesn't want to get on the right track there's not much you can do about it. He just has to pay the consequences and pay the debts. So that's the way those two were.

But the interesting thing is, after they took over, well just before they took over they came around to look, see what there was and everything else. The plant manager at the time, Collins, says, hey, it was kind of a poor way to say this, but he said, you know, the Chinks are coming in to visit today, which was - - I said, okay, and he says, they want to go in and talk with you. I says, why? He said, well, they think you have the most interesting area of the whole complex, because this is the beginning of where everything starts. Well, okay.

So they show up, and the younger one, you know, just roaming around, you know, he'd look at this and look at that and kept walking. But the older one, he'd stand there with you and you could almost tell he had a list of questions this long, and he'd say, if you did this or that, because he was high tech, if you did this with this machine here, would it do this? So I kind of looked at him, I said, yeah, it would. Okay, then he'd move on to something else and he'd say, if we did that with that operation over there, could you get these results? And, you know, think about it for a few minutes and kind of figure it out. I says, yeah, I think we could, yeah.

So almost every week there for a couple of months, he would show up. He wouldn't bring the younger one, he'd show up by himself. He'd come in and he'd say, "Let's go on the other side of the sample room where it's going to be one-on-one," he says, "let's sit down," he says, "I got a lot of questions for you." "Oh, okay."

First thing I know, he says, he says, "I understand you're getting ready to retire." I says, "Yeah, at the end of the year," which was 1946 [*sic* 1986]. I says, "In the month of December I'm retiring." "Oh, you can't do that." "No? Why not?" I had thought of this ahead of time, and I had checked with different people on the State level and so forth, I said, "There's a chance to go to consultant, instant consultant." So I says, "Well," I says, "okay, Thomas," I says, "talk to me." I said, "I'm going to retire in December. Either I'm going to fade away, or go to somebody else."

You know, that kind of caught his attention. He said, "Who else?" I said, "Well, I have friends at

Fieldcrest and Cannon Mills, West Point Pepperell, that, you know, I could easily, on a part time basis.” “Oh, no, no, you can't do that.” He said, “How about you becoming a consultant for us, exclusively?” “Well,” I said, “okay.” He said, “You got a fee?” And I says, “Yeah, okay, I got a fee,” I says. The fee would be so much plus expenses, and I'll give you one week a month, one solid week a month and that's it, for this fee. And I kind of see the figures in his “Fine,” he said, “actually you could have started higher if you wanted to.”

I said, well, you could do that yourself, I said, you could increase, you know, so that way there it would be kind of a mutual agreement. He said, well, let's give it about six months, and then, he said, we'll, but he said, also I'm going to throw in your living quarters when you come down, and he says, you're going to have an office down at (*name*) Mills in North Carolina, you're going to have your own office down there. Then he says, over here, well, there's still going to be your office in the designing department there. So I said, (*unintelligible word*), how about the management here? He said, well, don't worry about management, because you're going to be above this manager, you're going to be working for me, you're going to be my assistant. You know, you're not going to be a vice president or nothing, but you're going to be over everybody, so he said, don't worry about the plant manager or the vice president, see, because you're going to be over them starting.

So I said, okay, so I did that for seven years. I had a running account with Bonnie Adams at Lewiston Travel, you know, and I'd say, I'd call up Bonnie, I'd say, okay, Tuesday morning at 6:30 out of Portland to Charlotte, North Carolina, and a rental car at the airport. Fine, so, there's a corporate discount and the whole bit.

So I traveled for seven years, and the agreement was also for my wife to come with me. So, and when we were down there and we'd see these old big Southern houses, you know, with these big columns and the whole bit, two stories and the real thing. This is where we lived while we were down there. We had a chef in the kitchen, we had maids, we had cleaning people.

AL: So you enjoyed those seven years, I take it?

RD: Well, when I think about it, I says, you know, why didn't I think of this about twenty five years before this, you know. Well, yeah. And people would say, god, you're always traveling and you've got your briefcase and, you know, you're going here and you're going there. And I says, yeah, but keep in mind, it's a little bit stressful because you've always got a time, you've got to be at a certain place at a certain time to meet with people to discuss, you know, projects and so forth, and I says, you know, it's, it's an excellent way of life but there's a little bit of stress. But I says, no, I like it, you know. Like my wife would say, oh, you're having a good time, and I'd say, sure am.

And we'd schedule it so we'd go down there on a Tuesday, and we'd stay over the weekend and come back the following Wednesday, so on the weekend we had the rental car. The older brother had a big condominium in Nashville, in North Carolina, in the mountain area of western of North Carolina, there was, it could sleep ten people. It was right on top of a mountain. And the keys were always there, and he says, you know, if you want to go spend a weekend up there, there's the keys, go on up. And he said, make a call first to the caretaker, we'll make sure everything is in order. So, he says, the only thing is, he says, you'll have to scrounge for food on your own. I said, well, that's hard to do.

So that's, or we'd hang around and we'd visit Charlotte, which was a real money city. I mean, when you talk about Charlotte today, where all the credit cards and everything else is processed in the world today, it's either in Charlotte or in Atlanta, Georgia, you know, so.

We used to drive down, because this was right on Rte. 85 going directly to Atlanta, Georgia, we were about a quarter of a mile from the Interstate, where the plant was and where we were staying at the

house, and we'd get on the Interstate, drive directly to Atlanta, and visit, you know, Peachtree and everything else in Atlanta, got a motel, hotels in Atlanta, and that was all part of the deal.

AL: So how long did the Chinese brothers stay involved with the mill, until what, or what happened when they left?

RD: Everything fell apart. This is when Fred Lebel, you know Fred? Fred was the plant manager at the Bates division. He was about the only surviving one left at the time. He acquired financing, or backing, to acquire Bates Fabrics at the time, but he just didn't have enough capital to keep it going. And I think he was, he was really on the wall there, and I think this is about the time Emile (*name*), the investor, financial investor, came in and took over.

They went into, they created Maine Heritage Weavers, because when the Chinese acquired Bates, they acquired the name Bates Fabrics, they paid \$2 million just for the name of Bates Fabrics. And the minute they acquired that, they could shut everything down and go to some other part of the world and set up a little plant, which was Bates Fabrics.

And while I was the consultant for those seven years, I can remember the Minnette-Bates Corporation, I was the corporation. So if, you know, if anybody tried to sue me for any breach or anything, they had to sue the corporation so I was covered for any suit or anything. Because on my business card it said, you know, Minnette-Bates, but way down on the bottom it says, Minnette-Bates, Inc., and that was my, I was the corporation. But the controlling, the two Chinese, their controlling corporation was Chauncey Corporation, which came out of Hong Kong, this is where the money was moved back and forth.

But, I don't know if it was the younger one that was blowing the money and it just wasn't going in the right direction, I think, in the end. Because I think it was two years after I finally retired, because I figured I was going, when I retired here at Bates, in the Bates division, I had forty-three years of time in. So I kept thinking, well, if I go about seven years as a consultant, I'll have exactly fifty years and then I'll be ready.

So the two Chinese brothers, the older one kept, he was never really around, he'd probably come in once a month for, sometimes it would be a week, sometimes two or three days. Because, he'd call me up, when I was here in Lewiston or down in North Carolina, he'd call me up and say, Ray, he said, how about this, think about this, he says, can I do this? And I'd think about it, and I said, well, if I couldn't give him an answer, I'd say, well, I'll call you back, I said, where are you right now? He says, I'm in Hong Kong. So I said, okay, give me about an hour and you call me back, because I'm not going through your system over there, it takes too long. He says, okay, and I'll call you back in an hour.

So that's the way it was. Other times he'd call me and I say, where are you now? I'm in Jamaica. He had a setup in Jamaica, at the Kingston Inn in Jamaica, he said, I'm in Jamaica, he says, I've got a whole bunch of looms here I'm thinking of getting started, he said, (*unintelligible word*) some thought of this project? And I said, yeah, I said, it won't work. How come? And I'd explain it to him, and he'd say, oh yeah, I never thought of that. Okay, forget it. Goodbye, you know, and be gone.

Next time I know, I'd be in North Carolina, he comes walking through the door. How you doing? You know, it was like that. Like I say, every day was different, whether it was here or down in North Carolina. And if I was in North Carolina, Baxter Corporation was his supplier for textiles, for any kind, the thread, cards, or computer things, they were the supplier to the textile industry and they were located in New Jersey, and one in Shelby, North Carolina. So every so often, if they knew I was down there they'd give me a call and say, would you come down to our plant, we got a question we'd like to run over. So I'd say, okay, I'll drive down, say, tomorrow morning. Okay. So I'd drive down there and we'd go to the executive board room and sit there for hours, and they'd order food in and, they'd say, well, it's about

lunch time, we'll order a meal in, you ready to eat? I says, why not, you know.

So we'd walk around and, of course these places here, you know, you really weren't supposed to be in there because everything's supposed to be top secret of what they're making so your competition wouldn't find out. But they brought me in, you know, I could pick up anything I wanted to and they knew that, you know, I was up front honest with them for everything. Whether I liked it or not, I told them what I thought. Either I didn't like it, I'd say yes or no, you know. They'd say, well, we're thinking of doing this. I'd say, no, it's no good, it won't work. You know, you might get a good sample or a good starting thing, but it just won't work in the long run, on a production basis, I said, I don't care what you do. Okay. Well, how about a different idea? I says, well, okay, I'll work on that. So, I mean, that's -

End of Side A

Side B

AL: We are now on Side B. I'm sorry, I interrupted you.

RD: Okay. So, how much time do you need?

AL: Well, let me think about -

RD: You got any more?

AL: I guess one of the questions that I wanted to ask you was to go back a little bit about the people who work in all the different areas in the mill and how they interacted. I know you talked that you worked directly with the loom, the weavers.

RD: The weaving room, yeah.

AL: What sorts of different jobs were there in the mill?

RD: Well, of course we were almost self contained as far as, in other words, the cotton would come in from the cotton fields in bales, it would start right from that point to make the yarns for the woven goods. So we processed all the way through, from the cotton ball itself coming out of the bale, it was, you know, processed, different machines all the way through until it was a fine thread for weaving. So we, and then after, say, the bedspread was woven, it was either preshrunk if it was going to be a natural color bedspread, or if it was going to be dyed, we had our own dyeing in the lower area of the Bates complex, we had giant vats to dye any color you could think of. We had, like Gerry Lafrance, who was a chemist in the lab, to give you the right color for any shade you wanted. So anything that you needed, we had.

As far as maintenance, we had an electrical shop, we had a carpenter shop, we had a machine shop, we had a plumbing shop. You name it, they could make it. If anything broke down, they could make it within a certain period of time, unless it was a special piece of machinery on a certain part of the loom that was a trademark. Then you couldn't really make it to fit, it had to be the trademark piece to go back. But anything else, they could make right in the plant.

So we were self-sufficient. And finishing the bedspreads, packaging bedspreads, you know, until they were all completed and going out the door to be shipped to the customer, everything was done. Our office, we had all the accounting people, the business people, we had the New York office. At the time the main office, we owned the building, it was at 80 Worth Street. We had, you know, I don't know how many salesmen at one time, probably anywheres from forty to fifty, all over the United States. So from beginning to end, we were self-contained as a corporation.

AL: Did people work shifts? Was the mill going all the time?

RD: We ran three shifts in the good years, yeah. We had from seven to three, three to eleven, then eleven to seven. Yeah, just like that.

AL: Now, in your department, design, they didn't work shift work there, did you?

RD: We were in from eight to five. Then later on we went from seven to four, or seven to three thirty, and we went out for a lunch break. Most of them, they took a half an hour, to cut down their time. So we went from seven, say, seven to twelve, then twelve to one we took a lunch break, and then we came back from one to three-thirty or four.

But on some periods when we were overloaded with design work, we worked a lot of overtime. I saw spells where I'd go in at seven in the morning, and stay there until five, come home for about an hour, and go back about seven until midnight.

AL: Now, did you get paid extra, or were you salaried?

RD: Oh yeah, oh yeah, this was big money, yeah.

AL: And so, it was probably, I'm thinking in terms of lifestyle, the people who worked shifts had a little, were a little bit different in terms of how they worked than, say, you, where you were pretty much during the day. Did you interact at all with the people who worked -?

RD: Well, see, like, on my level, going back from day one, I kind of, when I walked in, I walked in on a management level as far as you look at it, and not, say, on the union. Because I never had anything to do with the union, and of course, say, starting with the weaving and all the other departments, everything was union. But, say, the main office, all the office accountants and everybody else, that was strictly the management area. So that way there, maybe I was fortunate when I walked in, from day one, I walked in on a management level. So, and that's the way it worked out.

But the union, over the years, they were good, you know, they weren't like some of the unions you see with the auto manufacturing and so forth that get out of hand. This local union was, they did well with the people.

AL: Did they, were there issues that came up over the years that you can recall, that the union got involved in? Hours, or working conditions, or pay?

RD: Well, it was the usual thing. There'll come a period of time where people got a little antsy, the price of things will start going up and the people will say, well, it's time for a raise. Well then you, the contract, over the years, averaged on a three-year level, the contract would run for about three years. And then the people going into, beginning of the third years would say, okay, everything's going up, we need a raise, you know.

I really never saw a strike or a shut down for, I don't know, like any more than, that I can really remember, of a week really over the years. Or anything serious, like you know, things nasty like breaking things or, you know, hurting people. It never happened. People had their opinions, but they always, they all went to the union meetings, and this is where they vented all their displeasures and so forth.

It was, it was fine over the years. I really can't remember any event that, you know, was serious enough to, you know, like you'd call the police in to squash something. I can't ever remember anything like that.

AL: Do you have recollections of Hal Gosselin?

RD: Hal Gosselin, yes?

AL: He was president, or vice president of Bates at one time.

RD: He was assistant to the president. That's, in the beginning he was, in the beginning, if I remember right, he came in to publish a magazine. He was in charge of publishing the magazines and the yearly annual reports and things like that, so he was involved in the printing of the magazine and so forth.

And of course, we changed presidents over the years quite a few times, you know. And he, at one point there, he went from that position to assistant to the president, and if I remember right he stayed at that level until he, I don't know if he retired or moved on to, he moved on to CMMC. But I think he was just assistant to the president when he moved to that area. He went to CMMC as, I think it was public relations director, when he moved to that area.

I remember (*unintelligible phrase*) a few contacts with Hal where we discussed some of the things in the magazines he put together for, like the spring line and the fall line and things like that. You know, I think it ought to go this way. I says, no, no, no, this.

AL: Artistic disagreements?

RD: Yeah, just you know, business disagreements.

AL: So you said there were quite a few Bates presidents over time at the mill. Are there any that really stick out in your mind as being impressive, or not so?

RD: Yeah, there was one way back in time, Herm Ruhm, Ruhm. He was a good, he was a family man and he was honest, you know. And we had some, one of them was Arnold Ginsberg. He was a character. He'd show up probably every two or three weeks, and he'd walk in, come through the door, and here I am, my name is Arnold Ginsberg, I'm president. I says, yeah, Arnold, this is what you said when you said when you were here last week, I says, don't you remember? Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, okay, you know. Flighty, you know?

But there was -

(*Outside interruption.*)

RD: My wife was a nurse until she retired, and she said, I want to do something different, so she went to work at Porteous, you know, selling the kitchen ware. And of course, if you look around you'll see all these quilted things are hanging all over the place? This is her hobby, so she's got her workshop back there. I still got my office way back in the beginning because I still do a few things on the side, so.

AL: But were there any other Bates presidents that you recall, or are those the ones that really stick out?

RD: Bill Hickock, he was interesting. There was Thomas Levine, he lives in Manchester. He was probably towards the end of, just before, yeah, he was just before the Tangs came in to buy out the Bates Fabrics. But way back in time, God, there were so many I just can't.

AL: That's okay.

RD: But it seems as though every, come the first of the year we'd get a memo saying, well, the old president is either going to someplace else or he's retiring and we're going to have a new president in a couple of weeks. So, this is the way it was. But, you know, a president is like, okay, they come in, they go, you know, it doesn't change anything, everything keeps moving. Unless you get one that's coming in who's got stupid ideas, you know.

Like, well when the Tangs came in, the ongoing, Eric, he had all kinds of, you know, well we're going to modernize this this way, and I says, you know, you're not thinking of the people, Eric, I says, you're thinking of the machine. You got to think of the people. This machine is not going to work until these people press the button and tell it what to do. Oh yeah, but that's simple. I said, no Eric, it's not simple. You're not considering the product that you're going to put, use this machine for, I says, it's just not going to work. Oh, wait and see.

Well, they'd bring the machine in and set it up, it would take three or four weeks. Even the people who set it up couldn't get it to coordinate with what was supposed to be, the duty it was supposed to be doing. And I'd walk down and take a look at it, and I'd sit back and laugh. And Eric would show up and he'd say, what do you think of that thing? I says, yeah, come on down, let's go take a look at it. And I'd stand there and say, what do you think? Well, stand here and watch, they're trying to get it to go. I says, can you go over there and get this thing going? Well no, he says, I'm not up on this high tech stuff. I says, why the hell did you get it? Well, somebody sold me on the idea. I says, yeah, all right, you spent seventy five thousand dollars setting this thing up, and you're paying it on a lease basis, on a monthly basis and now you probably paid a couple of months, which I didn't think he did, but anyhow, I said, and it's not even running yet and it's not going to run. So, well, he says, maybe you're right, he said, we'll give it another month. Well, within two weeks the people who brought it in came and took it out, and they went back to the.

But, you know, he was like that over the years, but you know. Like Bill Hickock, in his spare time his hobby was woodwork, to make woodwork, you know, outdoor chairs for lawn furniture and things like that. And he lived in upper New York state, and he has his own workshop and everything. And every time he'd come to the plant he'd say to us, can you draw me an idea for this type of chair, or this type of cabinet.

So I says, hey, we're making bedspreads here, not furniture. Well, he says, you know, this is for my little project. Okay, so, we'd kind of scribble (*unintelligible word*), hey, yeah, he says, could you detail it a little bit so, you know, to show me the parts. So I says, yeah, I think so, I says, next time you come we'll give you a, like a blueprint of some time. Because we could do blueprints, too, because I had taken mechanical designing and blueprinting and the whole bit, so there was no problem.

Fact is, our design department, we could do anything. The artists in there could paint, you know, they could pick up, you'd come in and they could just look at you and paint a portrait, sketch it out within half an hour and then go home and make a painting and come back next week.

I had one guy, Larry Stevens, he was unbelievable, he could paint the best portraits. That's the type of people we had.

AL: Are there things that I haven't asked you about, about your time at the mills, that you think is really important to add today?

RD: Okay, okay, let's go back a little bit. Over the years, the Bates, it was Bates Manufacturing was back in time, that's the way it was incorporated, Bates Manufacturing Company, Inc., I think, is the way it was way back in time.

We had the Androscoggin division, which was where Marden's has their storehouse way down at the end of Lisbon Street. And then we had the Hill division. The Androscoggin was where the main offices used to be, way back in time, and then they were brought back to the Bates division later on. The Hill division was weaving mostly sheetings, sheet goods, and I think at one time they wove shirting material. Way back in time they used to have these striped shirts which was a big trend, way back in time, in the '30s, '40s and that period.

And of course the Bates division wove bedspreads, but way back in time they wove rayon bedspreads, then later on we went to the nylon, dacrons as far as yarns, and then we wove table covers with napkins. I don't know if you remember seeing them, that was way back in time, the nice shiny table covers that we used to weave with napkins and the whole bit as a set.

Then later on we got together with Guilford Mills out of, was it Dexter? This is the period of time when the office complex, in other words they put up an office building and it was wide open, and instead of having all kinds of office divisions, they came up with the idea of walls in between each area. You know, in other words, you have this area here, and we're going to put up a wall here. But it wasn't a full wall, it was just, say, a panel.

And all these panels on both sides needed something to give it some color, so we wove what we called paneling material. It was woven by the yard, and we put all kinds of designs on it. And this was cemented to these panels for divisions in big office complexes. Like, you know, if you see a commercial today you see these, all these little cubbyholes? Well, most of them these days, they don't, they're all plain, you know, they have it shabby looking. Well, what we did is all kinds of designs on each one of these panels, so you had an office, you could have one panel like this with one design over here, one over here, and so forth, if the manager wanted to pay for this kind of paneling.

And then about the same period of time, we worked with this company, or this, people out of New York that they were in that same field, and that they were making this type of, for whole walls, you know, and we did a lot of that. We used to, for them we'd take a warp beam, you know, with all, that you've seen probably with the yarn that's laid on, so we could set it up on the back of the loom for the warp yarn.

Well, we did multi colors. We put it all on there and we'd run it through, and we had a design that when the colors were dyed onto this wall, it was still just yarn but it was dyed onto this wall, it gives you all kinds of designs. And then when they put the warp on the back of the loom, when it came through for weaving, you see, you had that design on the warp itself besides the other pattern that you put on it. So you had a multiple idea of shades on the warp itself, and then the design that you put on the face, you say the face of it.

Well, we had a monstrous order, just about the time the mill kind of folded, with this company out in New York. You know, we're talking millions, almost billions of dollars in contract. We just couldn't turn it over, you know, the money there for, the capital for doing this just didn't work out.

And like I say, the last manager there was Tom Levine out of, who lives, he used to be, with his father, a Carlton Mills, you know, when you go through Winthrop, the Carlton Mills, he was there with his father, they owned that. Then when they closed down, he came to, with us. But he was the last until the Tangs took over.

AL: Is that a good place to stop today?

RD: Yeah.

AL: Okay, thank you so much for your time.

*End of Interview
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