

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

Fred Lebel
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

MWOH# 015
January 25, 2006

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Fred Lebel for the Mill Workers Oral History Project on January 25th, the year 2006. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu and we're at the Bates Mill store that is located on -

Fred Lebel: Two Cedar Street is the address, in the Continental Mill complex.

AL: And tell me what year you started working in the mill?

FL: At Bates, or mills in general?

AL: Mills in general.

FL: Well, my first job was basically in this mill over here. I started working here in 1952, I believe. And I started to work with my father, who used, the maintenance department. From there I went into the quality control and IE work. And I did take about six or eight months to go to school in Memphis, Tennessee learning to class cotton, and when I graduated from there I was a qualified government grader and buyer. But when I came back to work for Bates I still stayed in the quality control and industrial engineering department.

Continental went out of business in 1961. Basically I stayed, I was the last person with the mill to get rid of the equipment, and in June of '61 the mill closed and the week after I went to work for Bates, also in the industrial engineering department. At that time Bates had three mills. They had the Edwards at Augusta, they had the Hill Division and Bates in Lewiston. I was stationed at the Androscoggin headquarters, there was a portion on the side that was set aside for the treasurer and IE department and other departments, and from there I would travel the three mills, Augusta, or Hill or Bates. That was '61.

In '63, I was assigned in charge of the IE at the Bates Division, and I believe in two years I became the general superintendent, and then another three or four months I became the manager. So by 1965 I was the manager of the Bates Division. I stayed on the job until, for I don't know how many years, and I became the vice president of manufacturing, and eventually president, in probably 1988 or '89. That's after the Chinese, the Tang brothers had purchased the mill, and I was associated with them.

I also forgot to mention, I did leave Bates for one year in 1983. I had a problem with the president at that time, Bill Gleason, and I left to go to work for Guilford, up in Guilford, Maine. After a year, John Wahl, who was the chairman of the board of the, this, of Bates, called me and said he wanted to meet with me and they said they were not happy with what was going on at Bates and if I wanted to come back. Tom Levine came back, and I did to help him. The only reason I came back was because my parents were not feeling that well, and Bates, I mean not Bates but Guilford was so good to me and I, if my parents were okay I might have stayed at Guilford.

But in any event, with my parents, I came back. But I was pleased to get back to the operation I knew well, and Tom Levine and I tried to get this place, to make it profitable. But it was so much in debt that it was almost impossible, it was just a matter of time that the mill would run out.

Now, it's quite a few years, I might be off a year or two, and I believe it was early nineties or late eighties that the Chinese had stopped, they were not paying their bills and everything else, and the mill was going to close completely. I believe they owed the city three quarters of a million dollars in back taxes, that's the Chinese, and other bills were mounting all over the place, and they were just stepping out of it. So I approached the city and I said, hey look, do you want me to continue the operation? I'll do the best I can with it with limited resources that I have, and they finally agreed, by all means do it. There's so many people still working, if you can keep it going we're all for it.

So that continued for a couple of years and we struggled somewhat to keep it going, because we just didn't have the backing and financial to make it worthwhile, so in a couple years basically we did run out of money and basically we did file for bankruptcy. And one reason we did this is the city at that time had just announced they were going to make a convention center in mill number five, which was most of our operation. So our advisors, legal counsel, said you better go into bankruptcy because with the money that you owe now and it's seen coming out in the paper, the banks I'm sure were going to force you to pay up, so we figured by filing we'd get some time that maybe we could recover.

Then (*unintelligible phrase*) we didn't, so the mill was out for sale and I believe it was 19-, the nineties anyway, they were sold to, the mill was sold to (*name*) Mills, and they had four American Heritage brands. Their intent was to have Bates, and they had their own company, it was also as old as ours, and they had another elderly mill in the south they were trying to get together. That in itself didn't work out, so basically the mill was closed in 2002, or 2001, and then I started my own operation as a result of this. I just wanted to keep the Bates Division going, especially on the bedspreads that we were making, they were well known, and I felt if that would stop that would be the end of it. So I took a gamble and I started a small weaving operation that I have now at the Hill Division.

We're struggling, but we're making progress. Right now we have six looms, and I believe this year will be a good year for us. I'm getting the jacquard heads going the way it should be, so we should be able to produce and deliver to our customers. So, actually this was started in, the first loom started in September of 2002, and we've completed three years. Now I have four jacquard heads going, I have a preparation department to make the warps, and a slasher for loom beams, so pretty independent now, so all we do is buy the yarns and we're pretty well on our own. We have a small dye house and all, and our product is being well received and we think this year will be a decent year for us.

AL: Is it that it's grown since 2002?

FL: Yes, yes, we had to start from scratch, we had no equipment.

AL: Did you have people that were, had worked in the mills that you were able to keep?

FL: I was very fortunate to keep some of the technical people that Bates had. People like Danny Fitzsimmons who's a tremendous technician on looms and all equipment. I was able to, because my daughter had worked for Bates in the weave room as a clerical, and she also was in charge of the cut and sew operation at the end, so she came with me with a couple of the girls that had experience in the cut and sew operation. We also (*unintelligible word*) Ray Bilodeau to work in the dye house, so he came over with us. Dot, an excellent jacquard weaver, also is with us.

So right now we have nine people. In addition to that, we also have Leonard for designing and all, and right now he just, he left last year, he was doing part work for me designing but last year he got a job in Brunswick in one of the industries in there, and I finally convinced him to come back so he's going to be back with us starting in February. So now I have the people I wanted in place, like Leonard will be designing, and other work that I need with Danny and the other, so we'll be about nine people basically, so I feel this should be a decent year for us, too.

AL: Now, you talked about the mills declining over the years in terms of production and number of workers, but there also seems to be a continuing interest in this product. Can you talk a little bit about what you saw as some of the reasons for the, was it technology or, for the downsizing of the mills, or financial?

FL: The downsizing of the mills, to go back, Bates in its heyday had about over six thousand people, when they had five mills. In the fifties, the Bates Manufacturing Company was making tremendous amounts of money, I mean, they were very profitable, paying huge dividends to its stockholders and everything else. But after the fifties, say late fifties, they started a downhill slide. Competition, a little bit from overseas, but the southern mills basically were really hurting Bates to some degree.

And Bates had not really kept up with the times to get new equipment, to be more efficient. For example, in the fifties when they were making millions of dollars they could have taken a portion of that and get new equipment. The end results would have been the same, but I think they could have lasted a long period. Nobody knew of all the imports coming in now. Most of your mills in the United States now are almost gone basically, there's a very small number of mills that are remaining. If you're a niche market, which I am in now and I'm hoping that'll keep us going.

Most of our competition from Asia, they go more in mass production. They don't want small items, they want volume so they can keep it around the clock seven days a week, and with their labor, which is on seven cents an hour, you can't compete with that. They have no environmental problems, they have very, very little insurance and all, so labor wise you can't compete with that. But if you have a niche market, and that's my belief, there's a good possibility we will make it, and especially the product we're doing. It's top quality, it's well received, and I'm proud of our product and I feel sure that if we service our customers and maintain the quality we have now, we should be fine.

I might have forgotten something in regards, like I said, it was six thousand people, and then I might add, in the late fifties, I believe, Lester Martin finally took over the company. What I mean by that, he was buying Bates stock on the market for years. Well, I wouldn't say for years, but long enough that he got control of it. And his main concern was, once he took over the stock there were five mills, (*unintelligible word*) was brilliant. He knew that buying the company, that what he bought it for, by liquidating the mills he would make a tremendous amount of money. Because what he paid for it and what he could get for the equipment and the product at that time could be very rewarding.

And that's how he started. He closed the one mill they had, the York Division in Biddeford, he closed that and sold all the assets, then he closed the Androscoggin and sold all the assets. His intent was to close Bates, one of the other mills, or the Hill Division at that time, which I believe was in early sixties, he had a heart attack and died. And that's what really preserved the mills, because his intent was to liquidate all the mills, it was very obvious on that. And how I know this is one of my friends used to work for him and he was telling me on the side, he said, this guy has got plans and I know what he's going to do. So in a way the people were fortunate that this happened, it kept them going for another ten or fifteen years. But that was the plan.

Then his son-in-law took over and he had good plans. He wanted to build Bates again, and he did build, did purchase other companies to help Bates. But again, it was just a matter of just too much and too late at the time, so eventually, you know, it eroded with the York going out, and the Androscoggin, with three mills left. And I believe it was about three thousand people left at that time.

The Hill Division, for financial reasons, I believe they sold that in 1972, they closed the mill and sold the building. And I believe they did the same with the Edwards, the Edwards was sold to Mr. Miller, Miller Industries, he bought it and he kept it going for a while until he had a fire, the whole thing went up and it never started again. And of course you know about Bates.

When Bates closed, by the way, I might add, when I took it over we, when Tom Levine and I came back it was about a thousand people here, and eventually it went down and I believe when I took over there were still about a hundred some odd people that I tried to maintain, and then eventually went out also.

AL: Now, the looms that you used, were some of those able to be kept from the mills?

FL: The looms that I originally bought were from Biddeford Blanket in Biddeford, they were closing and these looms were available, so I went down and looked at them. They were wide looms and all, and they were using them, and they were inexpensive and that's the reason I bought those. If I had to buy a new loom at thirty or forty thousand dollars, there's no way I could have started. Some of the looms that I bought at Biddeford, I think the first two that I bought were five thousand dollars, which itself was high. Then the next two were like two thousand dollars, and the last two I bought was a thousand dollars, so it's basically, I was able to purchase those because they were very inexpensive at the time.

AL: And you mentioned your father had worked in the mills.

FL: Yes.

AL: And was he from Lewiston?

FL: My father was from Lewiston, and my grandfather also worked in the mill but he was from Canada. My grandfather, whose name was Homer, and I still remember him basically. Now, he worked for this mill, Continental over here also.

Let me go back. My grandfather and two brothers lived I believe it was (*unintelligible phrase*) in St. Lawrence Seaway, and there was a large family, I believe it was twelve siblings. And I guess the food and work was very difficult at the time, they were actually starving, and they heard about the mills, and these were three teenagers I believe. Well, one was twelve, I believe, one thirteen and one fifteen. All three of them decided to go work in the mills, and I understand they took the Grand Trunk Railroad, they came to Lewiston and they settled over here to go work in the mills.

I remember my father telling me about my grandfather was, his job was, he had a team of horses with a wagon, and Continental does not have a railroad siding, so in order for the cotton to be received he had to take his team of horses and a wagon and go to the railroad siding, which is basically by the Hill Division, there used to be tracks in there. And there was an area in there where the cars, the cotton would stand, and he'd go in, open the doors by himself, and he would handle those bales which weighed five hundred pounds at a time all by himself. He'd put it in this wagon, he'd put six bales at a time, with his team of horses bring them back to Continental, the mill we're in right now, and unload them. And that was his job, that's all he did all his life.

And then when my father started in here, he worked in maintenance, basically in the yard, and eventually he became the supervisor. And it's amazing in a way, because my father had very little education, he couldn't write. But they still gave him the job because of his, how shall I say it, perseverance, and he was a hard worker and everything else. He was well liked.

AL: And what was his name?

FL: Wilfred. My grandfather was Homer and this was Wilfred. And so he worked here all his life, so when the mill closed in 1961 he couldn't believe it. I believe he had worked here about forty years then, and he was still, I think he was about sixty years old, in that area. Then he went to work for Bob Roy, and Bob Roy knew my father, knew the type of worker he was, so he gave him a job. And my dad worked

until he retired in '68, and he had lung cancer and he died I believe he was eighty-one years old. And my mother worked in the mill. My -

AL: Your mother did as well.

FL: My mother also was a doffer and my grandmother was also a spinner-doffer. So the family itself, most of our people worked in the mills. What I remember that stands out as far as my grandmother and my mother, my grandmother worked at the Hill Division as a doffer-spinner.

AL: And what is that?

FL: They, a spinning frame, they have bobbins, and when yarn is processed from roving it makes yarn on small bobbins and they got to come off the frame. So what they do when they're filled up, the frame stops and they have to take the bobbins out, the full ones, and put empty ones. And work was very difficult in those days, people were waiting in line for work, but the people that worked in the mill were pretty clever in a way. What they were doing is, like my grandmother was on the first shift, I don't know how many hours, maybe eleven hours a day, so my mother would bring her lunch, maybe she was nine or ten years old, bring her lunch at noon, and while my grandmother was eating her lunch, my mother would start working to learn the job.

So that's how they learned, with their mother or whoever it was. So after doing that for maybe a year or so, and again my mother maybe only twelve or thirteen, she went to work in the mill so when there was an opening she went in, does she have experience, oh yes, I've been doing, then she would show them what she could do and then she was hired. So my mother, again, all her life spent in the mill as a spinner-doffer, and when the Hill I believe closed in '72, then she came to work at the Bates Division in the finishing room, and she was a mender. She stayed there until she was sixty-five or sixty-six, then she retired. She just passed away about four years ago at ninety-one or ninety-two years old.

AL: And when you were thinking about going into the mills, what age were you?

FL: When I started, I came back, I attended Bates for a couple of years and then I went to the service, I went to OCS in Fort Benning, Georgia. I had a bad knee, I got banged up in the service so I came out of the service. But while I was in the service I got married to my wife Theresa, and so when I came back I didn't go back to school, I came back to work at Continental here for my father, so I thought maybe I'll go to school after, but I never did.

AL: So was your father working in the mill a help to you getting the job? Was it hard to get into the mill in your generation?

FL: I don't remember. I don't think it was that hard. Well, at the time, yeah, I did have a chance because I knew my dad, he would hire me, and I used to just in the summers while I was going to school. And as far as the age, I believe I was twenty-two when I came to work in the mills, when I started. So, and from here, like I said, I worked there then I learned cotton classing.

In all your mills you used to have what they called a cotton classer, a cotton buyer. All the yarn, not the yarn, but all the fiber comes to a mill. People probably think, well a bale of cotton is a bale of cotton. Well, they're all different, they have different lengths of staple, goes anywheres from thirteen sixteenth of an inch to an inch and a quarter. The longer the fiber, the more expensive it is. You have about six or seven different colors of cotton. You've got white, you got stain, you got tinge, greys and all, and these all have value. And when you make fabric, you got to make sure you have the right staple, you have the right color, and what they mean by preparation, that it's nice and smooth, you got the microdenier, you got to be, so I was learning this with Norman Fisk that used to be the cotton classer over here.

While I was working with my dad, every time he needed me he'd call me and I'd go help him, and I started to learn how to do cotton classing. And after a while he was letting me do a lot of his work. He used to play golf at Martindale, and one afternoon, I don't remember what age I was, but he went to play golf and going up the first hill he had a heart attack and he died. The mill agent at the time, Vernon (*name*) who was part owner in all knew that I did some work with Norman Fisk, and he called me in, he said, Fred, he said, I know you worked with Norm, can you take this over? I was scared. I didn't know at the time, I said, I don't believe I can do this to that extent, and he said, well, I appreciate your honesty.

So they hired somebody from Rhode Island, and when this individual came in and he started doing the cotton classing, he started getting me to work with him and I realized that I was more capable than he was. So I said, wow, but I (*unintelligible phrase*) the experience anyway. So at that time I made up my mind, I said I'm going to go to school to learn this if this comes up again. (*Interrupted.*)

And as I was saying is I said, when I saw that, then I said I do the school in Memphis. It's the Murdoch's Cotton Classing and Buying School, and I said, I'm going to go there. I had just been married, and I told my wife and she thought it was a good idea. So I told the company that I needed some time off, that I would go there and I was hoping that they might, and they couldn't at the time, they said, no, we can't help you with that at all. So I said, well, look, I'm going down. So I did sign up for the school, I went in, I know I drove down to Memphis, and I did the school, I did everything that was expected of me. It was like an international school, you had people from all over the world learning this trade. And the fact that I had experience before, when I finished that school I was qualified and I had a license to be a government classer. In other words, I could go work for the government. I don't know what, P-grade or whatever it was, but it was fairly good money at the time. And the fact that, like I said, I worked with Bates before and with going to school it gave me five years of experience, and then I did have the government license but I never took, I just came back and I came back to my job over here and they were pleased to get me back. And I said, well, if it happens again, I'll be ready.

But in the meantime, a year or two later something happened and I went into the industrial engineering department and quality control. And eventually in another year I was running it over here, I was in charge of those two departments until the mill closed, as I said, in 1961.

AL: And what sort of was your job in that position?

FL: I was in charge of quality control and industrial, time study work basically. I believe I had about three people in here that were working for me, there was about one other person in quality control, which is doing checks in the mill for, checking yarns, making sure your quality (*unintelligible phrase*) of sheeting. Continental here was known for very high quality sheeting. They used to do government work in parachute cloth, handkerchiefs. It was a well-known mill as far as quality, and this competed with the Hill Division, but basically the products are basically the same.

But the department, the time study was doing engineering work for job evaluation, time study work, more like efficiency experts, so that sorts of job. And when I left this mill to go to Bates, that what I stayed in basically, in quality control. Not really quality control, but the time study work.

AL: And you said that especially in the early days when your grandparents were working in the mills it was very hard work, it was very manual labor. How did that change over the years, that you saw, in terms of dangers to injuries?

FL: Oh, as far as the mills, I could go back from the experience of what I heard from people, when the Bates first started, and I'm going back like the 1850s and '60s and '70s. Remember, there was no electricity. Everything was waterpower. In other words, the hydros and all, and by shafts and belts, this is how the equipment used to run, and what was dangerous then is, like a girl like you, with hair like you

have there. The chances are, if that wasn't tied down you could be scalped, because the belts going by, if your hair got caught in there and then. That happened, and it was very dangerous in that respect.

But after the electricity came in and they got rid of the belts and better equipment, it was just more efficient. People still worked fairly hard, only the hours got shorter. In the, like early 1900, they were working fifty-four and fifty six hours a week. I believe it was ten hours a day, five days a week, and six hours on Saturday. That was their week, fifty-six hours basically. And I know in 1912, (*unintelligible phrase*) the State made a new law to cut it down to fifty-four hours, from fifty-six, but the people felt they'd cut pay if they did it. That was a major strike then, it was a real problem then in 1912. But the hours got shorter, you know, and eventually down to forty hours. But exactly over the years how it broke down is, all I knew at first was in the sixties and eventually down to the forties, that's what made it much better for the people to work in here.

And keep in mind the mills, too, were a three-day operation. In other words, they had people on the first shift, second shift, and third shift, it's twenty-four hours straight. Simply because the equipment's so expensive, if you bought equipment you didn't want to run just one shift, you're running three shifts so you want to utilize the equipment as much as you can. Now, the mills in the south, they used to work six days a week around the clock, but they had an advantage, they didn't work, I don't think they paid overtime on Saturdays for a while, until the federal laws got into effect. But they used to work six days a week.

Now as far as the hardness, people still worked fairly hard. And of course being in the industrial engineering department, people were allowed fifteen percent of their time for personal. In other words, in a day there were allowed seventy-two minutes to take breaks, to have lunch with the rest room and all, and that was pretty standard. You set up workloads for people to work, you know, for most of the time except for those seventy-two minutes. And we took studies.

In our department at Bates we had I believe it was eleven or twelve people working in there to do time study work in all the three mills at that time. So this is how you tried to keep your labor cost in line, so you wouldn't want somebody in a department working seven hours a day and having their seventy two, and then somebody else would be working four hours, and that created problems. Plus the fact your costs would be too high, so our job was to make sure everybody worked, and make sure that they were not overworking also. And so we constantly took time studies and that's what we tried to do.

AL: And what is your date of birth?

FL: March 5th, '29.

AL: So you grew up in Lewiston late thirties into the forties where you can remember -

FL: My home is right across the street here.

AL: Is it?

FL: On Cedar Street, which is part of Little Canada basically. As a matter of fact, when I worked at Bates, we got married, my father owned the apartment house and I used to work in the, live on the first floor and all I had to do is go across the street to work, so, basically, so it was convenient. Then in 19-, I believe it was 1963 I bought some land on Randall Road and I built my house in which I am today.

AL: What was Little Canada like, and the larger Lewiston community like when you were growing up?

FL: I would say Little Canada was a very close-knit group. I mean, we never locked our doors, or, I mean everybody was friendly, and you don't have the problem that you have today all over the United

States, I mean right now if you don't lock your doors you're going to lose something, somebody's going to come in. But people were, as I said, very friendly, no problem, hardly any problem. Oh, you still had a few people breaking a few windows here and there while they were playing around, but most of the cases it was pretty quiet, pretty friendly, and everybody seemed to get along fairly well.

AL: And what did you and your parents do for social activities? Was it centered around the church or the people you worked with in the mill, or a combination?

FL: A combination basically. There was St. Mary's right across the street from us, the church, and that's what we used to attend. And my parents basically both working, they'd come home at night and rest basically, and my grandmother at the time, they were taking care of her also. But I remember them just going to work, coming home, and they'd go out for a ride or eat out once in a while, but most of the time they'd stay home. And of course then you got television in the fifties, then that was their new hobby. They got a TV set and they watched that all the time.

AL: Were they both on the same shift at the mill?

FL: Not at first. As I remember my mother saying, she was working I believe it was the second shift, and she'd come out at night to make sure that I was fed and everything else. My dad was on the first, she was on the second shift for a number of years. Then eventually she was on the first shift also.

AL: And were you an only child?

FL: Yes, yes.

AL: And so your grandmother grew up in the household with you for some years, or was that later years?

FL: That was later years. Well, I remember, well maybe I was ten or twelve that she was living with my parents right here on Cedar Street. They bought a house, I believe it's 51 on Stewart Street, and that's when they moved out of here. And that's when I took it over, I mean basically, I had just got married and they said, well if you take this apartment house, you're working over here, it was somewhat in the early fifties if I remember correctly.

AL: And did they speak French in the home?

FL: Most of the time, they spoke very little English. My father enough to get by, that's why he became the supervisor, and my mother could speak a little bit. But I would say ninety five percent of the time they would speak French, French Canadian.

AL: So that was probably your first language, when you went to school you had to learn English?

FL: It was, it was, I was at St. Mary's matter of fact in the fourth grade, my mother wanted me to learn English so she trans me over to Coburn School at the time, it was a public school. Then from Coburn went to Jordan and Lewiston High.

AL: And in terms of economically, Lewiston was a pretty vibrant shopping center at the time you were growing up, is that what you recall? Or maybe not?

FL: Not really, to be honest with you. You know, you're growing up, and I don't think I observed that at all as far as the shopping centers and everything else. I know they were there. To what extent, how it would compare to other places, I really didn't watch that too closely.

AL: What are some of the experiences that you had working in the mill that stick out in your mind over the years?

FL: Well, some of the management people on top of us. When I became a VP or a plant manager, I used to travel to New York, and I did notice a lot of activities were going on that I didn't think were too bright, if I may say so. Some of the top management would spend money foolishly in New York. There was one individual, I won't mention his name, but he had an office and it was ridiculous the amount of money he would spend on that, with plush carpeting and walls and thousands of dollars, and I knew at the mills that people were just struggling to get by, and I thought it was a lot of waste of money in the top management in New York. But most people were fairly good, but those few individuals, basically.

Now one thing that still stays in mind, Bates, after Arnold Ginsberg took over, decided to get into the production of polyester fibers and he hired this man to build a plant in Virginia, I believe. I think today it's Philips, but it was a small operation at the time, he built a fiber plant producing. And I remember after a couple of years when it was ready to go, they, and they had an opening day, this gentleman that was instrumental in building this plant, invited everybody. And I know Arnold Ginsberg, who was the president and owned the whole thing, was (*unintelligible word*). And I remember somebody asking this guy that was in charge, who built the whole plant was asked, are you going to be there? He said, no, he said, that darn thing might blow up, he said, I'm not going to be over there. And he wasn't, he never showed up. But it did start and all, but it was a very small operation so it never did compete, but he did sell it to somebody else who, he got involved with, Philips I believe ended up buying it.

And Arnold Ginsberg also had bought Virginia iron and coal, and these were coal fields in Virginia and West Virginia. And I know he bought that fairly well as far as money and I believe another, three individuals came in when Mr. Ginsberg needed money to keep these operations going, he got some people in from New York for investments. And these three people came in and I remember lending Arnold eight million dollars, that came out in public, for, to keep the mills going and they would, you know, take some responsibility in the mills. But after three or four years they more or less took control of it, and they bought Arnold out, he went out with another company and they took it over. And I remember that it was just around the energy crisis, so those coal lands, 1976 I believe, the amounts of monies that they made as a result of that for the small investment of eight million dollars, they got coal land and all that was worth hundreds of millions of dollars, so they did very well, they were sharp businessmen at the time. That's one of the things I remember.

In the mill itself, I remember one of the individuals in the dye house, a very friendly individual, you talk to him, and very well, popular with the people. I know one Monday morning he came in, and he went to the dye house and undoubtedly had some problem because he hung himself in the mill, he was right there. So we had a few people, like one that, I mean, took his life this way, or we had a few accidents and probably people got hurt, and these are things you remember.

But one good thing is, most of the people were very cooperative and worked very well. Lucille Blais [*sic* Barrett] used to be the union president, and she worked in the cut-and-sew operation; very good person to work with. She was a fair person, she represented the union but she was also very fair to both ways, the mill and the people. And she, I believe she got her daughter through college through the mills, and many times she'd mention how good the mill was to her and provided livelihood for her family and all. Quite a few people like that.

I mean, these people now worked here for like thirty, forty, fifty years, so, and Lucille was probably one of the best stitchers the mill had so she earned her money, because she was a fast and hard worker. She did very well.

AL: You mentioned the unions, and that brings to mind Denny Blais who was the, like the New England agent for the textile workers. Did you, in your position did you have interactions with him, and if so -?

FL: Yes, I knew him, I had meetings with him, I knew him personally, and I would say Denny Blais was one of the smartest persons I ever met. You could go to, every so often you'd have arbitration or something, things that management and union would not agree. And if you went to an arbitration and Denny was the arbitrator for the union, his record was very good. And what was amazing with Denny Blais was, you could go to an arbitration meeting, it might last for two hours, he had no notes. Everything was in his head. I mean, he was, this is with, he was a brilliant man as far as I'm concerned. I remember him speaking for hours without looking at notes and all, and he was excellent. I always wanted to be on his side because he was so good.

AL: And talk about, if you can, some of the social activities that were connected with the mills. I know there was, I don't know if you were involved personally, but like the baseball team, and.

FL: You had baseball, you had softball, you had bowling. And also Bates every so often would have, would rent a rink and have skating parties for the employees. Now, in 1950, which by the way is before my time, I wasn't here then, was the 100 Year celebration. And then the, oh, what's his name, I'm trying to think of the, Maurice Chevalier, he was hired, or they got him to come to Lewiston and his entourage to sing at the Lewiston Armory, you know, the employees were there. So Bates went out to help to some degree.

And they used to have a meeting, which I was involved a few times, with the employees when it was twenty-, every year they had twenty five year employees. Well, you can imagine, you have two or three thousand people that, every year that have a number of people that would have, be twenty-five years. They would go to the Poland Spring House, that used to be, I don't know if you're familiar with that, okay, that was, every year they used to do that, they'd go to Poland Spring and all the people that had twenty five years or more were all invited. So it was all a gathering every summer, they would hire the hall at Poland Spring. That was a fact it was done every year. And of course when the mills started closing that backed off a little bit. But its heyday, when Bates was doing very well, that was very common for them to do.

AL: Were you involved in any of the bowling or baseball?

FL: Yeah, I was involved with the baseball basically, to some degree. And in bowling, I used to be a part of it, I joined one of the leagues to be with them to some degree.

AL: And over the years you've probably seen a few strikes at the mill.

FL: Yes.

AL: Do you, can you talk about that, what, the ones you remember and what, why they occurred and what the resolution was?

FL: I'm trying to think, I believe it was probably 19-, late 1970s. I believe the people wanted to strike because they wanted, I believe it was a money issue, they were trying to get additional monies. And I remember that I was in the mill with (*name*) Lambert who was president at the time, and the union had said that if we don't have an answer by a certain time, we are striking. And I remember at eleven o'clock, I don't remember if it was a Friday or Thursday, whatever, when it came to that time the people walked out of the mill, who were still in the mill at that time. So it was expected that they would walk out, but within a few days after it was settled. That's one that I do remember.

I know I've gone through like three or four of those over the years, but there was one way back, too, I believe, we were out for three or four weeks, and I believe that one might have been in the sixties but, about that time. But most of them were resolved, you know, either a few days or a week or two. The

longest one I remember I think was three weeks, around that.

AL: Do you recall Hal Gosselin?

FL: Hal Gosselin? Yeah.

AL: What was his role at the mill?

FL: Hal was assistant to the president. As a matter of fact, I have to give him credit for getting my job as the plant manager, because he recommended me to Frank (*name*) who was the president at that time for that job. Hal was a very knowledgeable man. Like Denny Blais, he was very sharp (*unintelligible word*), Denny was on one side, Hal was on the other side. Hal was smart and worked awfully hard. And his office basically was where, if you're familiar with Bates, where Turgeon, Al Turgeon is right now, in the executive office, that was his office basically. And Hal did a lot of traveling, he'd go to New York and represent the president and, if the president, which was Arnold Ginsberg, Al would take care of him basically. Hal did all the public relations in this area; he did an excellent job with that.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think I'm missing in terms of your memories?

FL: Well, the other thing is basically, I might add is of course, Bates in 1976 became an ESOT company, Employee Stock Ownership Trust. That's when the, in the end they had run out of money and they, again, those three individuals that took over the company for eight million dollars and got all this land and all the money they make, I think his name, well one of the individuals was very familiar with ESOTs and he knew someone on the West coast in regard to establishing an ESOT, so he worked at that and he was finally able to convince that was the way to go.

I think at that time, the late, I'm trying to think, late '70s or '76 if I remember correctly, he was not happy with the result. He had taken over the Bates mill and he had all this money invested and making one percent or two percent was not enough for him. He was a real financial man. His intent was to make money. He didn't care of people or what. I have money invested, I want a return or else. And I think at that time, I think he had three options: one was, if I can sell the mill to somebody else, that's probably one of the best things to do that I could, you know, recoup all this money and all; and another one was, if I don't I'm just going to liquidate it and take whatever I can get for the equipment and bail out; and the other one that came up was this ESOT, that I probably can have the employees take over the mill. And I believe it's for seven million dollars at the time, seven or eight million dollars, they worked with the Farmer's Home to, they would lend the money to the employees, and the Bank of Boston was involved with it, and I believe he got eight million dollars for that transfer at the time, that the employees would take over -

End of Side A
Side B

AL: We are now on Side B. I'm sorry, go ahead.

FL: No problem. And the debt, I mean, Bates still owed like twelve million dollars in the books, so besides borrowing eight million dollars, I believe they still had twelve million dollars of debt that they had to take care of.

And in the late '70s, if I remember correctly, that's when the interest rates started to go ridiculously high, and I think it went up to eighteen or nineteen percent, so not only did we have to pay X number of dollars per month to the Bank of Boston, but all the interest made it impossible to make any money. It's, a matter of fact the first month we were on our own, we were in violation of the agreement at the bank, we were not able to maintain anything, so that's one of the reasons that Bates was not able to

make it because they were in a deep hole, they just couldn't get out of it. Not that it would have made a difference. Sooner or later it would have gone out anyway with the, the way the activity is today.

But this Employee Stock Ownership, the people had a real interest in that because they felt that, wow, we got a chance of making some money in there. And if I remember correctly, I think the shares, the stock on the (*unintelligible word*) at one time went up to either a dollar-fifty or two-fifty, so people felt great about it, wow, two dollars and fifty cents a share. And, but it started going the other way, and then it was pennies, and then hardly anything. And of course when the plant closed it was nothing.

We still have people calling today that want to know if, that used to work here passed away and they must see the shares of stock, they'll call, what is this worth? And it's unfortunate, you have to tell them it's worth nothing. Or they had life insurance, that when the mills closed that, you know, it became worthless. I think I had, two weeks ago somebody called me, somebody that worked here, and said, well, I notice an insurance. I said, unfortunately when Bates went out these were worthless basically. That's one thing I remember.

And Bates had companies, they had a small plant in Canada, too, basically, that they had set up. And they were trying to circumvent I guess the taxes on cotton, it would go up to Canada, they'd process it, they would bring it back to the States and save all kinds of money. But by the time they got it going, the government stopped it, and actually it was Waterloo, and that's what it was, it was a waste of money up there. So a lot of money was wasted basically.

And of course the other thing, keep in mind, Bates Manufacturing at one time owned all the water rights. And that's, unfortunately they sold it, they lost all this potential money they could have had. Again, it's when they had a shortage of cash, they sold it to I believe it was the Lewiston community, it was the city that bought it over, and then they turned around and sold it right back to Central Maine Power. Bates at one time, I don't know how many kilowatt power they had, but they had three wheels at Bates, four or six wheels at Hill, and a couple of wheels at Androscoggin. And that was a real moneymaker, but unfortunately they sold it before the full value was effect. So Central Maine Power now, it's got all of those.

AL: Great, thank you so much.

FL: Well I'm, over the years I'm sure I've forgotten a lot, but as you get older you do forget a lot.

AL: Well you remembered a lot today, so thank you very much.

End of Interview
lebel.int.wpd