Oral Histories Transcripts

Adelard Janelle

My name is Adelard Janelle. I started working in the mills when I was 12. I was an oil boy.

The hours were from 6:00 in the morning to 6:00 at night. If we were good we sometimes got to play outside before the day was over. We had to say we were 16 to get work there but they never took it seriously. When the truant officer was about to come by they'd send us home.

I started at 55 cents a day - $3.30 a week. I gave it all to my mother, of course, because that's the way we did it then. I was the oldest of the children so it was expected that I would enter the mill. It was natural for all French-Canadians to work. In those days we started in our teens or earlier - today they want to go to college.

I'll be 91 this year. I was part of the great continental migration from Canada to the New England states between 1860 and 1900. Hard-working people arrived by the thousands to work in the textile mills in New England, as well as the shoe shops and the lumber yards in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine.

My family, the Janelles, were farmers, but in the 19th century, life on the farms in Quebec was hard. The crops were poor. You could only make a few dollars a year. My grandfather brought his wife and 11 children to Maine. My grandfather intended to come back after making some money, but he never did.

The family went by horse and buggy first, then by train. A special track was built in 1874 to connect Lewiston-Auburn to the Grand Trunk Railroad. He got a job right away in the Lewiston Bleach and Dye works. I don't know exactly what he did.

My grandmother? She had been a teacher of elementary children in Quebec. She made between $9 and $15 a year, plus room and board, before she got married in 1857. She didn't work after that.

My father was a weaver with the Androscoggin Mill. There were jobs in those days as soon as you got there. Weaving was a low paying job, paying maybe $7 or $8 a week. It wasn't hard work, except for the hours, which were 12 hours a day, six days a week.

(That was 1878) He left the mill in 1884. The Knights of Columbus were trying to organize in Lewiston. I heard that the dues were 10 cents a week.

The strike didn't succeed. The French would always go work somewhere else during a walk out. The Irish were the organizers but the French would work. They were proud and it wasn't until much later that the French would join unions. Another thing was that a lot of French thought they would be going back to Canada - it wasn't across the ocean like Ireland - so they didn't get as involved. That's why they were slow to become naturalized citizens too.

Like I said before, I was an oil boy in the spinning room, oiling frames. There would be 35-40 cylinders on each side of the frame and I would be in charge of oiling and cleaning and making sure it was running as it should. The older men were generally good to the boys; we all spoke French and got along well. The only English was spoken by the foreman. In the early years the bosses were English but later the French moved up and they became foremen and supervisors.

My friends on the block went to work in the mills too. When the work was done, we acted like kids and when the boss let us out for being good we'd play baseball or roller polo or go swimming. I knew some boys who went to Sherbrooke to the "colleges" (secondary schools) to learn English. Then they would come back and find it easier. I dropped out but I never stopped studying. I went to night school then to Bliss Business College. I always wanted to learn.

After the Second World War, I saw another opportunity that would get me out of the mills, doing something where I could use that education. I wanted to be a businessman - someone who owned a shop or a store or a business. I thought and thought and decided the ladies of Lewiston needed another dress shop. So I opened and ran Janelle's Dress Shop on the corner of Lisbon and Pine Streets. That's the corner where nowadays you enter the Lewiston Public Library. That used to be the dress shop where my two sisters worked for me. It was a good business. Those were the good old days for me. *

*Hendrickson, Dyke. Quiet Presence: dramatic, first-person accounts, the true stories of Franco-Americans in New England. Portland, ME: Guy Gannett Publishing Co, 1980)

Fred Robinson

My name is Fred Robinson. I'm 75 years young and I've worked here in the Bates Mill for 65 years. That's right, since I was 10. That was in 1880. Now you can figure pretty easy that it's 1945 and the big war is ending overseas.

My first job as a boy was in the Mule Spinning Room. (A mule spinner is a man who tended the large yarn making machines) The agent at that time was Mr. Barker and Tom Casson was Overseer.

When I started there was the #1 and #2 Mills. Then I saw the #4 and #12 Mills built Then came the #14, now known as the #5 Weave. Where the #5 now stands there used to be a sawmill and lumber yard. That burned down and the land stood unused for years. Finally it was purchased by the Bates Company and the #5 Weave was built in 1912.

One of my favorite memories is old Davy Bates. I can still picture him in his tall top hat, Prince Albert coat and gold-headed walking stick. One time me and a couple of other ten-year-olds were playing marbles during our working time. Along came Davy Bates with the agent and the overseer. The overseer came towards us to send us back to work but Davy Bates grabbed him by the arm and said, "Come on! Let them play. They are only children."

Another incident I remember like it was yesterday happened when I was a filling boy. On Saturdays when we had all our filling put out, us boys used to go down to the Dye and Bleach house and take a bath in the big vats used for dyeing the yarn. One Saturday one of the filling boys didn't put his filling out, so when the boxes ran out, the second hand began to look for the kid. He knew just where to look. He sneaked into the Dye House and hid our clothing. Then he chased us all over the place with a leather strip in hand and us boys in our birthday suits. Finally each of us received an "impression" from the strap and a warning to put out our filling before taking a bath!

Sixty years ago or today, it don't matter, the filling boy is just the same. Only today they have showers in place instead of dye vats. It seems like filling boys are the devil's gift to second hands.

I can sure enough tell you about the changes in wages I've seen all these years! In the Spinning Room I got the enormous sum of 35 cents a day. Working days started at 6 A.M and finished at 6 P.M. On Saturday it was 6:00-5:00. We earned a bit over eight dollars a month.

Then I went to Weave Room in Mill #1 at 50 cents a day as a filling boy. Then I started getting into the "big money." I became Boss Quiller and Head Bobbin Stripper in the Winding Room at 75 cents a day! That was $4.50 a week, if I didn't miss any work or get hurt.

Next I went to the Designing Room to weave gingham (checkered) patterns at the sum of one dollar a day. (Now up to $6 a week.) Next I go off to the #2 Mill as a weaver of damask for $12 a week. A really good weaver in those days could make up to $50 a month!

From weaving I went to fixing and worked as a fixer in both the #12 and #5 for a total of 40 years. I've given up fixing now and run the #5 Supply Room on 2nd shift. Being a former fixer, I know all the parts of a loom, so this suits me good. Besides this I still got my five acre farm. Three acres are in wood lots and two acres are under cultivation, growing berries of all kinds and a small vegetable garden.

I'm not so proud of my long years at work here as I am of the fact that between me and my wife we have over 30 relatives in the service. My grandson Billy is the apple of my eye. He's a member of the Signal Corps.

Myself, I never saw active military service. In the Spanish-American War, I was underweight and couldn't get in. and I was too old to join up for World War I and II.

This is my experience working all these years in the textile mills.*

*source: A copy of the *Bates News* (about 1945) article told all this and more about Frederick Robinson. It was generously sent to Museum L-A by Fred's grandson Billy's daughter, Joyce Ashcroft, January 2008.