

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

Andre Giasson
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

MWOH# 025
February 28, 2006

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History project. The date is February 28th, the year 2006. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and today I am interviewing Andre Giasson at his home on Davis Avenue in Auburn, Maine. Could you start just by telling me your full name?

Andre Giasson: It's Andre D. Giasson.

AL: And where and when were you born?

AG: I was born right here on Main Street in Auburn, you were in a house, you were not born in a hospital then, you know, it's a while back.

AL: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

AG: I had six brothers and two sisters, we were eight people in our family. Four of them are gone and four are still here.

AL: And what was your date of birth?

AG: 5/28/31.

AL: And your parents, were they both from the Auburn area?

AG: Yeah, well my mother came, my mother was born on Lincoln Street, and my father was born in New Hampshire, and they both, my father worked in the mill, in Continental Mill, and I worked in the Bates Mill when I was old enough.

AL: And your father, what did he do at the Continental Mill?

AG: Well, all that I don't know. All I know, he walked there every night to go to work, you know, to his shift, like I was.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

AG: My father was Edward Giasson, and my mother was Lisanne Lebrun until she became Giasson.

AL: So where did you fall within your brothers and sisters, in the younger end or the older?

AG: I'm the second to the youngest one, I'm almost the, the end of the whole bunch. We were brought up in the country, no water, no electricity. I wish life would go back that way, teach the young ones what we went through. Ain't it true? They get, everything right now, it's all handed to you, you know, they don't go out and get their water, they don't do this, they don't do that, you know. Well, that's life.

AL: So you've seen the Lewiston-Auburn community change a lot?

AG: Oh yeah, very much so. Before people lived on Lincoln Street, right here, you know, in Auburn, it was a place where you always walked to work, and you had busses every fifteen minutes to go to work, you know, the busses ran until twelve o'clock so people didn't have to buy, take their car and like that to go to work, everything was all nice and easy.

AL: And so, tell me about starting at the mill, how old were you?

AG: Well, started in the mill, I was sixteen years old, and my mother got me out of school to go work in the mill at sixteen years old. So I was there until seven-, when I was seventeen and a half then they passed the law that you could not be in there until you were eighteen years old. So we got laid off for six months, and then, but they kept the girls in there and they let go of the men. That was discrimination back then. No, I don't care anyway. But then we went back and then I decided to learn to weave, weaver, Number One and Two weaving room. First I was in Number Five and (*unintelligible word*) a loom for, one they used to stop to learn, and of course the battery end girls didn't like that because it kept the machine going and they had to keep on working more and more, you know, because if the machine stopped, the bobbin don't get empty, but if the machine run full blast they had to keep on working. But we helped them out, too, you know, we were good people, we helped those girls out.

AL: So what did a weaver do, can you explain that?

AG: A weaver is, they make bedspread, bed sheets, and every time a machine stopped, you got to check to see why it stopped, then you got to retie, tie back up the thread and fasten and start it up again. You got paid for how many yards of material you make a night, so you got to keep the machine going, otherwise you don't get pay, you lose money. You got to keep them going all the time.

AL: So were the loom fixers somebody that you counted on a lot?

AG: Oh yeah, if a machine broke down you had to go see, write it down on the board, he'd come over, fix it up for you, you know, keep on going, you know. They were paid by the hour, we were paid by piece work. And of course when you had a raise, well, you, we had an extra loom to run and they had a raise. The way it goes.

AL: Do you recall there being strikes at the mill while you were there?

AG: Yeah, yeah, I was in that big strike they had there, they had the Guard out, National Guard outside so nobody would get in or nothing, oh yeah. And everybody was mad, you know, because a lot of people then, you know, you had the Bates Mill, and you had the Hill Mill, and you had the Androscoggin, these are all part of Bates Mill, the whole Canal Street. And then you had your Continental down the hill, and you had the Libby Mill that burned down. Yeah, we had a lot of mills.

AL: What was the strike about?

AG: I don't know, I think we wanted more money or something like that, you know, so I guess that's what it was all about.

AL: Was that fairly early in your years at Bates?

AG: Oh, I would say it was before, before ten years that I was there anyway.

AL: So maybe the early to mid fifties?

AG: Yeah, I think so. Right here it says '49. It could have been. Let's say it was '56, '57, something like that. But they didn't give you much of a raise, you know. But it was a job, it was a comfortable job, it was something you felt proud of doing, you didn't mind going the work, you know. That was life then, you

know, it was nice. And a lot of people don't work in those places any more. There isn't any more, anyway, you know?

AL: What were the working conditions like, in terms of the weave room? Was it clean, or dusty?

AG: Oh no, very, very dusty, very dusty. I was surprised one morning there, the sun is shining, and we had these flap for air to come in, and you could see all the dust, all the way across. I never realized it was that dusty, you know. I was lucky, it didn't bother me, you know. Of course, I didn't smoke either, so that probably helped, too. But very noisy, though, but you got used to that. And we didn't, then they started, decided we had to wear ear plugs, so they didn't have ear plugs so they put cotton in our ears and that went down, and we had to go have that taken out because, then they came up with these special ear plugs and we wore that. It's what we had to do.

But it was a nice job, you know, everybody had their job. My job was to weave, keep the machine going. And we had a man that would clean the floor, and we had another one that would just clean the loom. Made a lot of dust, you know. And we were still there when they blocked up the windows, and that helped, that helped, that made the place warmer, you know, made a big difference. Until they blocked up the window, it was cold. I think they did that in April, you know, it was cold, still cold, you know. But the men were good who blocked up those windows, you know.

AL: Was the work dangerous in terms of injuries?

AG: In a way, yes, because when I went back, I stopped after fourteen years and I went back in '72, then the mill had gone, way down, so I went and did hand sewing, ended up for ten years, and then hand sewing went out. So I went back to the Bates Mill, which I knew what to do anyway, so they rehired me and I went on third shift. And then, and I worked seven days a week, started at seven at night and seven in the morning, just sit there, watch them running. I had no problem in the weaving, I liked it, you know, I liked it. I made a lot of weaving (*unintelligible word*) for people, and cases to put the scissors in, you know.

But if you didn't, if you were not careful, you start the machine a certain way, the shuttle, you know where the shuttle is, that come out and that would hit you or whatever, and then, the shuttle is, it gets steel thing at the end, because it always pushes back and forth. And if that came out it was kind of a little dangerous, you know. I got one in the side of the face one time and got really dizzy. But you were more careful, you had to be careful, like anything else, you know. But like I say, it was a nice place to work, you know, we enjoyed it, it was life, you know.

AL: Before we started the interview you mentioned a friend of yours that started when you did. Can you talk a little bit about him?

AG: Yeah, Jan Perreault, Jan, he worked, we became friends, you know, and he was a, I was the filling boy, the filling boy is the that puts a bobbin in the box and the girl takes it from the box and put in the, what do they call that now, it's not a unifill, but it was another thing. And then when the machine was empty, the bobbin, it would go in a big can, he'd pick up the can and put it in another big box and he'd take it upstairs and they take all the thread off and it was reused again, back and forth all the time like that. But he went in Number Five weave and he stayed there, and he was a good weaver, you know, the Martha Washington, Queen Elizabeth, you know.

So then when I left, when I was hand sewing, somebody was trying to tell him, oh, go hand sewing, you'll make more money. I told him no, don't do that, I said. You stay where you are, I says, you're piecework, you know, when the machines are running. It's not like hand sewing. Hand sewing, you won't make money that you're making. So he decided to stay there, you know, (*unintelligible phrase*). He thanked me for it later on in years, you know. I'm glad you told me that. Because people talk to you, no, you could make more money, this and that, you know. They did that to me, one of the

guys, I was working and, oh, you'd make a lot more money in the Continental Mill. So I went and tried it, but I didn't tell nobody. I went and tried it for one night and, nah, the machine was awful so I didn't go back. But they never knew.

And then before that I went, I was laid off and told my mother, I said, don't take any letters, you know, registered letters, I said, don't take any of those, don't sign for any of those. And I was in Connecticut working. They kept after me to try to get me back, you know, they'd been hunting for me for two weeks until I came back. So I went back, and I kept all my seniority and everything. They couldn't reach me, there's nothing they could do. I was in Hartford, Connecticut. I was still young, I was about nineteen, twenty years old, you know. But I went with my two brothers, and they didn't want to work so I said, the heck with that. And I was supporting my mother, so. Supported my mother until I was twenty-eight years of age, you know, until I got married. So, that was life. Back then you helped your parents out, you know, they didn't, you didn't take everything away from them, you helped them out, you know.

AL: Yeah, with eight children she must have stayed in the home?

AG: Yeah, yeah, she never went to work, no, no, she worked in the house but, yeah, that enough.

AL: I'm sure she was busy.

AG: Oh yeah, yeah. She was a good cook, though, she cooked good, you know, and everything. Two years before I got married she decided to go get a job, keeping for Mrs. Allman that used to own the Libby Mill, you know, and they gave her seniority and everything. But, you know, I wanted to get married like the rest of them, so I did.

I was a, I got married and my boy was four years old, and I was telling my boss, I've been here fourteen years, he says, oh, no-no, you haven't been here fourteen years. I says, oh yes I've been here fourteen years. And by then you had a board, you had a board that was covered with glass and it told you what year you came in, this and that, so he went and check and then he came back and apologized. Yeah, you've been here fourteen years. Yeah, I know.

AL: Are there people who have passed away that you worked with that you could talk about, what they were like?

AG: Well, yeah, I lost, we lost, when the Hill Mill closed down then a lot of them came to work in the Bates Mill. And then I met a lot of nice people, and well a good, a lot of good loom fixers there that I liked, you know, and they're all gone, you know, all passed away. And we had this guy, don't remember his name, he said to me, he said, tell you what I'll do with you, he said. You accept my mistake, and I said, I'll accept yours and we'll get along good. So we did. He died young, though. I don't know why, but.

AL: Did you, I know the mill sponsored things like softball and baseball leagues?

AG: Yeah, I never was in there, no, that was probably after I left, you know. Because I left in '81, and I went and worked in the shipyards for sixteen years.

AL: So you weren't involved in the bowling league, or?

AG: No, no. That would have been nice to see, you know. The man that, Renard, in the Credit Union, and I cleaned the Credit Union, and the man that owns the place, the man that's in charge, the president of the Credit Union, he was in the Bates Mill at the time, and this is when they started Credit Union in the Bates Mill and we started saving our money in there, you know. And then when they closed, well they opened branch here and there, you know, called the Rainbow Credit Union. I met his father.

My brother worked in the mill, too, for a long time too, until he went to Pioneer Plastic. But it was

a job, you know, it was a job. We had a lot of shoe shops, had a lot of mills, you know, and we didn't know any better so we stayed in there.

AL: Now, when you were growing up with such a big family, were most of your social activities centered around the family? What sort of things did you all do for fun?

AG: Well, they were more or less older, and of course they got married as they went along, you know. But I helped them all out a lot, I was there for everybody just about, you know, but I still am in a way.

AL: Do you have memories of the Depression years?

AG: No, that's way before me, see, I was born in '31, so that '30, '29 and '30, yeah, that was that. I was two years old when they had this big fire in Auburn there. You ever heard of that big fire in Auburn?

AL: No, what was -?

AG: Well, this is why it's called New Auburn and old Auburn, and New Auburn started from Pontbriand Hardware store, there, and it burned the whole, they say it was so hot, we lived in Lewiston then, and they say it was so hot that they had to water the buildings in Lewiston so they wouldn't burn, you know, a great big fire. That was in the thirties, '32, '33, so that's the way, so they made it all the way through that again.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you feel is important to add about your time at the mills?

AG: No, I don't think so. So you interview a lot of people, eh?

AL: Yes, thank you very much.

*End of Interview
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