MILL WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE

William "Bud" Lewis **MWOH# 017**
(*Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu*) February 1, 2006

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History project. The date is February 1st, 2006. Today I'm interviewing William Bud Lewis at his home in Auburn, Maine, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. I'd like to start just by asking you to give me your full name and your date of birth.

William Lewis: Okay, my name is William B. Lewis, I was born on February 19th, 1919, which makes me almost eighty seven.

AL: And where were you born?

WL: Portland.

AL: And did you grow up in that area?

WL: Yes.

AL: What was Portland like in the twenties and thirties?

WL: Oh, it was great. It was, actually it was a run down city. It was an old seaport, and it was going through hard times. A lot of fishing, but a lot of poor people, and it was not a thriving city. It was of course the largest city in Maine, and for that reason all of the goods and materials that come into Maine went through Portland. And it was a banking center and mercantile center.
AL: And what was it like in terms of neighborhoods and growing up with other kids?

WL: Well, I was right in the west end, right in the middle of Portland, and walked to school, it wasn't a very far walk, you know, three or four, five blocks. And it was fine, it was great. Automobiles were just coming in, there were cars around, we had a car, but there were horses as well. And many of the things that came to our house, like the milk, would come horse and wagon. Coal, we had coal furnace and that was delivered by truck but, and that was only delivered once a year. It was quite nice, but it was poverty stricken, there were a lot of poor people in Maine. And of course during the Depression that got quite bad.

AL: Do you remember any examples that you saw during the Depression years that stick out in your mind?

WL: Nothing particular. There were soup kitchens and that sort of thing, but my family did all right, and the people I knew did. I mean, I didn't know any different and it was just, the Depression was normal. I mean that we grew up in the Depression and it was kind of normal. But things that my generation learned during the Depression stick with us today, and we're very saving, we don't throw, the throw away society is hard on us because we don't throw things away. And we're accused by our children of, you know, being too saving.

AL: And what was your father's occupation?

WL: He was a banker.

AL: And was your mother a homemaker?

WL: She was a homemaker. Women didn't work in those days very much. Some women worked in the factories, and in the sardine plants. And from my house I could hear the sardine sirens blowing when the boats came in, and the siren, when the boat, sardine boats came in they'd blow this siren which could be heard all over that part of Portland, and the people who worked in the sardine packing plants would hear the sirens and go to work and pack the sardines. That was probably one of the bigger businesses in Portland at the time.

AL: Now, what brought you to the Lewiston-Auburn area?

WL: Well, there's a long, long story and I won't go into it too, in too much details. I went to college and was an engineer, mechanical engineer, and I studied internal combustion engines. So in 1939, between my junior and senior years at college, I went to work for Pratt & Whitney Aircraft in their experimental department, and when I graduated they wanted me back, so I went back to Pratt & Whitney and I worked there until 19-, all through 1948.

But my parents were living in Portland and wanted me to be near them, so my father said, you've got to come up and interview fora job in Maine, if you'd like it, you know, we'd like it, to have you move back. So I interviewed with a man named Robert Braun who was the chairman of the board of Bates Manufacturing. Bates Manufacturing had been incorporated in 1945, after a very tough period of time when textile mills – you're going to edit all of this, I assume, so –

AL: If there's any publication, yeah.

WL: Yeah, I mean, this, my, my speaking is just for your purposes, right, okay. During the war, textile mills were (*unintelligible word*) flourish, they boom, they make millions, because they're making uniforms, tent materials, parachute cloth. So all the mills get into a war effort and they really boom. But after the wars, when times are tough and the country is trying to recover, the mills have a really tough time. And they were on the verge of going out of the business during the Depression.

Well, one of the biggest customers of the Central Maine Power Company at the time were textile mills and other mills in the state of Maine. And Central Maine had kind of a vested interest because they were selling the mills an awful lot of electricity, because the mills after the war were running more and more on electricity. And it was so crucial, and they were the biggest customers of the Central Maine system, but also the workers. And textiles is a very labor intensive business, so there were thousands of employees. It's ironic to me that in the Bates Mill today they have almost as many employees as they did when it was a textile mill. We didn't think we'd ever see that again.

But Androscoggin, Bates, and Hill in the one chain of mills, there were the others, the Libbys and the Continentals, but I'm talking Androscoggin, Bates and Hill, along with a mill in Saco, the York Mill, and the Edwards Mill in Augusta that were independent cotton mills. And Central Maine Power was sort of working for all of them, they were doing the accounting, the purchasing, and they were doing it all from Augusta right out of the Central Maine headquarters.

Well, Securities and Exchange Commission said, you can't do this any more, you've got to decide whether you want to be an electric utility or a manufacturing company, so you've got to split up. So Central Maine Power sold five cotton mills, the Androscoggin, Bates and Hill in Lewiston, the York in Saco, and the Edwards in Augusta, they sold them to this newly formed company called Bates Manufacturing Company, Inc. They took the Bates Mill name, and then they had the Androscoggin Division, the Hill Division, the Edwards Division, the York Division, along with the Bates Division. But it was Bates Manufacturing Company, Inc.

And so they separated from Central Maine Power, they began to have their own offices. And Robert Braun, of Porteous, Mitchell & Braun, was the first chairman of the board, and Herman Ruhm was the president, he came from sales, he was in Bates Fabrics before, that was the selling house for these mills in New York. And a man named Fred Scribner, a lawyer in Portland, became the treasurer. And it was all Maine management, and it thrived from 1945 until 1956, and got bigger and better every year because the boom times were coming, you see, and they put all the money that was made right back into the mill. So they did a lot of modernizing from 1945 up through the early part of the 1950s, a seven or eight year period.

And somewhere during that time, into the, maybe into the fifties, there was a man named Lester Martin who owned a company known as Consolidated Textile in the South, and he'd made an awful lot of money with his textile mills in the South. And he saw Bates, and he saw how well it was doing, so he started buying stock. And to make a long story short, in an unfriendly battle, he took, he bought enough stock, he eventually in 1956 got up to fifty two percent of the Bates Manufacturing stock. So the whole original Bates Manufacturing Company, Inc. board of directors, even into the plant managers, some of them, they all left in 1956 and it became, it was the same company but a new, out of state management.

And of course there are a lot of different opinions on this, but the general Maine opinion was, and this take over was fought desperately by Lewiston politicians, but they couldn't stop it. They tried, they did everything they could to stop this man from taking control of the company, but he got control. They left, and the mills continued. But the prophecies were correct. He didn't want to run it to keep it running; he wanted to run it to make money. And so from 1956 until 2000, that's a long time, forty four years, Bates went downhill because, although they did put some money into it, they didn't put a tremendous amount of money, and so we began to lose our position as a leading cotton textile mill.

Our bedspreads weren't the only thing. Originally there were sheets and blankets, and probably one of the most important, ladies dress fabrics. And Bates in the early fifties, very early fifties, developed something they called disciplined fabric. Fred Lebel may have told you about all of this.

AL: No.

WL: But, well he wasn't even working for Bates at the time, he was working at Continental Mill. And Bates Manufacturing Company, Inc. had a big research and development department, which was located in the Androscoggin Mill, with a lot of chemistry people, Ph.D.s in textile chemistry. And they developed this disciplined fabric, which was wrinkle proof, that was the principal thing about it. But it ultimately became stain resistant and wrinkle proof, and shrink resistant.

Many mills had what they called sanforizing. Sanforizing was primarily a process which prevented shrinkage. Cotton fabric will shrink, and it was a terrible thing, you know, you buy something and it shrinks, and you expected it to shrink. And in those days, if you were going to go buy undergarments or close fitting garments, you would always buy something a little on the large side of what you really needed, knowing that it was going to shrink.

Well anyway, disciplined fabric came along and was an overwhelming success. It was used on, one of the big customers were Arrow Shirts, which you probably never heard of, but they were big in that, and Manhattan Shirts. And the biggest one of all was the Hill Mill which made shirting goods. Textile mills make all kinds of fabrics, you know, heavy fabrics and light fabrics, and that's just in cotton. You can get into wool, and you can get into other types of, lots of types of wool. But I'm talking mainly cotton, because Bates was always a cotton mill, never anything else, never a woollen mill.

But they did get into blends, cotton and polyester blends. And the disciplined fabric came along, and then after that we developed other fabric treatments, complex chemical treatments with cross linking fibers to prevent shrinkage and to make them, if you put press in them then press will stay and they wouldn't wrinkle, so Bates became quite a plant and quite a business.

And each division, each of the five divisions was making over a million dollars a year, that as a corporation was the largest company in the state of Maine, on employees, with somewhere in the neighborhood of six or seven thousand employees, around twelve hundred in each plant, and the greatest profits. And this was from '45 through '55, in that general area. And then things started to turn.

Now, I don't want to keep going on one vein and talk your ear off, so I'll stop at that point and you can ask me other questions.

AL: Well, you, over the years you saw a lot of different presidents at Bates. Can you talk about them in order, if you can remember them in order?

WL: Oh, I can remember them, I've written them down. I can't talk about each one because there are too many, but I told you that 1945 was the beginning. It's not when I came to work, I came to work in 1949. But Herman Ruhm was the president, and the whole board of directors, the company was formed by Robert Braun and Herman Ruhm, Fred Scribner, and they had a Boston brokerage firm that put up the capital to buy it. And all of this has to come into the picture, and I wasn't privy to all of that, but I know generally what happened.

So they formed this corporation, and lots of people that are well known in the state of Maine were involved in this. Herman Ruhm was widely known, Bob Braun, of Porteous, Mitchell & Braun was very well known, and Fred Scribner, the treasurer, had a young man working with him named Vincent McKusick, and Vincent later became a Chief Justice in the state of Maine. So they had a lot of good people. Pierce, Atwood, Scribner, Allen and McKusick who was the, were our attorneys. And so that was a big Maine management and, but it got blown away in an unfriendly stock take over.

So then there was a salesman from New York, Bates Fabric salesman, Frank Morbey, he became president. I'm not going to give you all of these names because there's too many of them.

And then in 1957, Lester Martin himself decided he'd be the president. He's the guy that took over the mills. And he put in his son and other people, and his own lawyers and attorneys, well, lawyers and attorneys are the same thing, but he put his own top management. Here's Bud Lewis, he's just an engineer. By that time I was the chief engineer, and so I worked with all of these original Maine people because I was the chief engineer, after a while, not originally, but in 1954.

In my own behalf, I went to work in 1949 for the then chief engineer, a fellow named John Murphy, and after three years they said, Bud, we'd like to have you become the plant engineer of the Edwards Mill in Augusta, and that will put you in a position to come chief engineer when John Murphy retires, and he will be retiring. Well, the long and short of it was, he retired in 1954 and I became the chief engineer and remained so until I retired in 1985, and they didn't replace me so I was a consultant from then until the year 2000. And at that point, it was on its last legs, and my wife died, and Bates was going to move from Lewiston to Monmouth, Winthrop, I beg your pardon, Winthrop. And we looked at a mill out there, and Fred Lebel was at that point the top man, he was running the plant, the plant manager, with possibly an interest in it. And you would have to find out from him whether he had a financial, he did have a financial interest in it by then.

So I worked very closely with Fred, and he was my superior of course, because he was running the mill, and I said, Fred, I'll stick it out until you get the plant moved from Lewiston to Winthrop. And at that point the backers, there was a Chinese man named Thomas Tang, the two Tang brothers that had money in it, and they said they wanted to move it but when the chips were down, the money was not forthcoming, and Bates went out of business in early 2000, 2001 maybe, 2001.

And so I worked right up through 2000 and not much into 2001, and Fred continued to work and then it went out altogether, and he bought some equipment, he went into the Hill Mill, and he can give you

all of that.

So that's a quick rundown, but I worked, including Fred, Fred Lebel was the sixteenth president or chief operating officer of the company, so I worked with sixteen heads of operations. That's too many, that's too many for any company in a period of time which was about fifty years. But it shows what a strong business it was, to survive all of these people.

AL: That's a lot of turnover.

WL: It's a lot of turnover, but, and all the time shrinking, shrinking, shrinking, because it was not long after 1956 that Lester Martin did what everyone said he was going to do, he closed the Androscoggin Mill, and then he closed the York Mill, and then he closed the Hill Mill, and then he closed, let's see, the Androscoggin, York and Hill, and then he closed the Edwards Mill and the only thing that was left was the Bates Mill.

Now, the Bates Mill was the only one that made bedspreads. They were all different types of mill, although several of them were similar. The Hill Mill made up very fine goods as I told you, fabric, shirting materials and, for the disciplined fabric. And the York Mill did likewise. The Androscoggin Mill was a rayon mill.

AL: Is that where they made parachutes?

WL: No, we didn't make parachute cloth. The parachute cloth, the one I just referred to, was made by the Cabot Mill in Brunswick, and that's, the mill is still there but it's not a textile mill any more. But it's right, you've seen it, I'm sure, it's right near the river, right near the bridge that goes Topsham, but it's not on the Topsham side, it's on the Brunswick side. On the Topsham side is the Pejepscott Mill, which was a paper mill, and that's gone, too.

Maine has made tremendous transitions, and Lewiston, I mean, there was a lot of sobbing and crying and, this is going to ruin the community. But the great thing about it all is that Bates died so slowly that other things began to come in. Liberty Mutual was one. Are you familia with Liberty Mutual, the insurance, and they went, they built a plant. And then of course in Auburn we had Pioneer Plastics which came in and became a big entity, and General Electric built a plant. And lots of plants were built in Lewiston and Auburn during the time that the Bates mills and the Libby mills and the Continental Mill, which were thriving when I came here, when they all went under. But the city survived, and now it's booming again. It's a boom or a bust, or somewhere in between.

AL: Because Auburn was very dependent for many years on the shoe industry.

WL: Auburn was shoes, shoes and shoe machinery, the machinery that is used in the shoe business, in the shoe factories. And shoes did for a while survive as the mills went under. You can't write any history without bringing in Bob Roy, for instance. Have you heard of Bob Roy? You haven't.

Well, he was a very well known Lewiston entrepreneur, and his father, let's see, had a transportation company and he hauled cotton for the Bates mills between Lewiston and Saco and Augusta, and he built up a cotton handling business, a freight business. Well eventually, when the Continental Mill went under, he bought it as just a property, not as a going business but as a property, and he put shoes into it. And so he got a number of smaller shoe companies, and it worked out well.

He had a partner named Jerry Therriault who owned Lewiston Crushed Stone at the time. That was a big business. All of these are people who were big in the community in their day, you know.

And so Bob bought the Continental and filled that up, and then he bought the Hill Mill from Bates and he filled it up with more shoes, and then he, let's see, then there was another fellow, a man named

Rosenthal who was a Waterville businessman, and he was a tremendous factor in saving Waterville, which was going through the same problem because Waterville had textile plants. And he had an urban renewal, he built one of the first big malls. He, actually it wasn't a mall, he converted downtown Waterville into a mall, so it was, the downtown was almost like a mall.

But he made a lot of money, then he came out and he built the Promenade Mall, which is now out on Lisbon Street. But he also, let's see, he bought the Androscoggin Mill, and I don't want to get into, there's just too much of it, you see, too much of it. But the end result is Lewiston survived, Lewiston and Auburn survived.

Now, we started all of that out with all of these people, and people won't even remember their names today unless they worked for the mills, and there aren't many left. I can only think of one man who worked at the mills as long as I did, in current times.

When I came to Bates in 1949 we had a newspaper, a magazine, a Bates magazine, and I noticed in reading these things that there was a Napoleon McGraw who worked in the Androscoggin Mill, and he'd worked there for fifty years in all. And I thought, my God, anyone working in one place for fifty years? Unbelievable. And it ended up, I did not work as a direct employee for fifty years, because I only worked from 1949 to 1985, but I continued on as a consultant and worked two or three days a week until 2000, so I put in fifty years myself. It's mind boggling, because one of the biggest parts of my career was working for Pratt & Whitney Aircraft, which really I loved that.

AL: Now, in your position at the mill as an engineer, and then chief engineer, what did your job entail on a daily basis? Was it management mostly?

WL: Well, originally, in 1945, see, Central Maine had been working on all these plants, but in 1945 they had to have a central engineering department. And each plant had its own machine shop, carpenter shop, electric shop, which handled all the utilities, all the substructure, the infrastructure of the mills, and each one had a plant engineer. They called them master mechanic in those days.

That's another thing you're going to get into here somewhere along the line if you interview enough people, the titles of all the people have been changed. There were all these weird titles, like bobbin girl, and second hands and overseers, all of them changed, all of those things have been changed.

But anyhow, the central engineering department did major design and work on things like changing the lighting in all the mills from incandescent to flourescent. And when I arrived at the mills, they just had finished, in all five mills, putting in flourescent lighting, the four foot tubes, instead of bulbs. And they put in central heating for the three mills in Lewiston.

Actually, the first project I worked on when I came here was tying the three mills in Lewiston together on one electric system. They had been, as I told you, three independent mills. Now they were Bates Manufacturing, so the first thing to do was instead of having three customers of Central Maine Power, and in those days you bought power, it got cheaper and cheaper and cheaper as you bought it, you bought blocks of power, you had to be so many kilowatt hours a month of high price, and then it went down, down, down, down. If we were one customer, we could save fifty or sixty thousand dollars a year, which was seen like big money in those days, by being one customer of Central Maine Power instead of three customers of Central Maine Power.

And also, each mill was generating its own power with its generators, and those generators are still running. Florida Power and Light owns them as far as I know, they got them, they, that's another story, when Central Maine lost its generating capacity.

So the central engineering department at Bates did things of that nature, so we had one power

system and we had to lay, put in new lines, high voltage, well, six hundred volt lines which was fairly high voltage. Then we linked together, another project I worked on was linking the, tying them together steam wise so instead of having an old boiler in Androscoggin Mill, and old boiler at Hill Mill, and some old boilers, in fact I think they had about twelve of them at Bates Mill, we put in two boilers at Bates Mill and tied the mills all together and had a central steam station, and saved an awful lot of money on the generation of steam, and I worked on that.

And also, we automated all the power plants, electric generating plants. The Bates Division had two generating plants, one up in Number 5 mill, the sawtooth building, one down on the river bank near the Continental Mill, and Hill Mill had one, and it's still running, up in the middle of the Hill Mill, and Androscoggin had one that's still running way down at the end of the Androscoggin Mill near the Pepperill Mill, we tied those all together so we had one connection with Central Maine Power, so that was a project I worked on.

There were lots of things. And any major engineering, which required engineering design as opposed to maintenance. See, maintenance and engineering were separate, and the maintenance was done by a plant engineer and the carpenter, pipe shops, electric shops in each mill, but the major changes like steam plants, electric, over all changes, and new construction. We built a new weave shed in Augusta, and we put air conditioning of a sort in the Hill Mill, and the extended it into Bates. Never did get to Androscoggin. And so we put air conditioning of a sort in there.

And ultimately we got, in the Hill Mill, we got refrigeration, which was becoming crucial in the textile industry. To get faster and faster machinery, and to get cheaper and cheaper and cheaper, the machinery has to go, be modernized, has to run faster, has to use less labor. But also, has to be air conditioned because a cotton fiber is very sensitive to humidity and temperature. And that's something about the jacquard woven bedspreads that were made by people, French Canadians who have been in this for generations, and they were dealing with machines that had leather and wood and string all as part of the over all, have you ever seen a loom, you've seen a loom running, Fred Lebel's loom maybe?

AL: No.

WL: Well, you should see his looms, because they're jacquard looms and there's a lot of overhead structure. You know anything about how a loom works or what it does?

AL: I've heard a little, but.

WL: Well, I'll just, I can give it to you very quickly. Any piece of woven fabric has to be made on a loom or a machine similar to a loom. There are other kinds of machines that do knitting and other things like that, but we're talking weaving. Well in weaving you have a lot of strands of yarn, and they're all on a great big wheel, it's called a beam, and they're going in hundreds of ends, each individual threads you might say, these ends are going into a loom. But they're all under control. Once they're in the loom, you can lift them, or you can not lift them. And pretty soon we're going to be onto a computer here, you'll see.

In the jacquard loom, each and every lengthwise yarn, which is the warp, is controlled, it can be lifted or it can be lowered in a pattern. And so they're going like this all the time, and every time they go one way or the other, a bobbin goes through and takes in what we call filling, they call it the warp and the woof, you know? Well it's, filling is what goes in crosswise, with a bobbin.

And the jacquard loom can selectively pick up different lengthwise ends, and make a pattern. And you can do other things, you can put tufts in, and so you can come up with a very complex woven pattern which turns out to the George Washington's Choice Bedspread, which is beautiful. And I still have one. Well, I have a lot of them, in fact, I have a lot of bedspreads, and they're beautiful things. And people still, a limited supply, a niche market, a limited number of people will still want those old fashioned bedspreads because they look beautiful.

Now I'm losing track of myself here.

AL: And so you were saying hat people had worked on these for generations.

WL: Yeah, well the, they worked on the old machines, and then the machines started to get more and more and more modern. You could not move these machines without moving the people, because, but the reason I said wood and leather, which these looms were for and, oh, I was talking humidity and air conditioning, it was very crucial that everything be just right. Cotton is very subject to static electricity, and you know how it is, sometimes you can rub across a carpet and get sparked. Well, that makes little fibers go all astray, they won't do what you want them to do. So by controlling the temperature and humidity of a weave room for instance, and spinning rooms, you can make the machinery much faster. So all of that had to be done and the engineering department did it. And the southern mills were built that way.

There's so much, I could talk for months, you know, and listen, I don't want to blow your ears off. But the South had several advantages to the North. Some were man made and some were not. One that was not was where the cotton was grown, and of course a lot of cotton is grown in Texas, tremendous amount is grown in Texas, and the southern mills were close to that. Another item was labor supply. The northern mills were unionized, the southern mills had cheap labor, they were not.

So the woollen industry was the first to be sucked out of New England. New England became the original, during the Industrial Revolution, which occurred in Europe in the eighteen hundreds where they had big factories instead of, they got weaving out of the home and into the factory, this all happened in Europe. But then it started in the United States, and they needed power so they looked for rivers, and New England had the rivers, and the rivers of New Hampshire, oh, what's the name, the Merrimack River which runs through Lowell and Lawrence and Haverhill and all, that was one of the first really big developed sources of power for textile mills. And they had water wheels, which were all mechanical, that had great big pulleys on them, ropes and leather belts and shafting.

I don't know, it's hard for me to tell, explain it all to you, but when I first came to Bates there was still some of that at the Bates Mill and at the Androscoggin Mill, line shafting they called it, driven by, directly from the water wheels. Mechanical power. And we had water, from the Union Water Power Company, at certain periods of the day, always daylight, because everything was done in the daylight, they didn't have electricity for lights at night, and gas was dangerous in a textile mill, you don't want any open flames because cotton textiles are very flammable.

All of those line shafting had to be removed, and individual electric motors replaced these belts. You've probably been to places like Sturbridge Village and other historic places like that where they show people with spinning wheels and they're treadling them, and everything was done mechanically and by hand. Oh, and the Maine State Museum is a good place, have you ever been to the Maine State Museum? They have a water wheel on the bottom of that, and it's driving some machinery that you can see if you walk down and then you hear it roaring.

Well, that's what the mills were here, except it was much more elaborate and much more extensive. These shafts, which were three or four inches in diameter, would run the length of the mill. They'd run from let's say Chestnut Street to Cedar Street, or they'd run from Chestnut Street up to the cross canal, Ash Street, the length of the Bates Mill, these great big shafts that were being driven by water turbines at one end or the other of the mills. And these shafts would turn when they turned on the water, and then each machine would have its own belt and the operator, with, there were fingers, little steel fingers and the belt was here, the operator would throw a lever and shift that belt from an idling pulley to a driving pulley, and then the machine would run. I could even show you holes in the floor down at the Bates Mill today where the leather belts went through, to run all that machinery.

And when I first got there, even at the Bates Mill, the card room was run totally by belts. And the Edwards Mill and the other mills as well, and while I was there all of that got changed. The looms had all been changed, they were all individually motor driven with one horse power or one and a half horse power motors instead of great big fifty and seventy five horse power motors that eventually were used to drive the shafting when the generators were switched from mechanical power to electric power.

See, all these old mechanical things got replaced by hydro-electric machinery, so that the water wheels would still run, but they ran generators and the generators made electricity, and electricity went to the individual motors. A tremendous change, and a lot of years going by here, 1850 all the way up to, well, 1950 and beyond. A hundred and fifty years is the approximate life of the textile industry in Lewiston, from 1850 to 2000. It was just about over in 2000.

AL: You said over time a lot of the names of the different positions changed, like bobbin girl and that sort of thing. Do you know what spurred the changes?

WL: Yes, to a degree. It was, I have a hard time sometimes with words, but those were old fashioned, somewhat maybe derogatory terms, and certainly bobbin girl is a little bit derogatory. But overseers, well, the plantations in the South with slave labor had overseers, so it was maybe not quite such a nice name so they began calling them superintendents. And instead of having a second hand and a third hand, and those were assistant administrators. Like every manufacturing department has a boss, so they were all originally called overseer, so you had overseer of carding, which is a process, overseer of weaving, a process, and all the way through, all these different processes. They became, let's see, what did we call them, we call them superintendent. So the overseer became a superintendent, and then all the way down through the line all of these weird names got changed. And it just was what were the times.

AL: Do you know what decade that was, when they started changing?

WL: Well, when I first got there in 1949 they had all these names. They were changing through, big changes I would say in the fifties. I think by the time the sixties came along they had all the new names.

You see, the man who ran the mill was called an agent, agent of the Bates Mill, and he became the plant manager. And then it went from there to, plant manager and superintendents and overseers.

AL: Did you have much interaction with the union over the years?

WL: Oh, tremendous, yes. Me personally? Well not, no, that was not my job, but for many years I had employees and I was a, well my category was overseer when I came in, but I wasn't called overseer, I was called master mechanic. But the master mechanic became the plant engineer, although many of them weren't engineers. I was an engineer, I'm a college trained, professional engineer and had a degree in engineering, that's how I got into this business.

And there were two, when I came into Bates, I was the second licensed engineer, or qualified, a degree holding engineer. My superior was a self made man, and he'd worked up through mills in Lawrence and Haverhill, he started as an electrician and he worked up, and he became the chief engineer of Bates, but he wasn't an engineer, except as a self made man. He studied ICC, International Correspondence School, ICS, and he studied and he learned and he got degrees from these correspondence schools, and the company made him the chief engineer when 1945 came along. He may have been the second one, the second engineer for the five plants, but he was there, he'd been with the Bates Mill for seventeen years as the master mechanic at the Bates Mill. So he had a load of experience. With the International Correspondence School business he was qualified to design bridges and, he knew strength of materials and things of that sort, which are crucial in the engineering business. You don't want the roof caving and that type of thing, you know.

And we designed buildings, we built buildings in my department, the engineering department. But

the engineering department went out somewhere along the line there, I can't remember exactly when. Certainly by the seventies, the engineering department, and I, because the plants were gone. I mean, we had no need for a central engineering plant because we didn't have these satellite plants any more. So I ultimately became the, well I was chief engineer, and we had a plant engineer, but then he left -

End of Side A
Side B

AL: We are now on Side B.

WL: So I don't mean to say that I was crucial or critical or anything like that, but as times change and progress things get more complex, and an education becomes necessary, and so I was a licensed engineer and registered in the state of Maine. And, well you have to be today. Like a dental hygienist has to have a license, and to operate a boiler you have to have a license. And I'm very interested to know what happened at Maine General Hospital in Waterville, did you read about that?

Well, yesterday there was a boiler explosion, and I can't understand why there would be a boiler explosion in a hospital. And it, apparently the boiler was not attended full time. Our boilers were always attended full time. And I was a licensed boiler engineer, along with everything, I was a licensed surveyor, state of Maine. Times change, and you have to have responsible people doing work that affects the safety of the public. OSHA had a lot to do with this, when OSHA came in. And the EPA. Of course OSHA is an arm of the EPA, you know that. It's hard to tell.

So anyway, ask me, I'll try to give you shorter answers to cover the territory you want to cover.

AL: No, this is great because your descriptions are really helpful. We hope to share this with school children and get them to have an understanding of how looms work and all that, so your descriptions are great.

WL: Bates was always, the entire time I was there, had school children coming in from time to time. Every year at a certain time of year there'd be kids coming in. Bates was always good at that, trying to improve community relationships.

AL: And they had social activities over the years, too, like bowling and other sports?

WL: Oh, Bates had a hockey team that was the top hockey in the country.

AL: Really?

WL: Yeah.

AL: Do you recall how they were able to have (*unintelligible word*)?

WL: I can tell you who was running it, it was a man named Larry Charest, and you could look up Larry Charest at the *Lewiston Sun* and you'd find out a lot about the Bates Manufacturing Company hockey team. And they played all over, they went, I know they went to Crookston, Minnesota, because I went to Crookston, Minnesota for a totally different reason, I went out there to get some water wheels which we put in at the Edwards Division, we moved the water wheels from Minnesota to Augusta and made another fifteen hundred kilowatts of power up there on the Kennebec River. See, I was in the heavy engineering part of it.

AL: And did you know Denny Blais?

WL: I knew who Denny Blais was, oh yes. I didn't know him personally. Oh yes I did know him

personally, but my very best friend at the time was a man named Louis Laun, L-A-U-N, and he's still living and I still communicate with him and his wife, and my best, still my, amongst my very best years long friends, and you have those, you know, and visit them in New York state.

But Louie was the assistant to the president, Herm Ruhm's assistant, and he got his job along about 1947 or '48, and he was a graduate of the same college I was and that's one reason we got together quite quickly when I came here. And as assistant to the president, he was in charge of labor and public relations, and he had, he was in charge of all the labor negotiations and he and Denny had very serious battles. In fact, they went through strikes together, and every time I get with my friend Louis, we talk.

And Louie has been up here in more recent years, long after he retired, and Denny Blais retired, and we, my wife and I gave a party for Louis and his wife and we said, who would you like to invite to this party? And he said, Denny Blais. And Hal Gosselin. Hal didn't come, but Denny did, and Frank Coffin was another, and he came. And they were all people we knew in those days.

But anyway, one interesting thing about Louis and Dennis that I remember, the strike, the Hill Mill I think was on strike, and it was terrible. I've been here through strikes, and I've crossed picket lines, but as an engineer I didn't get any duff, nobody bothered me. I was in an ideal position, being chief engineer through all these years, it gave me a wonderful life, because I didn't have to worry about the top management, as a treasurer might, because nobody was interested in the engineering. We got this guy, Bud Lewis, and he's going to take care of that part of it, and nobody wanted, nobody challenged me for my position. But there's plenty of people challenging for other top jobs, you know.

Well anyhow, the strike was in the midst of things, and the Catholic Church was involved and people like Sister Rachel were involved. She can tell you a lot about strikes and that type of thing, because both the labor and management would turn to the Church, you see, to kind of get some kind of mediation, you know. Everyone was trying to mediate to try to get these people, but the critical day came and management decided, I don't know the details, management decided they were going to give a little. Where's Denny Blais? So Louis gets on the phone, where's Denny Blais, where's Denny Blais? Well, they found him out at Martindale, on the golf course. They got him in, and they had a resolution, and the strike was over, and both sides declared victory.

That's what always happened in those things, both sides, as long as you can save face, you've got to come to a point, Denny as the local union manager, he had superiors in the textile workers union, but he was the top man in Lewiston, and Louis was the top man for Bates, and somehow they had to arrange hours, wages, working conditions, whoever, you know, so that both sides can tell their people, we won. And when you get to that point, strike is over. But I got a big kick about it, because they had to get Denny in out of the golf course.

AL: Oh, that's a nice story.

WL: But you've got to run on, I've got fifty years of it up here and I'm not going to dispense all of that in an hour or two, so best thing is ask questions.

AL: I guess sort of a broad but also a specific question to ask you would be, are there any specific recollections that you have from those years in the mill that really stick out in your mind after all these years as -?

WL: Well, some that would stick out in my mind but would not be of particularly great public interest. One morning I went down to work and there'd been a cave-in. The phone rang here at the house around six or seven o'clock in the morning, we've got a cave-in. So I went down to the Hill Mill and there's a hole about so big around in the middle of the Hill Mill yard between a seven story building here, and a boiler house and chimney there.

And the Hill Mill was set up with three generators here, and three generators there, and the water comes in, goes through the generators, comes out into tunnels, we call them tail racers, underneath the building. And those tunnels came together like a Y, and the Y was right on the edge, the back edge of I believe it was Number 3 mill at the Hill Mill, but it was seven stories, and there was a hole there where the tunnel had caved in. Lots of reasons behind it, but it's things like that that strike me.

I was in Augusta sleeping one night and the phone rings, we got a fire in the opening room. So I have to rush down, and lo and behold we've got a fire and the fire engines are there.

And floods, when I was at the Edwards Mill, and after when I came over here as chief engineer, almost every spring we had the threat of flooding because the Edwards Mill was very susceptible to flooding. Certain parts of the Bates Mills, and the Continental Mill, of course, was subject to flooding. So I had to put together some means at the Edwards Mill, where I worked, of determining what we should do in advance of the flood. How bad is the flood going to be? It's like being a weather predictor. And how high is the water level going to rise, and what are we going to have to do about it?

Well, we had lots of lower rooms, weave rooms it happened to be, and with individual and one and a half horse power motors on them, and we had another place, a dye house, where we did fabric finishing with bigger motors and equipment. I would try to predict, and I got pretty good at it after a number of years, of exactly how high the water would rise, and when it would get there. In other words, I would have a lead time of, oh, anywhere from twelve to twenty four hours, watching the weather but also knowing what was happening up river, in Waterville and beyond.

Because floods start up river and then they come down, so that you can say, the water in Augusta is going to be at such and such a level, seventeen feet, at six o'clock in the morning, but it's going to be eighteen feet at noon, and it might be twenty feet at another twelve hours. And knowing that, you'd know, well, all of these motors are going to be under water. So I'd call in all my crew and all the rest of the help, I had about sixty employees as a plant engineer, carpenters and mechanics, mill wrights and this type of thing, and they had all their proper equipment and they had chain hoists, and mechanics, loads of people. And then the production people themselves, the weavers and other people, bobbin boys, whoever, they'd all get to work and they'd loosen up these motors and tie them up, get them up above the water level.

So, those are the things I remember. Crises. Also when new machinery was started up, I was involved in the, I told you about this disciplined fabric. Well, after the disciplined fabric, we got into some other business on bedspreads where we were, and this put Bates way ahead of every other bedspread mill in the country, we were chemically treating, there were a lot of different kinds of bedspreads, these were plain woven bedspreads. The principal one was known as Piping Rock. That doesn't mean anything to you, but Piping Rock is a plain bedspread. There were, oh, everywhere there were Piping Rock, and hospital bedspreads. They don't even have hospital bedspreads any more, they have some sort of a thermal blanket.

But we put in a tremendous machine that was going to continuously process this, it was going to go in as raw woven fabric right off the loom, and it was going to go through and be totally bleached and dyed. And so had all of this machinery, I put all of that in to replace antiquated machinery which is totally different. Batch type originally. This was continuous process. And if you can just imagine making something in batches, like cooking meals, cooking lots of meals, it's a lot better if you're in an institution to cook it all at once on a continuous process so that instead of having, you put stuff in, you do it and you bring it out, you put it in and bring it out finished, dried, ready to roll up and cut, go to the stitching and so on. That is big in my mind, too.

There's a lot of things, and individuals that I ran across who, some were very weird and some were very, had tremendous knowledge and could do tremendous feats that you wouldn't think possible,

get you out of trouble.

AL: In talking to some other people, I've heard about the ingenuity of some of the workers.

WL: Oh, tremendous ingenuity.

AL: If there were tools or something that they didn't have, they were able to make them.

WL: Oh, they, at Bates, and this type of company, especially as the years went by and money was awfully tight, we had to make everything. Some weaver would, well we, there was a man named Gus Mullen who was an overseer in the stitching room at Bates years and years and years ago. And he developed, he had, he was thinking about this all the time, he's watching these women folding bedspreads, and it was quite a chore. He developed a machine, they called it The Horn. It had nothing to do with tooting a horn, but it was a big piece of steel and it was in the shape of a triangle, about this big, and the full width of cloth would be pulled over this, and it would be pulled down and you'd put a fold in it.

So it was folding cloth, so that when it came out of this machine, it was mostly folded. And all the girls had to do, they had saws, they were knives, electric knives, which were very dangerous to use, but you've seen meat slicers where they put a whole piece of meat in and it goes like that and it cuts the meat into slices? Well, we had something similar, but it was by hand originally. Well, the cloth was being pulled along a long, long table and these girls would take these similar types of knives and go whooosh and cut a whole stack of bedspreads. I don't know, there'd be a stack of bedspreads that high, and they'd cut them all at once. And then at the end people would pull them off and they'd have to round them and trim them and stitch them and sew them and hem them and inspect them.

It was, the, what we called the finishing room, well, finishing has two different, I don't know exactly what the name of it was but I called it the finishing, dry finishing. It was a huge big room with thirty five thousand or more square feet, maybe fifty thousand square feet. And you could come in to a stairway, and some stairs went down, but you'd be on a little balcony and you could look out and see this whole room, it's the base of the big weave shed (*unintelligible phrase*), down underneath, and you'd see hundreds of women all busy doing something. And truckloads of bedspreads, blues and greens and yellows and reds, and being whisked around, being stitched, cut and folded and put into packages.

It came down from upstairs through a slot in the floor and went over this horn and got sort of laid out on tables, and then they'd take it from there and it ended up in a plastic bag ready to go on a shelf in a store. And all of that was done, the labels were put in. It was highly mechanized, but getting more and more and more mechanized all the time.

But getting back to Gus Mullen, he had the ingenuity, and you never knew who was going to come up with, why don't we do this, or why don't we do that, and so the workers were instrumental in some cases of some very remarkable improvements that helped keep Bates going.

AL: So you had a sense that the management was receptive to those ideas.

WL: Oh, absolutely, yeah, yeah. Of course there are all those people and some people are more congenial and some people are more adaptive than others, and you had animosity, you had people that didn't like people. I had electricians who wouldn't, I had one particular electrician that I remember who was very good. He wouldn't tell anyone how he did it. And when he got through, he never left a record of what he did to get it going again. He could even change the wiring, but he wouldn't tell anyone. Drove me up the wall. If a machine broke down he'd be the first man I'd call, but eventually he decided he wanted a raise in pay or he wouldn't do it any more. So we had to say, well listen, you know, I can't handle this, you know, I can't let you come to me every time you do something remarkable and ask for a raise in pay. You are the top electrician now, I don't have room in the labor, whatever you call it.

AL: Structure, yeah.

WL: The structure, because every job has a rate and it's all union negotiated at the bargaining table. You can't get it. So, I quit. Well, then he applied for a job opening at another, as a station operator, run a generator. That was fine, I needed a station operator so I sent him over there. I knew it wouldn't last long because he'd go crazy. There's nothing to do there except start up the wheels, or change the settings on the wheels, and just, but be there in case of emergency. Deadly. So eventually he broke down and came back and got his old job back.

But you have people things. One day I had, maybe it was him, maybe it was another electrician, and he had a foreman come in, we didn't call them foremen, but it was a foreman, he was, I guess we called him a superintendent. He was the boss, they called him the boss electrician, because they had the boss piper, the boss (*unintelligible word*), but the boss name, boss was left off after a while.

The boss electrician would be working with this man down there on a machine, and the machine was broken down, and all the product had to go through that machine. So it was crucial. Bedspreads, who knows, it's going sixty yards a minute, and a bedspread is only two or three yards long maybe, and so there's lots of product coming off of here. So the overseer of the department comes in, the production man, and he says to my electrician, when are you going to get it going, when are you going to get it going. He's right over his shoulder. I got to know, I got to know whether to call in the second shift or not, or to tell them not to come in.

I had a, one of my men got so upset, he just stood up and left the mill, went home. Of course that made it take even longer. And the man who was doing that was one of my better friends at the mill, he was a, he had a similar job to mine in the chain of organization, he was a superintendent and I was at the superintendent level. We both reported to the plant manager. But I had all of my people, and he had all of his people, and he wanted to know how to handle his people and I was trying to solve a problem.

There's miles of wire in these things, you know, and it can be a short circuit anywhere. And things wear out. Oh, we had lots of crucial times and we had to get things going again. There weren't only floods and fires and breakdowns, there were lots of, you know, and every so often we'd have an underground water main break. I could almost predict it, when a, maybe a six inch or maybe even larger, water pipe would break because of frost in the ground. And that would shut the mill down.

AL: Did you ever observe or hear about any ethnic rivalries within the mill?

WL: No, no. There may have been earlier, but not in my day. You see, they were all French Canadian, so they may have had their own differences, but not ethnic differences.

AL: Was there still a significant Irish?

WL: Irishmen, that never gave a, was a problem. The Irish came to town to dig the canals. The French Canadians came to town to be the operators within the mills. The English came to town to be the mill managers. That's the way it, the, the English were the bosses, the French were the workers in the mill, and the Irish were building the mills. And then as time went on, of course, the mills were built, the Irish intermarried, and there was still an Irish, well, look at the churches. St. Patrick's, Irish, and, wait a minute, St. Joseph's, Irish, St. Patrick's, French. Of course St. Peter and Paul are French, and they all had their little enclaves, but I never saw any ethnic problems within the mills, never.

AL: I think this is a good -

WL: Well, now wait a minute, there were a few blacks that were brought in.

AL: From the South? Were they brought when the ownership changed?

WL: No, from, Dominicans, Dominican Republic. Not, no, not southern blacks, we never had any of them. We had blacks from places like Dominica and Jamaica, but they were only token. It wasn't, it wasn't like this Somali thing. Had the Somalis come up at that time, it would have been quite interesting to see what would have developed, because they would have been ideal workers for the mills. But by the time they came there wasn't any of that kind of work remaining.

Today in factories you have to have skilled labor. In those days you didn't have to have skilled labor, you trained people. And fortunately, generations and generations of French families would pass down their knowledge to generations. So in the weave room, for instance, a weaver's son would come in, or a weaver's daughter would come in, men and women, there were equal amounts. I couldn't tell you whether there were more women or men at Bates. There were loads of both.

They broke down pretty much into departments. The women were mostly in the finishing processes, folding the bedspreads, cutting, sewing, stitching and all of that, and the men were out on the production machinery. Very few women on production machinery, weaving. There's a whole lot of processes which you really should know when you go through this, opening, picking, carding, and then there's roving and spinning, and eventually works up to weaving. And weaving is the final process of making the cloth, but then after that you've got to finish them. And there's wet finishing where you're bleaching and dying, and there's dry finishing where you're cutting, stitching and folding.

AL: That's neat. Thank you very much.

WL: That's all you want?

AL: I would like to come back to you again. For today.

End of Interview
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