

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

**Bernadette Cloutier**  
(Interviewer: Bridget Harr)

**SMWOH #09**  
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**Bridget Harr:** And I guess initially they just want you to state your full name, and then say what mill you worked at and just describe what you did.

**Bernadette Cloutier:** I'm Bernadette Cloutier, I worked at Bates Mill, and I was their production, I worked in production department.

**BH:** What did you do, (*unintelligible phrase*)?

**BC:** I decided what color the spreads were going to be, and I changed the colors on the loom, you know, go make an order and have the colors changed in the dye house. I would give them tickets of certain colors to dye. And then the George Washington, I would tell them if I wanted antique or snow white. They went by tickets.

**BH:** I think I've seen those when I toured the L-A Museum, the little ticket punchers? Yeah, okay, that's interesting. And I guess just any favorite memories, just what you did?

**BC:** Well, I worked in the finishing room when I first started, I was folding bedspreads.

**BH:** How old were you?

**BC:** I was only thirty seven at the time.

*(Excuses herself briefly.)*

**BC:** I don't know, it was wonderful working there. And then I became a switchboard operator, I took that job, and I worked there as a switchboard for, until I got laid off. The mill started, you know, laying off people.

**BH:** When was that?

**BC:** Nineteen ninety, I believe. And then they called me back in and I went to work downstairs for another year, and then '91 that was it. And I started there in 1957.

**BH:** Did you have a family when you started?

**BC:** Yes, I had five children.

**BH:** Did any of them work in the mills? Was it *(unintelligible word)* -?

**BC:** Yeah, my son, one of my sons did.

**BH:** Did anyone else in your family, like did your brothers or sisters work -?

**BC:** My husband worked at the Hill Mill, and my sister, my in-laws all worked there.

**BH:** So it's very like, very much a lifestyle, just part of the community?

**BC:** Yeah.

**BH:** I think that's so interesting.

**BC:** It was nice working there. Better than, I liked it better than the shoe shops. Because I tried the shoe shops, and they -

**BH:** How did they differ?

**BC:** I don't know, I didn't, just didn't like the work.

**BH:** A very, like a sense of community, I feel. Like we've seen, I'm in a class and it studies gender relations, but there have been documentaries on the mills recently and we've been watching those and just, to see how the life was. Like they showed the boarding houses and all that sort of thing.

**BC:** Oh yeah, yeah.

**BH:** And I just think that's so interesting, to have such young girls be living on their own and then working at the mills.

**BC:** And they had all these apartment buildings on, all along Canal Street where the people used to live, you know.

**BH:** Right. Can you describe how maybe you just, a typical day was, working at the mill?

**BC:** Typical day was, you went in in the morning, and you'd start your work by checking the inventory sheet, and see where you had to cover the colors that were short, you know, if there was an order and there was fifty bedspreads, and they didn't have the fifty bedspreads, I had to see that they received them to ship them out. You know, things like that.

And then in the afternoon, I'd schedule my work and then put it on, there was a big board there, put it on the board, and then I'd go, and after lunch I'd go check around for my colors and I'd put like red tags on them, so they would do them first, fold them first. They were all in baskets. Then I had to go the dye house, tell them what, if I needed a color before the other, they'd take care of it.

**BH:** So it was very, like each person had one task that you did?

**BC:** Yeah.

**BH:** Was it very cooperative?

**BC:** Oh yeah, yeah. They usually were very nice. Then I had to go in the weave room and see what color the looms were weaving. Like the Queen Elizabeth, they came in blue, gold, spice brown, antique and snow. Well, you had to have the filling, you had to have the filling to change the color, so you'd tell them to make a filling change and that would make the bedspread like from blue to spice.

**BH:** And that was just for each bedspread, you did it one at a time?

**BC:** It was as they, it depends how many bedspreads I needed. And they'd loop the loom on until, you know, we cleared the shortage.

**BH:** And then, so did you do many different styles of bedspreads as well?

**BC:** Oh yes, there was a lot of styles. I don't remember all of them, but there was style 2088-47, 88-47 is Queen Elizabeth, 2010, 2047, 2018, 2037. Did I say that one? I can't remember.

**BH:** Did you mostly work with men or women, like in your interactions daily?

**BC:** Both, both.

**BH:** Was it very even?

**BC:** Hmm.

**BH:** Did you see any difference in, like what were men's tasks versus women's tasks?

**BC:** Well, the men did the heavier work, the heavy (*unintelligible word*). And most men were supervisors. So if I didn't get what I needed, I'd go see a supervisor and they'd get it out.

**BH:** Was there ever, did you ever face any problems with like male supervisors, or were there -?

**BC:** Sometimes, yeah.

**BH:** What was that like?

**BC:** Sometimes I had to go to the, the one above the supervisor. What did they call it. Not the superintendent, but he took, he was over the supervisors.

**BH:** And he'd straighten it out? And was he better working with women as men?

**BC:** Yes, well what I had to do was write a memo, and then tell them and take care of it. It was, I liked it.

**BH:** Do you have any favorite memories, like not only just working at the mill but also just life? Because I've heard that there was like a hockey team, and just like people's lives really completely were around the mill, outside of just working as well.

**BC:** No, no, I didn't really have time, with the children, you know. They had skating parties, and they had, I went to the Christmas parties and that stuff, but you know, I couldn't do everything.

**BH:** What was your favorite part about working at the mill?

**BC:** I think I liked the switchboard a lot.

**BH:** And what did that entail?

**BC:** All the calls were coming, I had to place them through.

**BH:** So less of actually like making the material, but, like less weaving or whatever, (*unintelligible phrase*) switchboard?

**BC:** Well I, when I took the switchboard I left the other job. I left the production part of it.

**BH:** So it was more like administrative type work.

**BC:** Hm-hmm.

**BH:** Did most women do that as well?

**BC:** No, I was, they only had one switchboard operator.

**BH:** Just a question, any challenges you faced?

**BC:** No.

**BH:** No? You were really happy?

**BC:** Hmm.

**BH:** Well, what would you like to talk about?

**BC:** There's not much more to talk about, really.

**BH:** Really. What did your husband do?

**BC:** My husband worked in, he worked in the card room at the Hill Mill, and then they were closing the Hill Mill so he applied at Bath Iron Works, and so he went to work there until he passed away.

It was something that I really enjoyed. There was about nine of us, nine girls that worked in the finishing room. I even joined them after I went to the office, we'd go out to eat about once a month, or go see a play. It was fun. We had a Christmas party.

**BH:** Just formed really close friendships?

**BC:** Yeah, yeah, it was fun.

**BH:** A lot of my family is from Pennsylvania, and their, it's a coal mining town where they live, and all the life centered around the coal mines. And I had no idea about the

Lewiston history with the mills here. I just think it's so wonderful, what both the Lewiston-Auburn is trying to do with getting these interviews, but then also to have Bates students do them. Because I feel like so many Bates students first of all don't get out into the community enough, but then also really don't know much about Lewiston history.

**BC:** So you're from Pennsylvania?

**BH:** Well, actually I, my family, my family is from Pennsylvania. I graduated high school in Oklahoma, so that's where I consider home. But when I go visit my family, like my grandparents and my extended family, it's all in Pennsylvania, yes.

**BC:** So what year are you in college?

**BH:** I'm a sophomore, it's my second year.

**BC:** Sophomore, hmm. You like this area?

**BH:** I really do, I really like it up here. And I like this town, too. It's so interesting just as a, the whole like French Canadian history as well. I like that.

**BC:** Are you seeing some more people today, you said?

**BH:** No, not today. I'm actually trying to set up another one. I've been having problems. I keep asking for another name, because the other woman I was going to interview decided she didn't want to do it any more, that she just didn't remember enough. She only worked there five years, so it wasn't as big a part of her life. But then the list that they've giving me of what other women to call, I keep calling someone and they'll be like, oh, I was already interviewed. And I was like, oh, I think they gave me



the wrong list, I think they have a list of the people who have already completed an interview and that's what they're giving me names from. But I still plan on doing more stuff.

**BC:** So what are you going to do with this now?

**BH:** Well, after we finish I will go back and transcribe it. So just like write down interesting parts from it, and just word for word, so then the museum can have a transcript that says what we've spoken about, as people listen to the tape. And then also then write a summary of what we talked about.

**BC:** Well, I guess there's not much more.

**BH:** I'm trying to think. Were there accommodations for women, like during pregnancy, or how did that work? Did you ever work (*unintelligible phrase*)?

**BC:** I don't know, I wouldn't, I never worked when I was pregnant.

**BH:** It was after.

**BC:** I think they could only work til, they couldn't work as long as they did now. I don't remember, because I never worked when I was pregnant.

**BH:** Did you know of any other women who like, was there like maternity leave, as there is today, could you have your baby and then come back?

**BC:** Well, they had, yes, they did, they had so long to come back. I think it was six weeks after the baby was born, something like that.

**BH:** Oh wow, six weeks.

**BC:** And I think they had to stop, I think the seventh month. But I'm not sure about that.

**BH:** What about, did you know, what were the age ranges of the women that you worked with, like were there -?

**BC:** Oh, from eighteen to, til they retire, like sixty five.

**BH:** And then was there, were there any programs for like childcare during the day?

**BC:** No, no.

**BH:** How did you do that, because you did have kids once you got there?

**BC:** Well, see, I worked on first shift, my husband worked on the third shift. So he, when I wasn't there, he took care of the kids. And we had, when I had to leave home, we had a babysitter until he came home, so that's how we worked it out.

**BH:** Did a lot of families have to split shifts, where a husband worked one shift and the wife worked another?

**BC:** I believe so. Unless you wanted to pay a lot of money for, you know, babysitting.

**BH:** So how much time did that give you then with your husband?

**BC:** We really only had weekends, you know.

**BH:** Weekends, yeah.

**BC:** Because he slept all day, and I worked all day.

**BH:** Your son, what did he work, what mill did he work in?

**BC:** He worked in the Bates Mill, the, well what happened to him wasn't really fair. He worked at the Hill Mill, then he was drafted, so he went to Vietnam. So they were supposed to be guaranteed their job when they came back, but they didn't give him his job when he came back. They found him another job at the Bates Mill, but it wasn't what he wanted. He was working in the paint shop, and he liked that work. That's what he wanted to go back, but there was something that happened there that wasn't right, he went to the union and, I don't know, he had to take the job at Bates or no job at all.

**BH:** Union wise, was there a union established when you first started working?

**BC:** Yes, yeah.

**BH:** What were relations like within the union, or between workers and the union, and then the union and -?

**BC:** No, I don't know, I really don't get, I didn't get much into the union stuff. But if you had a problem, there was this woman that was a shop steward, you used to talk to her and I guess she'd try to take care of it. And I, I never really had problems.

**BH:** That's good. Better not to have to deal with it. What, just shift wise, the different shifts, what were the times for those, I mean how long were your days?

**BC:** It was seven to three, and then three to eleven, eleven to seven.

- BH:** So the mill just kept (*unintelligible word*)?
- BC:** Yeah, kept going, twenty four hours a day.
- BH:** What was it like working summer versus winter, just conditions within the mill?
- BC:** Well, it was really hot in the summer, yeah, inside there, it was really hot. But the winters the mill wasn't bad.
- BH:** How'd you deal with the heat, just put up with it?
- BC:** Well, we had to, they gave us salt pills to take.
- BH:** Oh, so you didn't dehydrate?
- BC:** It helped, but it was hot.
- BH:** Wow, that's interesting. Salt pills, I've never heard of that.
- BC:** Yeah, they had a container there, you'd take a salt pill to, so you wouldn't sweat, you know.
- BH:** So rather than take breaks to go get water, they just like had you take the salt pills instead? Did they give you many breaks?
- BC:** Well, we had a (*unintelligible word*), we had I think every two hours ten minutes. And we had twenty minutes for lunch.
- BH:** Did you think that was fair?

**BC:** Twenty or half an hour lunch. Yeah, it was okay.

**BH:** Was it hard working there, difficult?

**BC:** No, no, no, not if you did your job, nobody bothered you. In a way it was nice, Bates Mill was really nice.

**BH:** Yeah, that's interesting. It sounds like -

**BC:** It depends what room you're in.

**BH:** Were there rooms without windows, like in the summer, would the windows at least be open to try and -?

**BC:** Oh yeah, yeah, they'd open the windows. It was right by the canal there. Yeah, but when you're in big building like that and it's hot, you know, windows don't help much. It does, but.

**BH:** Right, right, but not comparatively. How many would work in a room?

**BC:** Oh, I would say maybe two hundred a shift. It's one room, it's extremely (*unintelligible word*), where I was.

**BH:** Now, were the tasks, I know each person had their own task to divide up. Now, was each room, though, set for a specific task?

**BC:** Oh yes.

**BH:** Okay, it wasn't like a bunch of people, each doing one task within the same room. It was divided.

**BC:** Well, like the weavers did the weaving, and then they had the people that put the filling in the weave, when a weaver was, they had shuttles like, they put the filling in the shuttles, that was one job. And then the weavers had their own job. Then they had people that, after the, see, these bedspreads went on, they were rolled, as they were woven they were rolled on a big, I don't know what they call it, spool or something. You'd have somebody cut that off and then change it, so there was different jobs, different people. And some were just sweeping and cleaning around, some people would oil the machinery.

**BH:** Did you ever own any of the products that you made?

**BC:** Oh yeah, I have one on my bed. I had quite a few of them. I gave some to my daughter. We used to buy the pound pieces. We had good deals, you pay so much a pound. So a fifty dollar bedspread you could probably get for like ten, and there was just a small damage.

**BH:** Okay, was that part, like was that a benefit of working at the mill?

**BC:** Yes, you had to work there.

**BH:** That's nice.

**BC:** There was people from outside, too, that used to come in, and they had to pay full price.

**BH:** Did, now, most of the people that you knew within Lewiston, did most people work at the mills?

**BC:** At that time, yes, yeah, mills and shoe shops. It's all we had.

**BH:** Did your, was your family, like did your parents ever, were they involved in the mills?

**BC:** No, my parents lived in Jay, Maine, and what they had there was International Paper, and they had shops.

**BH:** Oh, okay, my father worked up there.

**BC:** He did?

**BH:** Yeah, he used to be a salesman, and he used to come up and make calls there. When I was younger, we lived in Portland, so. Did you know of any, like were there any differences between, just in your interactions with friends, between like single women and married women, and their treatment within the mill?

**BC:** No.

**BH:** No difference?

**BC:** No.

**BH:** Did a lot of people meet each other at the mill, like for just our family lives, did people meet their husbands?

**BC:** Well, when they had those Christmas parties they did.

**BH:** Were they very like social gatherings?

**BC:** Yeah, yeah, they had a nice banquet and then you dance after. It was really nice. Then they had those skating parties, I told you that.

**BH:** Right. I'm trying to think of what else I could ask. Do you have anything you want to share?

**BC:** I told you everything I know.

**BH:** Yeah, okay. Did you ever go inside the boarding houses?

**BC:** No, I never lived in there.

**BH:** Right, I've heard that they had curfews and everything like that, that they were very structured for like younger girls.

**BC:** Really? I didn't know that.

**BH:** Yeah.

**BC:** It was mostly apartments, people with families.

**BH:** That's interesting, with the maternity leave, how quick it was, six weeks after. Because I feel like nowadays that's much longer, much more of a time period.

**BC:** I guess they give them longer now. But the insurance, at that time, I guess it was the insurance, they paid so long, you know, with the -

**BH:** Were there like insurance through the Bates Mill, did workers have -?



**BC:** Yes, you had good insurance until, you know, everything turned around there. Because I had my feet operated on for bunions, and they paid me for all the time that I was out. I was working in the office, so they gave me my full pay. It was good, good benefits.

**BH:** Was it hard standing all day, or did you get used to it?

**BC:** Oh yes, it gets hard standing all day. But when you're younger you don't mind it so much. It's when you get older.

**BH:** How did, did you notice the change?

**BC:** Well, I worked down in the finishing room, standing all day, for eleven years. Then I went upstairs to the office, so I'd go down there once in a while and walk around, but I'd go back and sit, you know, it wasn't like I was standing all day.

**BH:** Were there other people who stayed down in the finishing room, on their feet all day?

**BC:** Oh yeah, hm-hmm.

**BH:** I can't imagine that.

**BC:** But you move around a lot, though. You just don't, folding bedspreads you move from one end of the table to the other. It's two people working, one at one end, one at the other, and the stitcher's here. So you got to keep her going, she's putting the fringe on the bedspread and the table would be, long table is here, so you take the bedspread, you throw it on the table, then you fold it.

**BH:** Okay, while she's still stitching?

**BC:** Hm-hmm. They go pretty fast, they went pretty fast, the stitchers.

**BH:** Did people ever make mistakes with it, at the mills, and like what were the consequences then, if a mistake was made?

**BC:** I don't know. I don't know any of that.

**BH:** Were the supervisors, like I know you said you could have had problems with them and then you'd go to the next person above them, were they gener-, but were the supervisors day to day generally like accommodating and nice?

**BC:** Oh yeah, yeah.

**BH:** It would be more rare that you'd have a problem with them?

**BC:** Yes.

**BH:** And then, do you think would have had, be just as likely to have problems with them as women would, or was it definitely a gender separation?

**BC:** No, I don't think so.

**BH:** So, then it was even, then?

**BC:** Oh yeah, I believe so.

**BH:** So did you really, did you see any, much discrimination against women or

anything?

**BC:** No.

**BH:** Was it very -?

**BC:** Yeah, it's not like today.

**BH:** Right, really?

**BC:** It wasn't like today.

**BH:** What's your opinion on that, compared to today?

**BC:** I think they favor men more than women.

**BH:** That's interesting. But then back then it was (*unintelligible phrase*)?

**BC:** There it was most, in that room it was mostly women working, so.

**BH:** So it would be difficult to favor men. Well, thank you.

**BC:** You're welcome.

**BH:** I don't know if you, if you think of anything else I'll use, definitely.

**BC:** If I'm, I'm about, I don't know, I don't of anything else I could tell you.

**BH:** Good, well thank you.

**BC:** You're welcome. Thank you.

*End of Interview*

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