

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

Jason Gosselin
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

MWOH# 044
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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History Project. The date is June 1st, 2006, this is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and I'm here with Jason Gosselin at the Bates Mill executive office conference room. Could I start just by asking you to give your full name?

Jason Gosselin: It's Jason Gosselin.

AL: And where and when were you born?

JG: I was born in 1973 in Auburn.

AL: In Auburn, is that where you grew up?

JG: Actually no, grew up mostly in Newport.

AL: Newport, Maine?

JG: Correct.

AL: What was Newport, Maine like when you were growing up? It's a small town.

JG: It still is. It was a little smaller than it is now, but it was, we moved out, lived on a farm for a while and, it was nice, quiet.

AL: And so after high school did you move to Lewiston?

JG: Actually moved with my family to North Carolina for a year during high school, then moved back to live with friends in Newport for my senior year at high school, and shortly after high school moved back to Lewiston.

AL: And what brought you to Lewiston?

JG: Family mostly, job.

AL: And is that when you started at the Bates Mill?

JG: Actually, it's not. I worked at Gates for a while when I was eighteen, and had a couple of other jobs around. And then the mill operation decided that they were going to go ahead and do some more stuff for the mill store, and consequently they needed somebody to work in the lab, and so I took that position at that time.

AL: And what were your duties in the lab, what sort of things did you learn?

JG: Basically at that point in time it was just simply bleaching and washing. We were providing goods right off the loom to, directly to the mill store, gray goods would be shipped to North Carolina for the mill in Grover, where they were going ahead and processing for retail sale. But for the mill store we were just going ahead and expediting limited goods, just to go ahead and service them. So I was washing and bleaching that product.

AL: And did you say it was '93 when you started?

JG: That's correct, yes.

AL: What was happening at the mill at that time?

JG: Very little. As a matter of fact, they were gearing down production, they were planning on I believe moving everything to North Carolina. That was met with resistance, and consequently they ended up diverting, they just were no longer associated with the mill in North Carolina. I don't really know how that all transpired, but then things started to pick up for this mill as they became independent.

AL: And I also notice in here that you have quite a family history working in the mills?

JG: Yes, actually.

AL: Can you talk about how far that goes back, and what -?

JG: It goes back probably further than I even realize. But I know that grandfather on my mother's side was associated with the mill, for work, for a long time, his entire life, and eventually actually owned a portion of the mill, and then owned it outright after it became independent of the company in North Carolina. So he's been in the mills for a long period of time, going back to the heydays of textiles in this area.

And my father as well was in the mill, basically he worked in the mill his whole life. And my grand-, not my grandfather but my grandfather's uncle on my father's side was actually president of Bates during its heyday as well.

AL: And what was his name, do you know?

JG: Hal Gosselin.

AL: Oh, yes. And so, and your grandfather is Fred Lebel?

JG: That's correct, yup.

AL: So you have a long line of people (*unintelligible phrase*).

JG: Yes, yes, yup, lots of textile history in my family.

AL: Over the years did they tell a lot of stories?

JG: There really weren't a whole lot of stories. There was a lot of mill talk, but it was always very official and professional, and just trying to meet agendas and get stuff done. There was never really a whole lot of personality with talk about the mill, it was always just work.

AL: So what was the, can you talk to me a little more about the atmosphere at the mills as it -?

JG: Well it, I mean it's gone through, I'm sure it went through a great deal of transition. I'm sure the atmosphere during the '40s, '50s and '60s, even the '70s, was very different than it was when I was at the mill. I enjoyed working there, it was fun, but it was a job, and that seemed to be how everyone kind of perceived it. It was very, oftentimes it was just very dark, it just seemed like everybody had someplace else that they'd rather be.

It was during a time that nobody really knew what was going to happen until Bates became independent from this company in North Carolina, because it looked like all the jobs were going to be shifted out. Once that that era kind of came to an end and it became a more independent company, and things started to pick up and more employees came on board, the attitude seemed to change, where people seemed to enjoy coming to work more.

And that, you know, in a mill it was, it was an odd environment. It was something that I wasn't used to. I mean, you have different kind of people to a certain extent where they, I don't know, sometimes it seems like rumors and innuendo ruled the break room and the lunch room, but you just learned to live with it and deal with it and get your job done. And things started to change a little bit, people seemed to be a bit more upbeat, and then things were picking up, business seemed to be pretty good. And one thing led to another, and ultimately business ended up not being very good at the end.

AL: Were you here during the time the Tang brothers owned it?

JG: I was not. The Tang brothers are the company that was in North Carolina. So the Tang brothers had already shifted out, they were running the mill in North Carolina. As a matter of fact, when I came to work here my father was still working in North Carolina for the Tang brothers.

AL: And when you worked in the lab, was Gerry LaFrance still working there?

JG: Gerry LaFrance was working part time. Yup, Gerry LaFrance actually taught me how to dye.

AL: He did.

JG: Yes, he did, he taught me the bleaching formulas, and then as things started to gear up we went from just a, white and natural were the only things that we offered, we were at one point in time, I remember, and Gerry taught me how to dye after that. And then Gerry would kind of come and go, he would vacation, and he was retired and enjoyed his time off. So he gave me a crash course in dying, and then I just kind of learned it on my own and, through books. And we had gone from having basically no color palette to having a palette of about, I'm going to say conservatively, two hundred colors at some one point in time. We actually had a market week, say, right around 1998, where we had a demand to, they threw about seventy colors and styles on us to go ahead and match for a presentation in New York. So things were definitely looking up at that point in time.

AL: And then it all sort of came down.

JG: Yeah, there were some funding issues. Again, I was never on the boardroom side of the conversations. I'd heard the rumors and perhaps was privy to some inside stuff that maybe I shouldn't have been at the time, but yeah, it seems like we ended up getting purchased by a company in Minnesota, Farebo. They had secured a great deal of funds, from my understanding, to go ahead and either move this company to another location, or to modernize it. And nothing ever materialized as far as modernizing our equipment. Everything that we were working with was pretty much obsolete, and consequently the writing was on the wall, and we just couldn't compete with high tech industry any more. We were just very archaic, and trying to get done what we could as best we could with what we had to work with.

AL: And Rachel had mentioned the last three months being very chaotic (*unintelligible phrase*)?

JG: Oh, yeah, well I think everyone felt somewhat betrayed the last three months that we were here. We knew that the place was going to be closed down, there were a lot of

promises that had been made by the corporation in Minnesota that never came to fruition. There were, just a lot of things that transpired where people were hoping to go ahead and retain their jobs, they were hoping for the mill to be modernized to a certain extent, they really expected good things to come out of the promises that were made. But unfortunately it seems like they had other plans, and I believe they ended up purchasing a mill somewhere in the South, I don't know.

I was still on at that point in time working simply as a consultant, helping them get their cotton dying up and running in other places, and helping them out with formulas, and dealing with a lot of customer base that they had, and just basically trouble shooting and doing technical things for them at that point in time. But yeah, the wind was out of everybody's sails and nobody really, everybody was showing up at that point in time for nothing more than the paycheck. They knew that nothing was going to come of this, it was dead end, it was just loading equipment on machines, and doing so as quickly as possible, and then just doing as little as possible for the remainder of the day, unfortunately.

AL: And after the mill closed, did you go on to a job that was related in some way?

JG: Actually, absolutely not. I ended up taking a position, well that's not entirely true. For a short while I did some welding, and then I worked for a few months over at Miller Industries in Lisbon, didn't like it there at all. There were just some personality conflicts, it was very difficult to, it was not what I was used to. Here, I was used to knowing, I would get an agenda, this needs to be done by the end of the week, I would set up my crew, set up my formulas, and get it done. There it was, you'd get a list at the end of the day, and they expected you to go ahead and have everything laid out in an hour. It just wasn't for me, did not work out. And then I went into, I became associated with a company out of New Jersey that manages and oversees building maintenance for retail stores, and I managed Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and eastern New York for them. So, completely not associated in any way.

AL: Are there things about your time in the mill that I haven't asked you that you feel is important to talk about?

JG: No, I think you've pretty much covered everything. I mean, without getting into technical aspects, I think that that's pretty much a pretty good version of the evolution of my time at the mill. Started out slow, things picked up, and ultimately the carpet was pulled out from under our feet.

AL: Can you, before we end, talk a little bit about the machines, the different machines that would be in the dye room and the lab?

JG: Well, as far as the lab goes, I mean everything was very obsolete, it was stuff that nobody was dying with any more. We actually had converted a Beck machine into

a paddle dye machine, which was just an act of complete and total desperation, trying to get product out and get it done with a process that this machine wouldn't accommodate. So, you know, we were doing everything we could to go ahead and make things work.

You know, in the lab, the process was basically we would get a Pantone sample, a colored chip with direction as to what product a certain customer was looking for this color to be dyed on. Then I would trouble shoot it in the lab using our basic dyes, actually our color palette of dyes, we didn't actually using basic dyes. Basic is a type of dye chemistry that we didn't use, we would use direct and fiber reactive dyes. And then depending on the criteria of color fastness, light fastness, that would determine what sort of chemistry we would use in the dyeing process. Then we'd go ahead and dye a sample, transition it into our paddle machines, dye a twenty, twenty five pound lot, see how that came out, and if it was consistent then we would go ahead and transform it into a production lot, run a couple production lots, fine tune it, and that was it, we were dyeing cloth.

We did at one point in time secure some actual paddle dyeing machines, which were also very old for their time but it was nice to have them, and we didn't have to use this Beck machine any more, which was just an absolute nightmare.

AL: Great, thank you very much.

JG: You're welcome.

End of Interview
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