

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

Edwina Foster
(Interviewer(s): Emma Alexander)
2005]¹

SMWOH #025
May 15,

Interview with **Edwina Foster**
Conducted by **Emma Alexander**
May 15, 2005
4:30 PM

Edwina Foster is 75 years old and has lived in Auburn all her life. She still lives in the house she grew up in. She was waiting on the porch when I drove up into her driveway. The news was on the television and there were two cats sleeping on the couch. She said I could take a seat and she turned the volume down on the television. I then gave her the forms to sign.

[00.00.04]

There's that many. So you might as well start. [Edwina is signing the forms]

[00.00.18]

First we're going to start off with some simple questions. Can you state your full name?

Pardon?

Can you state your full name and spell it for the tape recorder.

Edwina Foster. E-D-W-I-N-A. F-O-S-T-E-R.

[00.00.30]

What was your maiden name?

I never married. I'm a very old maid. Really old. [We both laugh]

[00.00.36]

What was your date of birth?

2/9/31

[00.00.42]

Where were you born?

Uh. Actually I was born in Portland, ME, but I grew up in Auburn all my life.

What time did you move to Auburn? When you were a baby?

Yes. When I was a baby.

¹ This heading was added by Thomas Burian, 08/21/06

So you lived in Auburn all your life? You never lived in Lewiston?

I worked in Lewiston, but I lived in Auburn.

[00.00.56]

What was your mother's name?

Addley Merrill (Sp?). She lived in Gardner.

What was your father's name?

Edmund Foster. E-D-M-U-N-D.

Were they also born in Maine?

Oh yea. Yea. Their parents came from Canada. So actually the name is Foster but it should be Fortin. The grandparents came over the border and they couldn't speak English. So they gave the name Foster. So all the children had the name Foster. So I got cousins Fortin and all that.

[00.01.45]

So how do you spell "Fortin?"

Huh?

So how do you spell the original name?

F-O-R-T-I-N.

[00.02.00]

That's really interesting. Um, did they work in the mills? Your parents?

No. My aunt was a...well my mother died when I was nine. She never worked. We moved out in the country. Old Hotel Road. My father was an electrician. And uh, I guess he had to give it up when they got more technical. He was great with his hands, but when they started you know books that you had to go by I guess he retired and all that.

[00.02.30]

Why did your grandparents come to the states from Canada?

Yea, well they were farmers I think. They were farmers.

[00.02.48]

Do you have any siblings?

A sister, but she died a few years ago.

I'm sorry. Um, how many years younger or older is she?

She was two years older.

[00.03.00]

Two years older. So what was her name?

Helen Cheney. C-H-E-N-E-Y.

Did she work in the mills at all?

No, no. She was more or less uh, well she married and had four kids. She was more of an office person. Telephone operator and receptionist. Along that line.

[00.03.30]

So how would you like describe your family life growing up with your sister and your father?

She left home when I was 16 and uh she moved to Portland with my father. We didn't see each other often. I used to go over there. She got married. Moved to Massachusetts, Vermont. She moved all over, she was a real gypsy [chuckles]. She was all over the place. But I would go and visit her in the different places.

That's great and your [I get interrupted]

In a matter of fact one of her kids just came down and I hadn't seen him in 40...50 years.

That's unbelievable.

They lived in Florida. Well they lived in Vermont, Massachusetts, and then Florida. The daughter moved back after my sister died. She moved back to Vermont.

[00.04.36]

And you said your dad moved to Portland as well?

Huh?

You said your father moved to Portland with your sister?

Well he lived in Portland and my sister was here and lived with me. My mother died when I was nine. We moved in here with my aunt.

So you lived with your aunt when your dad moved to Portland?

Yes. Well, he died before my aunt did.

[00.05.00]

Did you have a close family?

Uh, only my aunt and uncles had died I believe. I'm not quite sure. They all live out of town so I think I might have one left. I don't know we don't keep in touch.

[00.05.24]

How would you describe your cultural heritage or your ethnic background?
Pardon?

Your ethnic background? French-Canadian?

Uh, French-English and a smidgen of Indian [uses hand motions when she says smidgen]

[00.05.37]

In your household growing up when you were young, did you celebrate that at all, your background?

No, but they were good cooks though. Good cooks. My aunt was a good cook. I miss her cooking.

[00.06.00]

Have you ever been married before?

No. I'm a real old maid. [chuckles]

[00.06.12]

So your sister got married though?

She got married when I was....she must have been around 18.

[00.06.35]

Now we're going to talk more about the mills. When did you begin working in the mills?

'47. I was 16. And that was before they put a law in that you had to be 18 before you worked around machinery. So I just got in under the wire. So after that you had to be 18 to work the machinery.

[00.06.48]

In which mills did you work in?

Continental, the Old Mill and Bates Mill and when they closed I even worked in the woolen mill for a year I guess. And after that I went to....I went back to the mills because I got called back before it shut down. And then we it finally shut down I was out a whole year. I was on my last unemployment check when I went up to Clover manner, the nursing home. I got a job there. On my

last unemployment check. My last unemployment check. And I was there 16 years.

[00.07.36]

Which mill did you like working in the best?

Uh [long pause, is thinking]. It's hard to say. Continental I guess.

For any reasons?

Huh?

For any reasons why Continental was the best?

It was clean I guess. I would say.

Good working conditions?

Yea. Very dusty the mills.

[00.08.06]

What jobs did you hold when you worked in the mills?

Um, 40 years I was a spinner. When it started to go down a little bit I went on doffing, which I wasn't too good at and then...like they said when the room was finished I went down to the finishing room. Uh, I should say I went to the weave room first. From the weave room I went to the finishing room. When I went down I went as an inspector folder. I think a folder would be....we folded the bedspreads after they were done. Now you got twin, double, queen and king and each fold is different and you have to remember that. That's piece work. You do not go slow on that. Your partner expects you to move and I could not hear in my head which fold was which. From there I went to a cutting table the same room, but it was different. In other words when the cloth came out of the weave room they were put....they had to be folded, put on a table and I did that until it got shut down.

[I cough] I'm sorry I'm getting over a cold.

That's ok.

Actually can I get a glass of water? I'm sorry.

No that's ok [Edwina gets me a glass a water from the kitchen]. I don't know where I got this glass from but it's got my initial on it.

Oh that's great thank you. I'm just coughing up a storm.

Well it's this crazy weather you know.

Just waiting for it to get warm outside.

Yes.

[00.11.00]

So did you just work in the mills?

Well after they closed I went up to a nursing home. On the three mills I worked in the spinning room mostly.

[00.11.30]

What do you think about the products you made?

Very nice. Yes very nice.

They were very high quality. I heard a lot about the Bates blankets.

We worked hard. We were very hard workers. They will never find a bunch like us.

[00.11.54]

Do you think the hours were fair?

I worked 40 hours. Matter of fact in the beginning we used to have a half hour of work, we used to leave the mill, get lunch or just go outside to smoke. We always went one place by a fence. One year it was like a holiday and nobody went to work and that day a car went into the canal and it went right were the old spinning room used to stand. It would have wiped out the entire spinning room if we were working.

Oh my God.

The people were lucky.

[00.12.30]

Did you get paid overtime?

Oh yea. We worked overtime.

So the pay was very fair?

For the textiles...they weren't the biggest payers of the mills. They were not the biggest payers. We earned our pay. We really earned it. We were conscientious people. We tried. We worked hard, but we enjoyed it.

[00.13.06]

Did you think men and women held specific jobs?

Yes. Once and awhile we would get a man spinner. But it is a different set of nerves. The men were good in doffing. The men were excellent doffers. Spinning is very rare if they stayed. They always went on as doffers.

[00.13.30]

What is doffing?

Doffing is after we....as spinners we fill up the bobbins. They come and they take them off and set us up for another.

How do you spell that?

D-O-F-F-I-N-G I Think. I taught once for awhile. I was a good teacher. I may not have been the fastest, but I was a good teacher. I taught a few spinners how to spin. I taught a few doffers and I was good at it. I wasn't....they didn't keep me long on doffing because I'm not quite fast enough, but I was able to teach someone and they were fast. Yea.

[00.14.30]

Do you feel that particular ethnic group, like Irish or French-Canadian, held certain [I get interrupted quickly]

No, no, no. As a matter a fact when we were at Continental the Canadians came down to work. They come down for work. Do you want some more?

[Edwina notices my glass is empty and points to the glass]

No thank you.

A bunch of Canadians came down and one of the girls we were friends up until she died. They come here on what they call a green card, working permit. We were friends up until she died. She was only 52. Very nice people.

[00.15.12]

Do you think the French-Canadians held specific jobs?

No, no, no. Come on this is hard labor. You don't distinguish between nationality at all. The only thing is I used to get mad was when we would sit on break. Most of them were French. But they used to tell jokes in French and say the punch line in English. I didn't know what the joke was about. I didn't know how to speak French! [voice raises, she laughs]. That was frustrating. No, no. Everyone was the same.

[00.16.00]

How did you get your first job in the mills?

Well, I quite school, grammar school. I was not very good at learning. Hard headed [points to head]. That time you did not just stay home. You either worked. You either went to school or you worked, so I went in the mills. Which was about the only employer, except for the stores and at that time you had to speak both French and English, because there were so many French. My aunt was the raised us and she spoke perfect English and perfect French.

Wow. I bet she went far.

Yes. Well, her mother was French. As a matter of fact she lived with us until she died and we couldn't talk. I couldn't speak French and she couldn't speak English, so we....there was no communication between us.

[00.17.24]

How could you get promoted to a better position?

There was a job on the board. You sign up for it. Well, you got to be able to do it.

[00.17.36]

What were the relationships like between the workers?

I wouldn't say they held us with high esteem. We were good workers.

Did you get along with the other workers at the mills?

Oh yea. Well you know it's like a family. They tell us their troubles. We tell 'em ours. You know it's strange....when you're there you know we're all together, but once you leave you don't see 'em.

Really?

Yep it's like when you're in that world, but once you leave it's gone. Except for a few years we would have a banquet for all the spinners for Christmas.

That's really nice.

For a good many years we had banquets every Christmas. Just to get together.

[00.18.48]

What were the banquets like?

Oh just lunch. Exchanging gifts or something.

[00.18.54]

How many spinners were there?

Oh it was a lot of spinners. Oh yes. A lot of spinners. We had more than that. At least a dozen at the banquets. I mean that's not all of them. But oh yea there were a lot of spinners. Working in the mills there were big floors.

[00.19.18]

We actually got a tour of one of the mills and we got to see the big rooms and I never knew how large it was. Unbelievable. How were the relationships between the workers and the bosses? Did you get along with your supervisors?

Well, if you were honest and did your job. Sometimes they would pull these things on us and you had to let them know and put your foot down.

For instance?

Well, for instance if you were supposed to run a job and he put someone else there and it should have been you, you have to put your foot down. Hey, that job should have been mine. For a matter of fact one day they did it to me twice. The second time the girls went in the office and we stuck together and told them “hey that’s not right.” So, ok he said, next time. I turned around and said “No! Now!” I said “No. Enough is enough. I want to go now.” That way they won’t pull it again.

[00.20.48]

And it worked? They won’t fire you? You could definitely do that?

Yep. You have to be very, very bad to be fired. Not many people got fired. They rarely fired.

[00.21.24]

What were the working conditions like?

What were they what?

The working conditions.

You worked [laughs], you work.

Were there any health hazards? Were the machines dangerous?

Well it was always dusty. They went through a period where we were going to wear masks. I mean you have to understand. Spinning you’re walking. You’re walking back and forth. Back and forth. It takes a lot of breathing. If you’re confined in a mask you....it’s very hard to do it. Some of them wanted ear plugs. Ear plugs were easier to take than masks I would say.

[00.22.18]

Was anyone injured? Were any of the workers injured?

Well we got burned, scraped. Cause those bobbins were going around fast and so you have to grab them just right to pick them up. If you didn’t grab them just right, you get burned. One day I got cut on my hand. So I got a cut, so I couldn’t use it to pick it up because the threads you have to attach to another one. So I had to learn with my left hand very fast.

I couldn’t imagine that.

Oh well you learn fast. When you have to do something, you do it. You learn it fast.

[00.23.06]

Did you receive health insurance at all?

Oh yea.

[00.23.12]

Did you have health insurance when you were 16 when you first started working in the mills?

Well you get it within I think its 30 days. I won't say exactly, but you got to be working a certain amount of time to get it.

[00.23.30]

Did anyone get injured enough that they had to leave their job for a period of time?

I can't think of anyone. There was one woman who used her insurance a lot and they did let her go. So I mean I don't think they want.....since they have nurses stationed there too.

Oh really?

Oh yea. There was a nursing station. Something you felt uncomfortable you could go down and she would hand you a pill or take your blood pressure.

[00.24.18]

After the mills closed? What did you do? You worked in the nursing home right?

Yes. When I first left I think I worked in the woolen mill.

[00.24.30]

What time did Continental close? What year?

'47...oh no no....I started in '47. I don't know exactly. [counts years in her head]. '86? No it couldn't be '86. I'm trying to think. I don't know exactly. I really don't know exactly. '47....'57.....'61! '61 they closed because I got my first car and right after I got my car the mill closed down. Every time I change my car, the mills shut down [chuckles]. It's a bad omen for me whenever I get something. It's going to be a disaster.

[00.25.42]

So you worked in the woolen mills and then you worked in the nursing home. Was it easy to find work after the mills closed?

It was a year. They knew if we had a chance to go back to the mills, we'd go back, so they didn't like to hire you. If someone hires you they expect you to work. As a matter of fact I worked at Clover for awhile and when I first started I worked at Clover and the mill called me back.

So Clover is the nursing home?

Yea. So I went back to the mill and I don't know for how long and when it was going down hill Clover needed somebody so I was working a double shift. I worked eight hours at the mill and I had maybe a half an hour in between the mill and going to work at Clover and I worked like that for quite a long time. So it's like working two eight hour shifts. Then when it definitely closed, I stayed at Clover. But I did work two jobs.

That's a long work day.

It was. Two entirely different jobs.

[00.27.36]

I asked you a lot of questions about the mills now but I am also interested in the Lewiston community at the time of the mills. So I'm going to ask questions about the Lewiston community as a whole.

We never had much to do as a whole. I mean the mill people were what we were associated with. We didn't have time to associate with other places. You can't work 40 hours and then if you worked eight hours overtime....you didn't have time to associate with anybody.

[00.28.18]

Did you work five days a week? Seven days a week?

Well sometimes seven days.

But mostly five?

Oh yea.

[00.28.30]

Where did people live in Lewiston?

Well they had blocks here for awhile. Well, they're gone now. For the most part they had homes. Like the husband and wife both worked in the mills. The wife would work the first shift. The husband would work the second shift and they would take care of the children while the other one worked.

[00.29.06]

Where did you live?

[Edwina points her finger down].

You lived in this house?

Yea. I've lived here since I was nine years old.

Wow. That's great.

[00.29.24]

Did you know any of the women working in the boarding houses?

No. We used to have a garden. We used to have animals here. We had pigs, even a couple of pigs at one time. We had ducks, chickens. This was, I mean, and a garden. We had to turn the soil, plus weeding.

[00.30.18]

Did the mills sponsor any work organizations or sports leagues? You said you had that banquet.

We did have a bowling team at one time. There weren't a bunch of women.

The women didn't?

They were always fighting.

How about the men?

No. It was always just women fighting.

A lot of "cat" fights?

Not bad. I don't know. It's hard to say. You have to be in a group to know there is always someone that wanted to make trouble. We had it for awhile.

[00.30.54]

Were you part of the bowling league?

Well, I wasn't too good at bowling. I don't care for the big ones. I like the small ones. We used to have the small ones.

The candle pin bowling?

I don't know what you call it. The small ones.

The small balls and the small pins. I love that. My hands are too small to use the big ones. I can't use the big ones, I always have to use the small ones [I laugh].

I like the small ones.

I do too.

[00.31.36]

Was your family, or were you part of a church?

We belonged to St. Patricks. Well, years ago St. Louis up here only spoke French. Since I was English, my uncle was Irish....his name was McCarthy....he couldn't speak French either, so we moved to St. Patricks. So I was baptized there when I was nine.

[00.32.18]

Was religion discussed in the mills at all?

Huh?

Was religion discussed in the mills?

No. You were where you were.

You didn't mix the two?

No. We did our work. We were supposed to do our work. We did our work.

[00.23.54]

So every Sunday you went to St. Patricks though and religion did play a role in your life?

Yes.

[00.33.30]

Did you ever feel, maybe not in the mills, did you feel like there was any ethnic conflict [I get interrupted quickly].

No no no. No. No. No. This is only arising now.

[00.33.48]

Do you feel that now with the Somali community coming in?

Oh well don't get me started on that. They're fighting world war III here.

[00.34.12]

What do you think about museum L-A's mission to preserve the history of the mills?

Well, it's like a dinosaur died, so if you want to know what we were I suppose they need something to show.

[00.34.36]

If you could portray one thing about the mills what would it be?

Well, a little bit of each room and what they did you know. You have to preserve something that doesn't exist. I guess there are some mills in Augusta. That has a mill that's still around. There aren't that many mills around. If you haven't lived it, it is very hard to explain it, because now everything is ethnic. There is no such thing as ethnic in the work. You did your work or you didn't do your work.

[00.36.00]

There's a lunch at the Musuem L-A. Have been talking to Rachel on the phone?

Yes for the interview. That's all.

Well there will be a big lunch at Musuem L-A that everyone is invited to.

Oh I went in October.

Oh there's another one. It's on.....I'll give you the date. It's on.....Here I'll write it down for you. If you need a ride....

Oh no I have a car.

Great.

It's this month.

It's coming up very soon.

Do we have to call?

No.

[00.38.42]

Do you have any questions about this project? Or final thoughts?

I think it's sad that there aren't any more mills. They had really good work and we can't pass it down to anyone. Like I said...I did teach quite a quite a few. I even taught some from abroad that came over. Somewhere in Latin America. I forget. And I taught them how to do different things. Maybe somewhere he's teaching somebody what I taught. So that's your heritage right there. You taught someone and they're off teaching someone else. It's sad we don't have it here 'cause who knows someday they may need those mills. There will be no one left to teach them. We'll all be dead. We're a dying breed here. You know. We're ill and worn down. There will be nobody to teach them.

[00.40.36]

I think this is really important to do this. I'm glad they're doing these interviews for the museum.

I thank you very much.

No thank you so much for the interview. It's great help.

That's good.

[Edwina shows me her cat that is on the bed. She says her other cat has a moose on her nose. She shows me pictures of the cat in her wallet after she can't find her in the house. She also shows me pictures of her sister that are in her wallet. I say good bye and thank you for a thoughtful interview.]