



## Hard Times and Hard Work

"People were waiting in line for work, but the people that worked in the mill were pretty clever.

...My grandmother was on the first shift...eleven hours a day, so my mother would bring her lunch.

Maybe she was nine or ten years old..., and while my grandmother was eating her lunch, my mother would start working to learn the job.

> ...When there was an opening, she went in, 'does she have experience?' 'Oh yes, I've been doing,'

then she would show them what she could do, and then she was hired." Fred Lebel

## Before World War II, the insecurity of work shadowed every aspect of life.

Whatever else you cared about—the Church hockey, playing music—you woke up six mornings a week worried about how to secure work and pay. With wages low and jobs unsteady, making ends meet was a family affair. Most children were expected to leave school and contribute to the family income as soon as they reached the legal working-age of sixteen (and sometimes earlier). About 98% of Lewiston's fifteenyear-olds were enrolled in school in 1930, but only 45% of sixteen-year-olds.

Knowing how to get a job and keep a job was one of the most important work skills that a young person learned. Any strategem—family ties, neighborhood friendships, the

The millworkers whose story is told here came of age in the 1920s and '30s: years of migration, resettlement, and economic crisis. Many first joined their parents in the textile mills during the Great Depression. Work was hard, hard to get, and hard to keep. They had to contend with ethnic and labor conflict. The only thing worse than the hard times in the mills was the harder times they had left behind.

Textile work was not steady or well-paid at any time in the early 20th century. Yet the Depression was the hardest chapter in the story of the millworkers' world. Those who found work never knew if a job and a wage awaited them the next morning. If you brought home ten dollars at the end of the week, you were doing OK.

Yet memories and research underscore the resilience with which millworkers responded. Just as Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal sought to manage the economic crisis, families found ways to stretch and save and share. In the process, today's elders learned a work ethic that has remained a touchstone of their values. Hard times were in many ways the formative experience of their lives.

"The working conditions were bad.

Like I said, 14-16 hours with very little pay. They were exploited, I'm sure.

But I don't think they realized how they were exploited too much because...it was so much more than what they had in Canada. Even at these slave wages and long hours,

I think they still felt privileged that they had a job and could earn cash and save to eventually do what they did." Irene Simpson

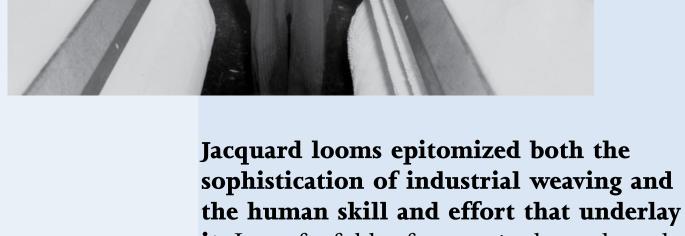
> "The river smelled awful.... So much so that if you had a cross, a silver cross or something, it would tarnish." Rolande Begin

Mill work strained not only budgets but

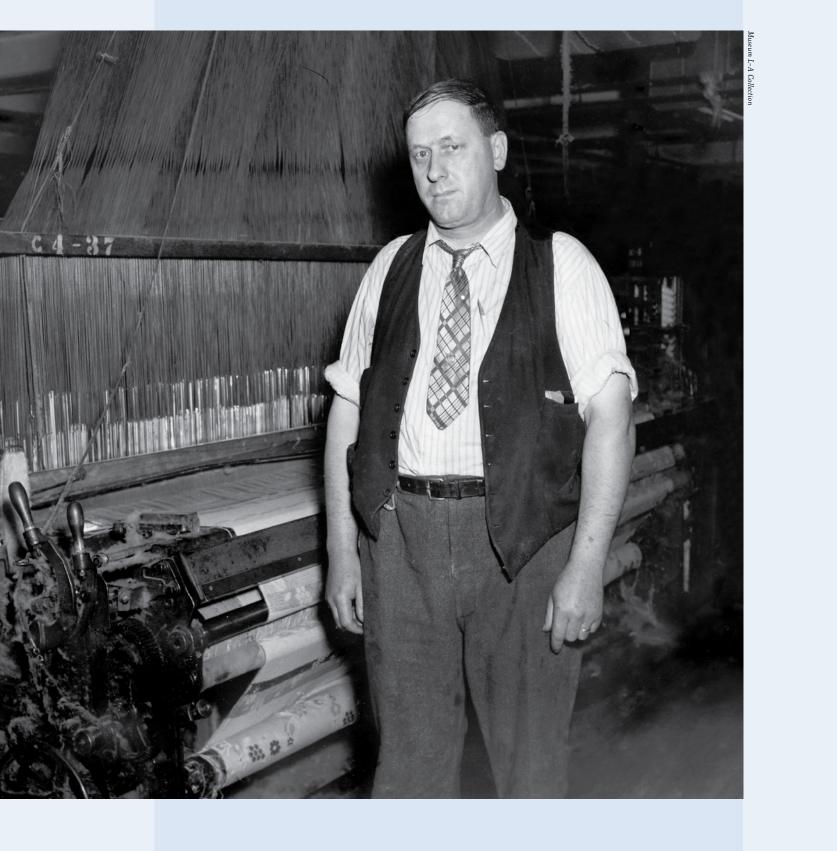
**bodies.** If you were to return to Bates Mill in 1935, the first thing that would strike you, almost literally, would be the noise. Even today Maine Heritage Weavers, with four looms, can seem deafening to visitors; the No. 5 Weave Shed of Bates Mill contained hundreds in the 1930s. Weavers ran up and down the aisles, each managing as many as sixteen of the giant machines. Even in winter, they might be stripped to undershirts; heat and humidity were kept high to make the cotton easier to handle. Cotton dust floated everywhere; workers came home with lint in their clothes, their ears, even their belly buttons. Fumes spread from the dye house. Outside the Androscoggin River reeked of chemicals and wood pulp discharged upriver by the paper mills of Jay and Rumford.

Today many retired millworkers still bear the effects of hard work in hard times: toughened bodies, deafened ears, weakened lungs.

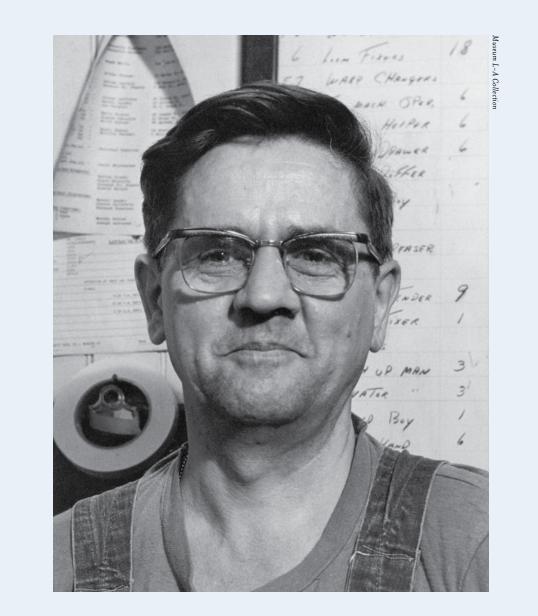




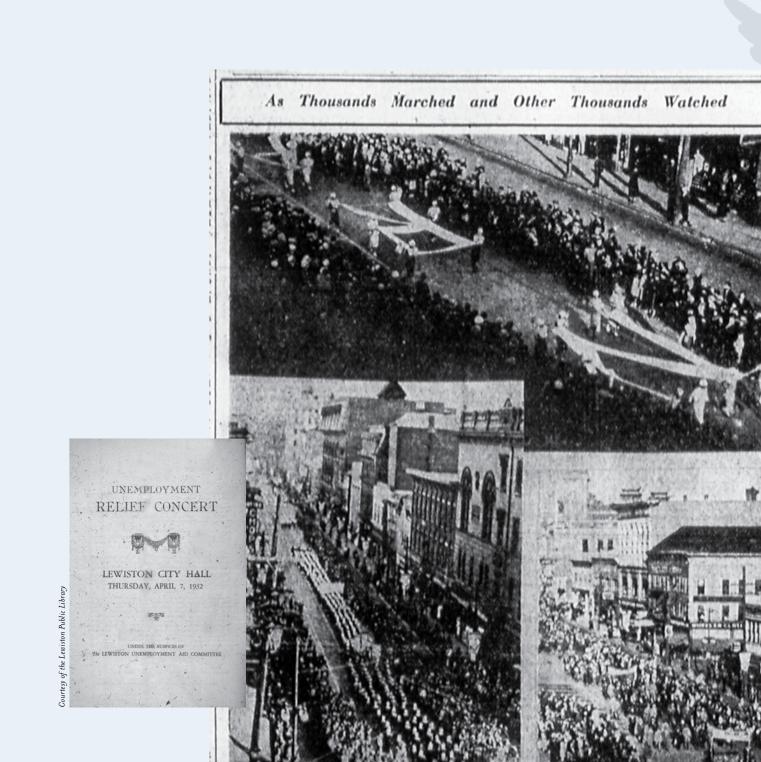
it. Long fanfolds of customized punch cards controlled the weaving process from above, creating the intricate patterns for which the Bates Manufacturing Company became famous. The looms were in effect a pioneering version of program-driven design; computer companies visited Lewiston in the mid-20th century to study them. At the same time, the Jacquard looms were loud, lightning-fast, and dangerous. Workers required dexterity to keep the machinery well-balanced, fix broken threads, and avoid flying shuttles.



"Well, my father was an inventor of half a dozen gimmicks that improved the machines that they were working on, little things of no consequence, but yet it made the job so much easier for the operator. He was a weaver, a loom fixer." Emilien Denis



Hard times reinforced a commitment to the work ethic, a spirit of creative resilience, and a pride of craft that remain among the deepest legacies of the millworkers' world. If you ask an elder about these years, you are bound to hear stories of hardship. But you may also be shown a weaving hook or a scissors, lovingly saved from the mills for fifty years—and a story of inventiveness and skill that goes with it. Such workers refused to be reduced to "hands," that is, disposable factory labor. They brought their own hands—and their hearts, minds, and muscles—to the work of weaving and the working life. For today's elders, hard work was not just an affliction of being born into hard times; it was also a saving grace.



"In 1937... I was working in the shoe shops, and the CIO came in. That was something new. They wanted to unionize the shoe shops... I remember going in the first day of the strike; I went into work just the same, I didn't strike. ...Finally the third day I didn't go in there. The boss called me at home and he wanted me to come in.

Lower right, the parade starts through Hulett Square, with many marchers (at left) still on their we attests where their divisions formed.

Well, I told him, I'm not happy over what you're giving me, I'm making just two dollars a day. 'Well, just come in, we'll take care of that.' So I went in for a couple of days after, they were giving me five dollars a day, and they wanted me to come in. But I said to myself, all these other people are out of work, it's not right for me to come in and work, now that they're striking, so I went out, I didn't go back there." Emile Frechette



Even as President Roosevelt tried to solve the national economic crisis, Lewiston-Auburn struggled to deal with the community's hard times. Political limited mill work to forty hours a week. Community leaders organized charitable aid for the unemployed.

Hard times also provoked labor conflict. All over the nation, mass production workers organized to fight for steadier work, higher wages, shorter hours, and better conditions Insurgent unions like the United Auto Workers and the United Steelworkers joined with existing unions to form the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1935. Workers in Lewiston-Auburn were part of these historic struggles - most visibly in Auburn's shoe shops. Led by the CIO, shoeworkers launched a city-wide strike in 1937, a militant but ultimately unsuccessful effort to unionize the Auburn shops.

Lewiston's mills remained unorganized until World War II. The Federal Government pressured industrial employers to recognize and work with unions to guarantee war production; the CIO's Textile Workers Union of America unionized the mills in 1941.

Apart from the great struggles over New Deal politics and unions, millworkers tried to humanize their work in smaller ways. Today's elders tell stories of shoveling off snow for an impromptu hockey game at the factory gates, or of cajoling a neighbor to secure a job. In the small weave of everyday bonds, the community withstood the harshness of

