



1850 *Bates* 1950

5

Bedspreads and Better Times

One mild evening in 1950, hundreds of Lewistonians celebrated the 100th birthday of Bates Mill. Workers and managers came together at the Lewiston Armory to eat, dance, and toast the firm's success. If the anniversary had come fifteen years earlier, it would be hard to imagine such a *fête* taking place. Work was too unsteady in the Depression. Relations among workers and bosses, French and English speakers, were often too hard-edged. The walls of the mill did not define the boundaries of a community.

But after the war, everything changed. Work was still hard, but times were not. The U.S. economy was growing. New England milltowns lost ground to Southern rivals, but Lewiston bucked the trend. Local owners modernized the mills and offered new paths for advancement. The Textile Workers Union made stable employment its key priority. In short, millworkers could count on steady work and better wages. They could see themselves as part of a company family.

The millworkers' social world went through a sea-change too. The tight-knit culture with which families survived migration and economic depression gave way to a more expansive way of life. For many, it was a francophone version of the American dream. There were new homes, new pastimes, new things to buy and places to buy them. More and more, the people who made George Washington bedspreads could sleep under them.



"[The mill] was a good place to work. You got a good wage, not the best in the world, but you got a good wage. You made an honest wage, you were treated with respect for the most part. Sometimes you had to fight for the respect. But you knew what...what was expected of you when you went in to work and you did what was expected of you and then you went home and you got your paycheck every week. And, you know, a lot of people depended on that." Danny Fitzsimmons

"I bowled, I did the bowling, and I was a Bates News reporter also.... [I reported] about the people in the mill.

When they went on vacations, or whatever they did, you know, they'd tell us. And then we had nice get togethers, too, you know, and we'd call the reporters."

Blanche Legendre

Steady work changed social life on the shopfloor too. Millworkers worked hard to create a company culture that built on the hospitable business climate. Employee magazines, picnics, hockey teams, bowling leagues, and awards dinners sent the message that the mill was a kind of extended family. Millworkers had their own, impromptu ways of humanizing the workplace, as we see in many photographs of Christmas parties, bridal showers, and friendly horseplay on the shop floor. Such sociability, organized or informal, made the mills a friendlier, less fractious place to work.



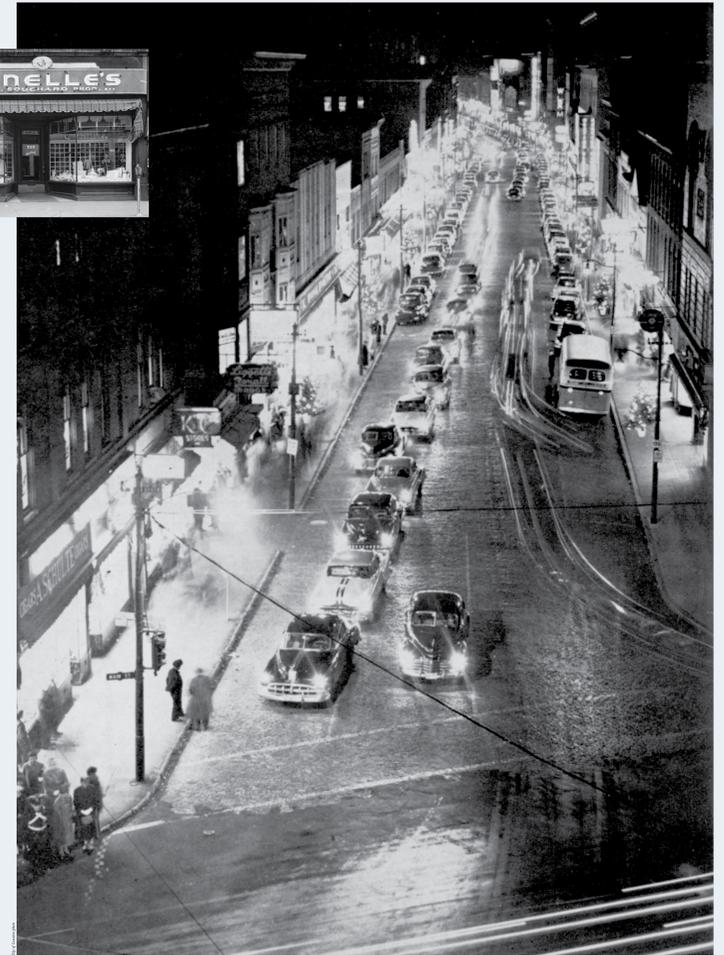
"Oh, it was awesome... [Lisbon Street] had all the stores.

The whole street had stores that were open and I mean people were always there.... Monday night...the boys would go cruising for girls. We would walk around. And Saturdays, we would go shopping all day.

Pauline Labbe



More money and new homes all pointed in one direction: to the downtown stores. For the first time, the millworkers' world had a consumer culture. When elders recall their prewar years, the stories are filled with details of low wages and free pastimes, postwar memories involve the shops, restaurants, and theaters of Lisbon Street. Young millworkers did not abandon the older social traditions of ethnic associations and snowshoe clubs. But these traditions were being dislodged by the pleasures of Peck's department store, family televisions, and new clothes.



The PEPPERELL Sheet



This modern floor plan of the Lewiston home shows the very large living room, which can be converted into a sleeping room. The entrance of the house is on the left and the living room is on the right.

Moving vans were one of the signs of better times. During the postwar boom, many families left downtown neighborhoods like Little Canada for more spacious, well-appointed houses overlooking the business and mill district. Some families built homes for themselves. Some developed housing as a property investment, a way of climbing not only the upland streets, but the social ladder.

Moving up the hill meant more than a new address. It meant a more "modern," middle-class way of life. Millworker families did not necessarily abandon the clan networks and customs that had been nourished in the tenements of Little Canada. (St. Jean-Baptiste Day parades grew more elaborate than ever.) But they interwove older ethnic traditions with a new ideal of stand-alone houses, nuclear families, and up-to-date appliances and conveniences. Immigrant workers like Gerard Grenier, a doubler at the Pepperell sheet factory, could build his family "a typical American home."

THE PEPPERELL Sheet

THE GERARD GRENIERS ARE A FINE FAMILY

THE GRENIERS BUILT A COMFORTABLE HOME FOR THEIR CHILDREN

All the Comforts in a Compact, Attractive House



After a day's work at the bleasery and dardina has faded, the Grenier family settles down for a late dinner at home with Dad reading the paper, Mother darning socks, the boys playing cards and Babe putting "her family" to sleep. A typical American scene in a typical American home.

Walter SPINNER

CHEVALIER WOVES BATES



Sixteen years after the 100th anniversary, in 1966, Bates Mill held another *fête* that looms large in the memory of millworkers. Maurice Chevalier, the famed French singer and actor, performed at the annual awards dinner honoring employees of long service. The visit of the great entertainer marked the success of the Twin Cities' francophone community during the postwar boom. It was a proud moment and proudly remembered today.

In another sense, however, Chevalier's visit represents not the triumph of the millworkers' world, but the beginning of a new crisis. In 1966, the aging cabaret singer was already in decline; the mills along the Androscoquin were already beginning to hemorrhage jobs; *Le Messager* was facing its last year of publication. Over the next twenty years, Lewiston, its millworkers, and their families would face a different kind of hard times.

Best Wishes
Maurice Chevalier
1966