



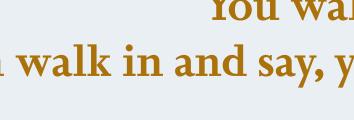
Closures and Openings

"You walk in, particularly where the museum is, and the people that worked there can walk in and say, you know, this used to be the weave room here, and hear the sound of the looms....

Beginning in the early 1960s, the social fabric that made the millworkers' world so strong began to unravel. Facing competition from non-unionized mills in the South and abroad, Lewiston's shops were forced to downscale and close. The Continental Mill failed in 1961; the Hill Mill a decade later. Bates Manufacturing Company went through two decades of absentee ownership, bankruptcy, disinvestment, and a futile employee buyout, before closing in 2001. The local Textile Workers Union (like the national labor movement) was unable to stem the decline and protect its members' jobs. Four thousand people earned their living in the mills during the early 1950s; forty years later, employment had dwindled to a few hundred. Today the four looms of Maine Heritage Weavers, which still make Bates-style bedspreads for a specialty market, are the only remnant of the textile economy. The great, clattering weave rooms are empty and silent.

Even earlier, during the prosperous postwar years, the millworker community had begun to fray. The forces of upward mobility, assimilation, and consumerism pulled the children of millworkers away from the older ways of survivance. Success offered the younger generation new educational paths, new jobs, and new life-choices. Indeed many Lewiston baby-boomers were urged by their parents not to enter the mills. Some recall being ostracized at school for their francophone upbringing and forbidden to speak French at work. The crisis of the mills intensified this erosion of community. Le Messager ceased publishing in 1967; Peck's department store closed its doors fifteen years later.

Both prosperity and decline, in short, undermined the world of the snowshoe clubs and St. Jean-Baptiste Day parades. The heyday of the millworker community was coming to an end.



They had one, two, three weave rooms. Five weave rooms on the other side of the canal. And the main building, where the museum is,



you could be sitting in the smoke house while the operator was taking a break, and it seemed like every once in a blue moon, the looms were in sync

and you could actually feel the whole building

moving back and forth."

Marc D'Amour

Today, looking over the empty halls and rusty looms, it may be hard to grasp just how innovative the Lewiston mills had been. Lowell and Lawrence all but died in the 1920s; Lewiston firms survived the Depression and prospered after World War II, buoyed by aggressive marketing and improved technology. It may also be hard to grasp the resilience of the millworker community. By the 1960s, some families had been sending their children into the mills (and welcoming them home in French) for four generations, even as they created unions, fought two world wars, moved up the hill, and bought their first television. For decades, millworkers and managers navigated the storms of competition and change with tenacity and inventiveness.

Over the past forty years, the gathering forces of globalization proved too turbulent; the mills failed. Yet in the end, what may be most striking is not the demise of the millworkers' world, but that it flourished for so long.



The end of the mills is not the end of the story. Facing a crisis in their history, Lewistonians responded both by moving forward and by looking backward.

On the one hand, the local economy has reinvented itself with the same entrepreneurial energy that once went into designing bedspreads or tinkering with looms. Lewiston-Auburn is currently the fastest-growing employment market in Maine. (The old Peck's department store now houses the service center for L.L. Bean.) The community is evolving too. In the past seven years, nearly five thousand refugees from Somalia and

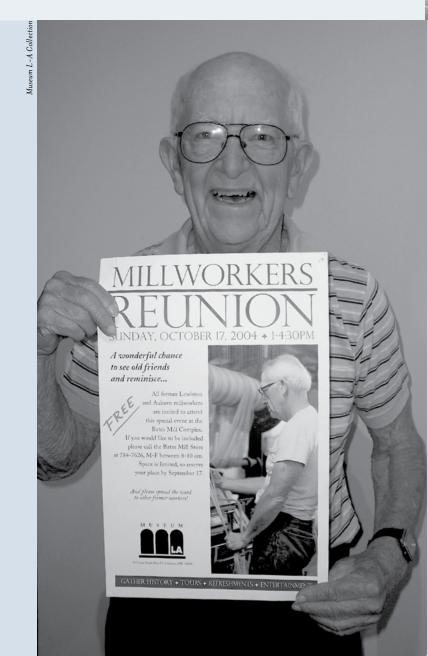
other African countries have brought new lifeways and languages to Lewiston. Fleeing civil war rather than agricultural depression bringing Islamic rather than Catholic tradi tions, their story both echoes and diverges from that of earlier migrants. Like Irish and Franco-Canadian newcomers, they have faced prejudice and economic displacement like the older immigrants, they rely on strong religious, family, and ethnic bonds for their survivance. New and old migrants have much to learn from one another as they forge a common history.

On the other hand, Lewistonians are looking back and reclaiming their past. Even as the last mills were closing in the 1990s, local preservationists, academics, workers, and the children of workers launched a remarkable, community-wide effort to preserve and honor the millworkers' world. St. Mary's, the decommissioned parish church of Little Canada, became the Franco-American Heritage Center. Lewiston Public Library and the University of Southern Maine, Lewiston-Auburn collected rich archives on the mill economy and Franco-American social life. (Materials from both institutions have contributed to this exhibit.)

Museum L-A has played an important role in the stewardship of community memory. Founded in 1996 to preserve and present the history of work and industrial community in the Twin Cities, the museum has collected looms and spinning frames, letters and photographs, union records and company newsletters. In recent years, it opened temporary quarters in the old weave rooms of the Bates Mill. It hosted a series of "millworker reunions" and launched an oral history project that yielded nearly 150 interviews—including the voices represented in this exhibit. The museum is itself led by a weaver's daughter, Rachel Desgrosseilliers, pictured at right with her father in 19??.

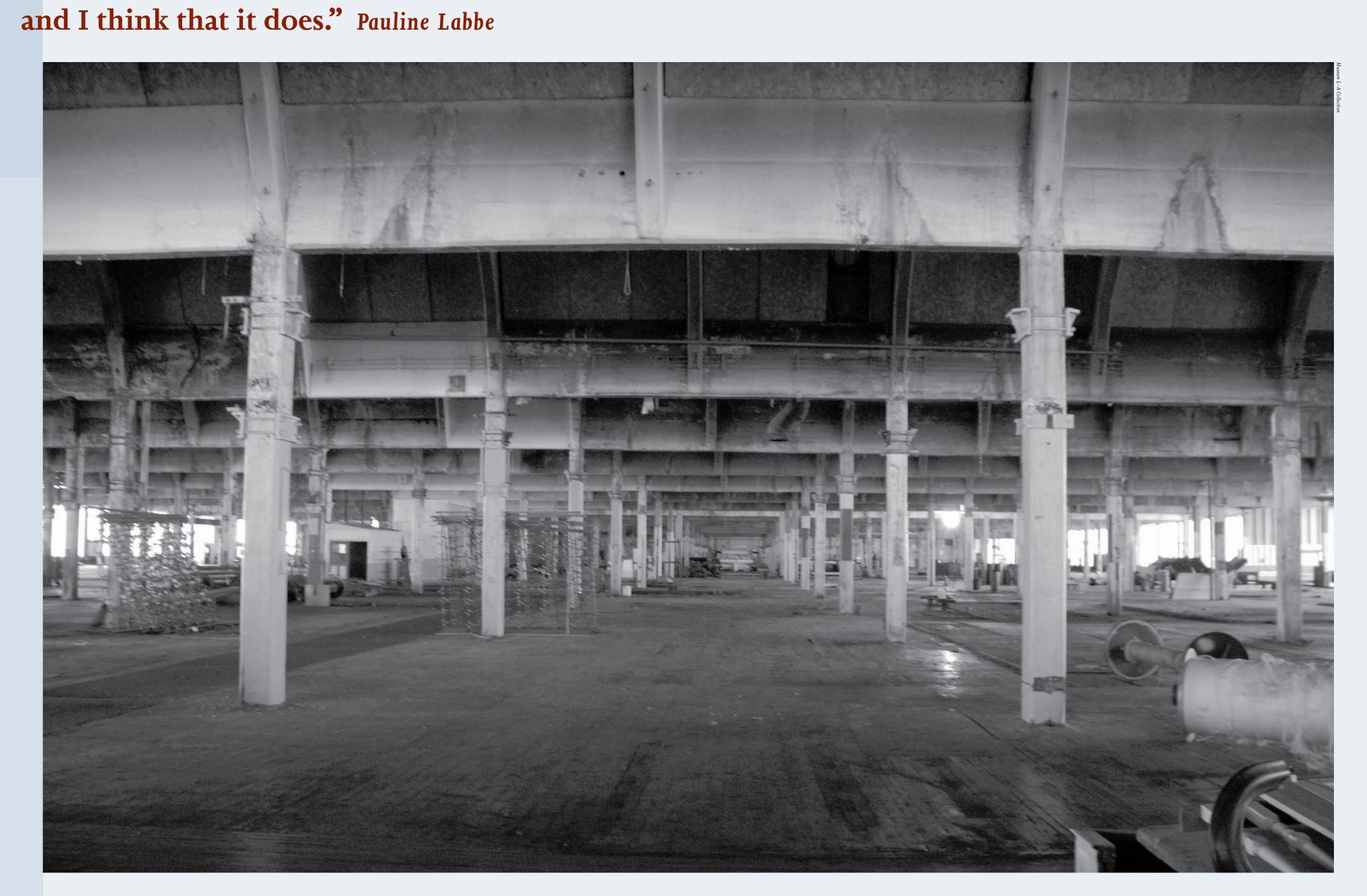
Yet Museum L-A aims to be more than just a conservator of workers' experiences and memories. It seeks to build a bridge between between the generations: to make the rich history of work and community in Lewiston Auburn a resource for civic renewal

"Weaving a World" shares the same goal. The result of three years of collaboration between Museum L-A and Bates College, this exhibit seeks to enrich the present by recovering the past. It is, we hope, part of a new chapter in the story that it tells.



"People were not accepted back then, and they are doing the same thing with the Somalis. They [say] history repeats itself

"Lewiston High School in the early 1960s wasn't exactly diverse by today's standards but there were lots of kids with names that weren't French...there was even one African-American guy. That's the time in my life I became aware of being a 'frog'. I lived with it, but I couldn't understand it because I always loved les reveillons, tourtierre, being able to understand and speak with my grandparents when they spoke both French and English, sometimes mixed in together!" Jan (Plourde) Barrett



"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... I did teach quite a few [people how to weave]. I even taught some [one]... from Latin America. ... 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, because who knows, someday they may need those mills. There will be no one left to teach them." Edwina Foster











