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Remembering life in a mill town

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REMEMBERING LIFE IN A MILL TOWN

By Tamara Hareven and Randolph Langenbach

Amoskeag means "abundance of fish" in Penacook Indian dialect. The Indian dwellers in the Northern New England region looked upon the Amoskeag Falls as a source of pure water and excellent fishing. Two centuries later, the fathers of the Industrial Revolution in America harnessed the waterpower of the same falls for the operation of their textile machinery.

By any standard, the Amoskeag was a giant. At its peak, in the early 20th century, it was the world's largest textile plant, employing up to 17,000 workers. It encompassed approximately 30 major mills, each of which would be equivalent to an entire textile mill elsewhere. Combined with numerous related buildings, these mills covered a total of 8 million square feet of floor space, an area almost equal to that contained in the World Trade Center in New York City. The Amoskeag housed a total of 74 separate cloth-making departments, three dye houses, 24 mechanical and electrical departments, three major steam power plants, and a hydroelectric power station. The company was almost totally self-sufficient in its operations and carried out all of its own design and construction, even of the largest mills. During the Civil War it manufactured rifles and, for a time, locomotives, as well as textile machinery.

Tamara Hareven is a sociologist who specializes in studies of the family; she teaches at Clark University and lectures at Harvard. Randolph Langenbach is a photographer and an authority on mill architecture. This article is drawn from their forthcoming book, "Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City," to be published by Pantheon this winter.

PHOTO/RANDOLPH LANGENBACH

The bell towers were visible from all directions, a prominent expression of the corporation's sense of pride.

The Amoskeag Company developed the town of Manchester into a city housing the world's largest textile factory, and dominated it over the entire century of the company's existence. There was hardly a person in Manchester between 1838, when construction began, and 1936, when the mills shut down, whose life was not in some way affected by the company. To the people who lived and worked there, the Amoskeag was a total institution, a closed and almost self-contained world. The company's policy of corporate paternalism penetrated almost every aspect of the workers' lives. The company viewed the employees as its "children" and expected loyalty in return. Many Amoskeag workers did develop a strong identification with the corporation. Most took pride in their work and in the fame of the company and its products. They were not indifferent to the esthetic quality of their environment nor to the institutional grandeur it conveyed. The subsequent physical deterioration symbolized to them the disappearance of their own world. As one former worker observes:

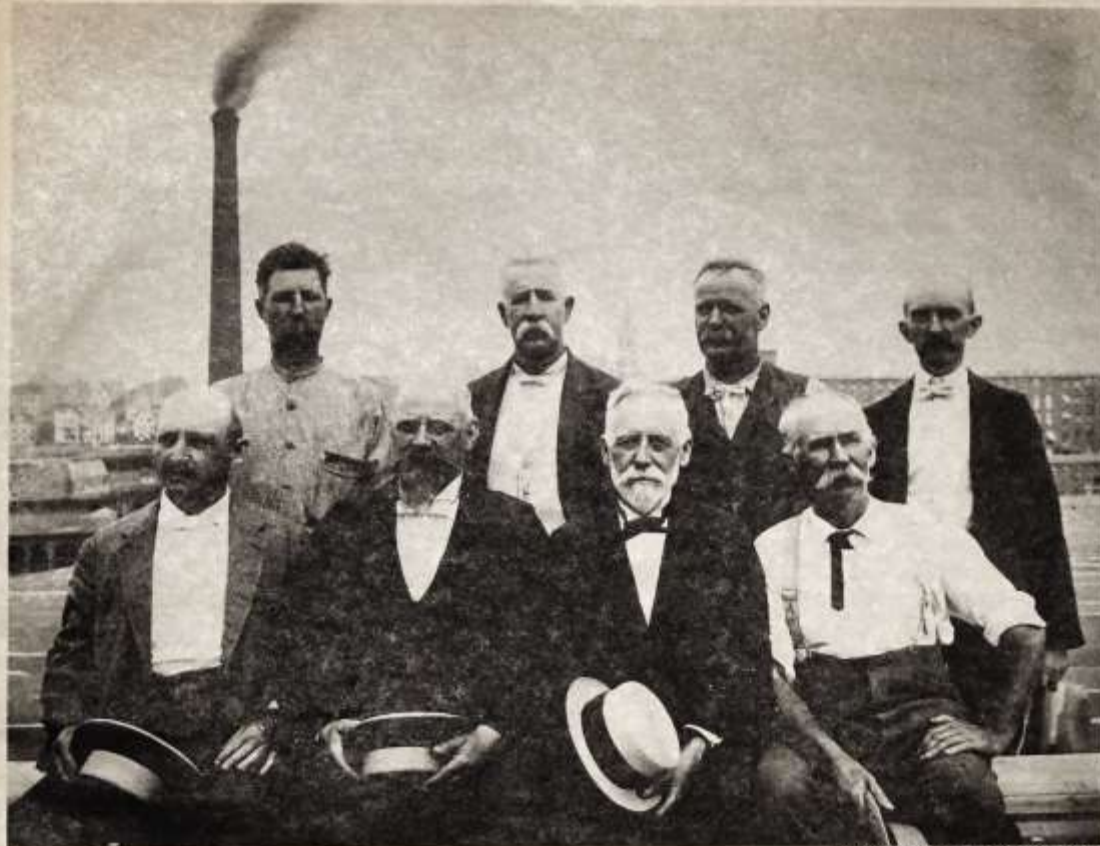
"It's too bad to see so many beautiful buildings in ruins and to think that so many people earned their living there. Today, everything is falling down. If our old parents, who worked so much in these mills, if they'd come back today and see how these mills are, it would really break their hearts."

Even now, 40 years after the final shutdown, many of the workers still call themselves "Amoskeag men." Yet, despite their close identification with the Amoskeag, they are painfully aware of its hold over their lives.

"It seemed like you were locked in when the Amoskeag owned the mills. If you told the boss to go to hell, you might as well move out of the city. The boss had the power to blackball you for the rest of your days. The only way you could get a job there again was if you disguised yourself. Some of them did that. They would wear glasses, grow a mustache, change their name. . . . It was that or starve to death," says a former weaver.

To many people, the view from Interstate-93 as it passes through Manchester, N.H., seems to typify America's 19th century industrial experience. The solid walls of red brick factories, which flank the Merrimack River for over a mile on one side and half a mile on the other, continue to captivate the viewer's attention despite their dilapidated state. To some, these buildings of the Amoskeag millyard are grim reminders of the "dark, satanic mills," and their exploitation of men, women, and children. To the former Amoskeag employees, who spent the better part of their lives in the mills, these empty shells are constant reminders of the all-encompassing industrial and social worlds in which they once lived.

It is the front of the millyard, facing the city, that dramatically underscores the architectural and social designs behind the Amoskeag. Archways, bridges, and wrought-iron gates pierce the front wall along the canal. Encased in that wall is the conspicuous bay window, which marked the agent's office, the symbol of the



PHOTO/MANCHESTER HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Top superintendents and engineers on the roof of a new mill in the year 1900.

Amoskeag's immediate center of control. A large cluster of boardinghouses, constructed in the style of federal townhouses and owned by the corporation, faced the solid wall of mills. The resulting design resembled a walled, medieval city, with the millyard fostering that same sense of enclosure.

The most striking aspects of the Amoskeag millyard were its organic unity and visual continuity, products of more than 75 years of almost continuous construction by the corporation's own engineers and craftsmen. It was a rare example in the United States of a large-scale, long-term, coordinated approach to urban design. Even the bricks used in later additions were carefully matched in color to those of the earliest buildings.

The millyard was open at each end, with tree-lined canals and railroad tracks running through its entire length on two different levels above the river. Instead of a long, straight avenue, however, a gentle curve softened the rigor of the design, dividing the millyard into identifiable spaces. These carefully designed and meticulously maintained spaces were a supreme expression of the unbounded confidence of the Victorian Age, a confidence rooted in the belief not only in continuing material progress but in the ability to overcome almost any social problem in the headlong rush for industrial improvement. The bell towers, which were deliberately aligned with the city streets so as to be visible from all directions, were the most prominent expression of the corporation's sense of pride.

Many of the youngest generation of Amoskeag workers — those alive today — are just one or two generations removed from the Industrial Revolution. Some heard firsthand accounts of this early industrial development from their parents. In their own lives, many experienced the wrenching movement from isolated village life in Ireland, Poland, Quebec, or even New England to a large, ethnically diverse, boisterous New England industrial town; and from the natural rhythms of farm work to the speed and rigid time schedules of the industrial world.

Most of these people preferred the industrial city to the "lost," mystical, rural community which, today, is often idealized as a harmonious and wholesome way of life. They had a realistic view of industrial life, with all its difficulties and exploitation; and they accepted the modern world into which they had been swept. In adapting themselves to it, they also modified it, wherever possible, to fit their own needs and traditions. The deep attachment that many formed to their work transcended daily routines. They developed an identity as industrial workers, and some approached even routine operations with the perfectionism of the craftsman.

Contrary to the prevailing popular idea that large factories and the urban environment instill individual anomie and social fragmentation, most of these people had a highly developed sense of place and formed tightly knit societies around their kin and ethnic associations. Despite their hardships and the conflicts they experienced, they shared the feelings they so frequently expressed about their lives in the mills: "We were all like a family."

The Amoskeag Manufacturing Company and Manchester, New Hampshire, were products of the new industrial order launched in New England by a closely knit group of Boston-based entrepreneurs. Manchester was modeled on the factory town of Lowell, Massachusetts, founded two decades earlier and developed by the Boston group of entrepreneurs. Control of the land on which the city grew gave the company control over the city's development during the entire century of the company's existence.

turn to page 10

Amoskeag *from page 9*

Like Lowell, Manchester founded a community of young women working together in the mills and living together in boardinghouses, within the social system of corporate paternalism — a philosophy of benevolent control — which treated workers as the "corporation's children" and which permeated all aspects of life: the organization of work, the strict management of the boardinghouses, the founding of charities, and the endowment of churches. In the mid-19th century, when the majority of the labor force consisted of young, unmarried women from rural New England, the company also regulated their behavior after working hours in order to reassure their parents. The boardinghouses were closed and locked at 10 p.m., church attendance was compulsory and alcoholic consumption was prohibited.

This so-called utopian period came to an end for most of the planned New England industrial communities shortly before the Civil War. Irish immigrant families willing to work for lower wages replaced the New England mill girls, and speculative housing gradually replaced corporation boardinghouses.

The Amoskeag also began to absorb German and Swedish immigrants in small numbers, mainly as skilled craftsmen. In addition, the Amoskeag brought in many skilled textile mechanics and dye experts from Scotland, sometimes to teach various skills to the local workers. Starting in the 1870s, French-Canadian immigrants, driven from rural Quebec by land scarcity, depleted farms, and poverty, began to enter the labor force of the Amoskeag mills.

Poles started coming to Manchester, first from other New Hampshire and New England communities, and later directly from Poland.

Greeks began to appear in Manchester around the turn of the century; and by 1920, they constituted as large a proportion of the Amoskeag's labor force as did the Poles. But like the French Canadians, these later immigrants never achieved particular strength or influence.

In 1910, in response to the new ethnic diversity of the work force, the Amoskeag launched a corporate welfare and efficiency program. The paternalistic measures were devised to attract additional immigrants to the city, to socialize them to industrial work, to instill loyalty to the company, to curb labor unrest, and to prevent unionization.

PHOTO/RANDOLPH LANGENBACH

The boardinghouses owned by the corporation faced a solid wall of mills.

Reaching out to the workers' families, the Amoskeag Company established a playground, and sponsored a visiting nurses' service. As an incentive to greater work stability, the Amoskeag also introduced a home-ownership plan, offering house lots for sale to workers who had been in the company's employ for five years or longer. These workers could pay off half the mortgage for $1. After another five years, they could liquidate the balance for another dollar. The company also helped workers secure loans from a local bank for the construction of a house. One of the Amoskeag's most important contributions to its workers' welfare was undoubtedly the rental privileges in corporation tenements. The "corporations," as the workers called them, were three-to-five-story attached brick houses strung along the streets leading down from the center of the city to the millyard. These substantial and attractive structures, with high ceilings and hardwood floors, were originally built as boardinghouses for the first mill girls. Some of this company housing was subsequently remodeled into family tenements, while the rest continued to serve as boardinghouses for single workers. The rent, which amounted to about $1 per room per month, was always substantially lower than the market rate for the rest of the city. The buildings were carefully kept up by the Amoskeag's maintenance crews. But admission was not automatic — to qualify for occupancy, workers had to have large families with more than one member working in the mills. Their names were kept on waiting lists for many months — sometimes years — before their turn came.

Other workers rented city housing, and a significant number owned their own homes. By 1910, only about 15 to 20 percent of the Amoskeag's labor force lived in the "corporations."

The efficiency program, inaugurated simultaneously with the welfare program at the peak of the corporation's expansion, introduced an employment office, intended to centralize the hiring process of all workers and keep a systematic record of all hirings, firings, and reasons for leaving. The employment office was management's effort to control the size and diversity of the departments in the mill and to curb labor turnover. Having a personnel file in the employment office for each individual worker also helped keep a check on the worker's background and activities. The employment office thus fulfilled the dual function of centralizing hiring and helping screen out unwanted workers, especially blacklisted workers and "agitators."

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The corporation's paternalistic employee programs and the overall Amoskeag "spirit" effectively discouraged unionization in the Amoskeag until the First World War. The United Textile Workers of America (UTW) made their first inroads into Manchester in 1917, a time when labor shortages coincided with high demand for production, both due to the war effort. The union formed several locals among the skilled textile occupations, but its foothold in the corporation remained limited. The corporation never conceded a closed shop, and the workers were not allowed to collect union dues in the workrooms.

Although the Amoskeag made the greatest profits in its history during World War I, industrial demobilization followed; and the Amoskeag, along with most other New England textile corporations, began to experience a gradual decline. Southern competition, antiquated machinery, inefficiency, and high labor costs were all factors. The Amoskeag gradually curtailed production, tapered its labor force, and cut wages. Many workers were fired, others were laid off temporarily, and still others had to join the reserve labor force. An increase in working hours and a 20 percent wage cut in 1922 precipitated Amoskeag's first long-term general strike.

Growing job insecurity drastically changed the work atmosphere and the pace of production in the mills, adding to the demoralization that followed in the wake of the 1922 strike. In

PHOTO/MANCHESTER HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

The numerous buildings contained 8 million square feet of floor space, an area almost equal to that of the World Trade Center in New York City.

earlier years, many workers left the Amoskeag on their own accord in search of better jobs. But in the post-war period, most workers left because they were laid off or dismissed. By the 1920s — a period of prosperity in the United States — the workers in the Amoskeag were already rehearsing for the Great Depression.

In September 1935, the Amoskeag shut down operations, with the proclaimed intention of reopening. In December of the same year, the corporation applied for reorganization in the New Hampshire bankruptcy court. In July 1936, the master of the court ordered liquidation of the company's assets. The Amoskeag's shutdown in the midst of the Depression destroyed the economic base of a city of 75,000.

Despite declining wages and increasing job insecurity, most Amoskeag workers preferred the industrial world to farm life, whose drudgery and isolation they never forgot. In Manchester, they were part of a network of New England industrial communities, so that in times of need, they could seek alternative jobs in other towns. These people confronted economic insecurity with hardened realism. They were prepared to face disaster as a normal part of life. But their fatalism did not make them passive. They struggled to improve their lot — or at least to keep from slipping backwards. The remainder of the time they rolled with the punches.

Raymond Dubois

Fifty-nine-year-old "Raymond Dubois" (not his real name) is now a municipal official of Manchester, having worked for the city since World War II. He came from a family of mill people who lived in the Amoskeag "corporation" tenements.

I was brought up in the area of the mill. All our people were mill people, and we didn't know anything else but mills. We didn't know anything else existed, really. I suppose if my people had worked for the Public Service Company, I probably would have worked for them, but the only people we knew were mill people. We lived near the mills, we carried dinners for our parents, and we just were accustomed to the mills. It seemed like this was where we would fall in when we got old enough. I went in a few months after I became 16.

You had an eight-hour stretch, a half-hour dinner, and you couldn't smoke. There was absolutely no smoking in the mill and in the millyard. The millyard was fenced in and there was a watchman at the gate, so you couldn't run out of the building into the streets even if your particular building was situated near the streets, which mine was. As a matter of fact, I did do that a couple of times, and I almost got fired. So you went eight hours without smoking, and most of the people in those days smoked. Not women, though; just the men.

It was as though you were in jail for eight hours, and you knew there was just no escaping. Fortunately, the people you worked for were in the same predicament, so they would try to get some pleasure out of it with joking.

The only thing I did like was my pay. It was good money at that time.

My job was to wind the spinning frames. When the frames were running, they'd run down; then there's a wheel that you crank, which winds the whole carriage up again. After the bobbins were doffed, we'd rewind the frames so that they'd start a new set of bobbins. Then they'd load them with the filling (unspun cotton). That was my function.

turn to page 26

Amoskeag *from page 11*

They used to use older women to put the empty bobbins on because they were cheaper labor. We'd pick off the full ones, and they'd put new ones up there; that's the process. People at the time wouldn't have taken that menial job if they couldn't actually support a family on it. In this room in particular, we had two or three older women who worked for about $12 a week. I was getting 38 cents an hour, and that came to $15.58 a week. For a young boy, this was adequate pay. Since I was still living at home, I gave my mother my pay, and I think she gave me a dollar and a half a week. It was a lot of money at that time.

We considered the overseers far above us, but they didn't abuse us. They were quite good. In the room that I worked in, we were only three men with 40 girls. All of those girls were like mothers to me; they sort of guided me. I don't think the overseers were as strict with the women or expected as much from them because the women were as temperamental then as they are now — they haven't changed. So that if they bawled a woman out, she'd probably go into a corner and cry or something, whereas a man would take it.

The other two men I worked with, the second hand and the roving boy, taught me my job. It only took about two or three days to actually learn the job, but it took me about a month to develop the speed that was required to keep up with the production. I was young, fast, and strong, and I found the job to be very, very easy. I was so fast that I had time to spare. Any job that they chose in the mills, they regulated it so that it would keep you going. But at 16, you can double the speed of any older person, and I'm naturally fast, so that I had a lot of time to spare. As a matter of fact, I got into some trouble because of that. Of course, if I had been working, I wouldn't have had time to do it. The aisles are narrow between the frames; and if you go down between the frames with a cart to take the bobbins off and there's a girl bent over doffing, you might rap her in the can with the cart, and in turn, she'd poke you or something. You'd end up wrestling in that aisle, and your backside might hit a couple of fillings and knock the bobbins off!

The jobs weren't unbearable physically. Nobody kept behind you, pushing for production. For instance, in our spinning room, we doffed once an hour, which meant taking the bobbins off and putting new bobbins on. If you did that each night eight times, it was accepted; if you doffed seven times, somebody goofed. If you doffed nine times, somebody's driving you.

The noise in my room wasn't the kind of noise that you get in the weave room. The weave room has a sort of snapping, pounding noise; ours was merely wheels turning and the noise of the bobbins spinning, so that you had sort of a hum. I don't recall being affected by it. But once in a while I went into a weave room to deliver dinner, and I just couldn't stand the noise. I don't know how anybody else could. Gosh almighty, it still exists today. It seemed as though the sides of the building were shaking.

It was amazing, in a sense, that every gate in the mill had a watchman. It was almost regimental. When you came out of that gate, if they were suspicious at all of your taking something out of the mill, they'd search you. So if you wanted to steal a few yards of cloth or a couple of bobbins or roping or things of that nature, you stood a good chance of being searched at the gate.

You never saw a butt in the millyard; you never saw anybody light a match. You can well imagine that a good fire would wipe out the whole mill.

They had cockroaches three inches long, and they had rats. As a matter of fact, the University of New Hampshire biology classes used to come down and catch the rats in jars and work on them all the time. And the drinking water — I don't know if they took the river water or not, but on every sink in the mill, there was one tap where it was written in several languages: "Do not drink this water." I assume it had to be river water.

People who went to work at the Amoskeag worked there until they died or until they got too old to work. Some lived in the corporation tenements. To live in them, you had to work in the Amoskeag. A son would move in with the father; and when his father died, the children would take over the tenement. In fact, a fellow told me one day that if he could buy all the real estate here, he would buy those tenements because they would never be empty.

There were some new corporations especially for bosses and their relatives. When I was a young boy, I felt that those that lived in the corporations were better off than we were. They were up one grade higher than us. We lived in a [privately owned] block right across from the new corporations on Hollis street. We were very crowded. No bathtub, just a toilet and sink. The new corporations were beautiful. In those days they had vines and porches, everything that we didn't have. There were a lot of people and a lot of kids in those houses, though. So the lawns and walkways were mostly always beat up, because the kids played in that area; but it didn't seem to me that the kids were as destructive then as they are today. Not that we were any better than they are today, but I don't think there was so much vandalism then.

turn to page 28

Amoskeag *from page 26*

People in the street, people that worked in stores, used to go to boardinghouses to eat along with mill workers. They put on family-style meals; you were glad to get a fork in your hand to reach for something. I can remember going to one of the boardinghouses; at 50 cents for a dinner, you could have all you wanted. They had potatoes, sometimes hash brown, sometimes mashed or boiled; they had meat; and when the blueberries came in, they'd have blueberry pie. It was boardinghouse-style, a long room and a table, just like at a banquet. There were people that ran boardinghouses for the Amoskeag workers all their lives. Some would have a whole building: some of the family would be working in the Amoskeag, the wife would run the boardinghouse, and they would have rooms up above.

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Nationality has played a part in this city since I was old enough to realize what was happening. Up to this date, it hasn't changed much. The French and the Irish always looked down on the Greeks, regarded them as the foreigners, because many of them that came into the mills couldn't speak English. And there was always a continuous banter between the French and the Irish. For many years it was worse than today, because now there's a lot of intermarriage, and people don't joke the same way any more about race and background. I found that out of all the people that I worked with, the nationality that I liked the best was the Greeks, in spite of the fact that many of them couldn't speak English. They seemed to be a jolly people and also considerate and generous.

Parents at that time stressed that you should marry someone of your own nationality. This was very, very strong. If you were a French-American and you married an Irishman, it was almost a disgrace. They accepted having ordinary friends, but they always questioned it if you went out with an Irish girl.

I think immigrants were kept down, because if there was a choice to promote somebody, it wouldn't be the immigrant. You'd have to be exceptional. They'd have to need them for a job that nobody else would touch. If, for instance, an individual was an exceptional man with his hands, if he was a good mill worker, he might receive better pay but only if they didn't have anybody else that could do it better. If a boss was Irish, he took care of the Irish; if he was French, he'd take care of the French. At that time, the French and the Irish were the stronger factor here in the city, and the Greeks and Polish did the work.

My mother was one of the few that didn't work in the mills after she was married. She was an exception to the rule. This was the reason why my father worked so hard. I think that most men preferred their wives not to work, but in many cases people wanted to make a better life for themselves.

In order to buy a home, a man's wife had to work; and most families where the women did work did indeed own a home or property or something, much like today.

I can remember my father working in the mill, seven days a week without a day off, without a vacation. He did that for seven years, without loafing one day.

That guy had to go to heaven! He worked in the mill on Sundays. It's hard to believe. He worked from 6 in the morning till 6 at night, and I carried his dinners in. Then the hours got better; we went to 40 hours. That eliminated a lot of this slavery, I'll tell you. He died at the age of 58. Of course, some people worked as hard as he did, and they lived to be 90. I can't say the job killed him, but I can't say that it helped him either.

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Personally, I think when we work hard, we get into a rut, a routine. I think that if he had taken a day off, he would have felt guilty. It's a terrible thing. He just got into that routine. My father wasn't illiterate, but he was probably only one step above being illiterate. He could read the newspaper, and he could write a little. He didn't have one of the higher-paying jobs, but working so many hours gave him a fair pay, so that eventually we were able to buy a house. I think I was about 14 years old when they finally bought that house.

We came from Lowell originally; and when we came to Manchester about 1926, he had been out of work and had experienced the fear of his family not being able to have the things that they needed. I think he always had that fear. This is what gave him his drive. While he could make the money, he was making it; while he could get the work, he was working — all because there were times when he wanted to work and he couldn't.

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I was in the Marine Corps, I went to war, and I saw action. My outlook after being in the service was that we had a very limited horizon here, in terms of being able to make good lives for ourselves, because of our limited education.

For years my father had chickens; he had a hundred chickens and a garden, and I helped him with that. Most everybody around this area had chickens. Many people had a cow. It was very common to see a guy walking down the street with his cow. One guy in the neighborhood had a bull to serve the cows. It would look kind of foolish today.

People had more gardens then. They ate more vegetables and greens. I think that the people ate more at that time, but they didn't eat as many fancy foods as they do today, such as cakes and ice cream.

We did have relief. The city did provide for those that were suffering, just as they do today. But it was a stigma, then, to apply for relief. Your neighbors would look down on you if you had to apply for relief.

You didn't seem to complain so much then. You accepted it. You didn't know things could be better. You thought this was what life was all about. You didn't think that there was a Florida where the weather was better, without winters where you froze to death. We didn't know there was another world. We thought the whole world was like what we had. I really thought this, probably till I was 21 years old. We didn't have cars, we weren't educated, and we didn't know anything that happened outside the little world that we lived in. It's amazing what you can learn after you leave school.

I find that as you get older, if you reminisce about the old days, and you're not looking forward to a better way of life, better things, you're getting ready to die. Many people that I worked with talk about the days gone by, and these fellows are getting on for 50 to 55 years old. They're down, they're practically dead. You get a man 65 to 70 years old who is looking forward to something — he's very much alive. I think we always have to improve, have something to look forward to. Even now, I'm looking for a better job.

Lottie Sargent

Lottie Sargent was born in Manchester in 1924. Her father's side of the family consisted of a long line of mill workers, his maternal grandparents having come over from Scotland to work in Manchester. Lottie still cherishes the paisley shawl that her great-grandmother brought with her to New Hampshire.

Lottie's mother died when Lottie was still an infant; and after her father's remarriage, she spent an unhappy childhood in her stepmother's household. Her childhood suffering was intensified by the shutdown of the Amoskeag and the Depression. Her subsequent story is one of survival and pulling herself up. She worked on a variety of jobs until she reached 17, when she started to work in the Chicopee Manufacturing Company Mill, which took over one of the former Amoskeag Mill buildings after the shutdown. She spent the next 25 years there. In addition to her mill job, she held a night job as a salesperson for many years in order to help support her children.

Lottie lost her job when the mill, then owned by the Johnson & Johnson Co., was shut down suddenly in 1975. Like several hundred of the Chicopee workers, she relived the shutdown of the Amoskeag as a result. She is now working in a textile mill in Suncook, N.H.

I really hoped that my children would be something better. Nobody wants their child to go back in the mill. Nobody. It's no life; it's just survival. If you're something like a teacher, you have prestige, you have money, you have a decent place to live. When you're a peasant, it's a roof over your

turn to page 30

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Amoskeag *from page 29*

head, and bread and butter, and lots of beer if you can afford it.

Probably 99 percent of us went back into the mills because there was nothing else. I wanted to go into nursing, but I got married [laughs]. So I went back to the mills instead of becoming a nurse. But I'm still a nurse. You can't take it away from me. I took all the courses; I can still do everything. I didn't work as a nurse because I didn't finish my training. You can't have a husband and children and be in training; it takes three years.

My husband and three kids and I lived on a farm with his mother. We didn't have a car, so for 14 years I had to walk to the bus to get to work. He was gone in the service almost 10 years, and I was all alone with the family. We had all kinds of animals, and I had to take care of everything. I had a milk route and sold eggs. I made all my daughter's clothes and canned [the produce from] our three-acre garden. We all had to work. We cut wood — I'd split a cord of wood an hour. Then when we needed money and he was out of work, I worked at Chicopee.

My father's family were mill workers from Scotland. My mother's parents disowned her when she married my father, mainly because he was part Indian and not so much because he was a mill worker, although people looked down their noses at mill workers.

My mother died when I was 9 months old. My older brother was 16 or 17 years older than me, and at the time he quit school and went to work. My brother next to me was put in the children's home, but I was too young. I think you had to be 3. The only people my father knew were people that patronized clubs and bars, so he would have women he met there — bar ladies — come over and babysit for me; and when he came back from work, he would find me down in some bar, climbing around or curled up in a chair sound asleep. They were the only babysitters my father could afford.

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When I was old enough, they put me into the Webster Street Children's Home, and I stayed there until I was 7. I was a very lonely little girl and a very naughty little girl — very sassy, very fresh, very smart. If I could antagonize anybody to get attention, I would. So I ended up having a room of my own. I didn't have any mother, and without a mother you don't have very much. My father worked, and on weekends he wanted a good time, so he didn't see his children too much. Besides, the people at the orphanage would press him for money.

My father and my brother George, between the two of them, were making $18 a week. They were buying their own food, paying for their room, plus they were paying $7 apiece for my brother and me in the children's home. That's how much it was at the home in those days — $7 a week apiece. When you add it up, it's almost impossible for anyone to do anything.

My father met my stepmother in the orphanage. She had two children there, too. I can remember asking her, "Are you going to be my mother?" when she came to visit her boys. I knew she was going out with my father. When there was no one there for me, I'd go over and stand near her, and the matron would say, "Get away from her! Get away from her!" I would say, "She's going to be my mother." "Oh no she isn't. Get away from her!" So I was quite happy when my father and stepmother first got married. It didn't turn out the way I thought it was going to. I was the only girl, so naturally I did the housework, and I did the washing, and I did this, and did that. I worked in the garden, took care of the kids, took care of the neighbors' kids. Anytime anybody wanted anything, it was "Lottie will do it."

When I was a child, my father worked in No. 4 Mill. I used to take lunches into the mills and spend the whole day there. Some of the other kids would come, too; and we'd walk the whole two miles through the mills, through the overpasses, the underpasses, and everywhere. No. 10 Mill is where we particularly liked to go, because we could look down and see the brownies swimming in the mill canal. The brownies are the strong young men that go swimming all year-round, and in the summertime they swam down there with no clothes. In those days, you just didn't do those things. Today, of course, it's nothing.

My father worked most of his life in the cloth room. Everybody in my family was a cloth inspector. Way back they came from Scotland to be wool sorters and inspectors. My brother worked downstairs in the card room. The card room was a terrible job, filthy; the cloth room was always nice, although they didn't pay as much because it was a cleaner job. It was fantastic to walk into the cloth room. They had all different colors of toweling, and it traveled on rollers, all the way up. The whole ceiling, the whole room, was just floating in cloth. Eventually, it probably ended up being steamed and put on smaller rollers and cut, but I never saw that operation. All I could see was mile after mile of cloth, going over and under rollers, all over the room.

turn to page 34

Amoskeag *from page 30*

There is no way to describe a full-blown weave room going. The whole place shakes back and forth in rhythm. The noise is something you've never heard before. I tried to get my son a job in Chicopee once, and they went through the cloth room where I worked and opened the door to the weave room. My son walked in and turned around and walked back out. He said, "You don't work in noise like that." The noise scares you. And here I was, a little 7-year-old, walking mile after mile through all these weave rooms.

turn to page 38

TEXTILE TERMS

Battery — the device on a loom designed to change the filling bobbin in the shuttle automatically without stopping the loom. This invention, which came into use around 1900, revolutionized work in the weave room.

Bobbin — the wooden spool on which the roving or yarn is wound. Bobbins come in different shapes and sizes depending on the use.

Bobbin winder — a machine designed to transfer the yarn onto small filling bobbins; for use in the shuttle.

Card — a large machine with drums covered with wire teeth used for disentangling and laying parallel the fibers of wool or cotton; preparatory to spinning.

Doffing — the process of removing filled bobbins from spindles in spinning.

Filling — the threads running crosswise in a fabric.

Hand loom — a power loom in which the filling bobbins must be inserted by hand into the shuttle.

Piece goods — goods bought by the piece; the set unit containing from 24 to 100 yards.

Roving — the process preceding spinning which introduces a twist to the sliver.

Sliver — a long ribbon of cotton, wool, etc., drawn out by means of carding, combing, or drawing and run into a can. The sliver has no twist and clings together by the natural crimps of the fibers.

Spinning frame — the machine for spinning the roving into yarn.

Twisting — the process by which two or more threads are twisted into a single thread.

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Times were very, very hard. When my father married my stepmother, she had two kids and he had three, and then they had two themselves, plus there was an old man who worked with my father; and we were all living together. My father took in everybody — everybody lived off him.

In order to survive, my father practically lived in a club. He used to sell numbers tickets, and I was one of the runners (laughter). This was a good many years ago; my father is long dead. I had to learn the back streets of Manchester.

It was the worst part of the Depression, and nobody had anything. In 1936 the mills went out, and the world stopped for everybody. A lot of our neighbors, a lot of the men, committed suicide. There was nothing. There was no food. I really don't know how we made it.

When the Amoskeag shut down, everybody had to do everything they could. I was 10 or 12, and they sent me out to work. I took care of kids, I did housework. I also worked in the gardens. We had to sell the produce in order to get enough money to live on.

At one time when they were working in the mills, they were making pretty good money. After World War I, though, they started cutting down; then they had a couple of strikes, and that's when my father went on the police force. The mill was the only thing in Manchester. There was nothing else; and when it closed, everybody was desperate. One of the men who committed suicide lived two doors up from me. He was from Sweden, and there were five children. They had left the old gaslights in the corporation tenements, and he went up to the attic and gassed himself.

My father felt terrible at Christmastime. He cried because he couldn't give us what he would have liked to give us, but usually he tried very hard. There wasn't any money, but everybody was drinking. My father used to make home brew in the house. When it is fermenting, it smells terrible. Everybody

turn to page 56

Amoskeag *from page 38*

made home brew in those days. Nobody went out and bought bottled beer or bottled wine. We would make root beer in the summertime, and sometimes all the bottles would pop and there would be root beer all over the place. We were too poor to afford anything like lemonade, so my stepmother would mix vinegar and water and sugar; it was very tasty.

□

They had a Coathouse factory in Manchester that used to make clothing; and while I was going to high school, I wore Coathouse clothing. It was like a sewing project, a WPA for women. A lot of women didn't have any husbands and had to support themselves, and they did that instead of being on welfare.

We kids didn't get many heavy meat meals. One thing that all of us resented: my stepmother and father used to have steak and pork chops at night after we went to bed. It's not that we didn't have enough to eat; we did. It's that they had the better life after we went to bed. We used to sit on the stairs and look down. After all, you can't help smelling steak and pork chops. But the man that worked was supposed to get the best. I wouldn't ever do that with my family, but many times I gave my husband all the meat. I guess I ended up doing that because it was expected of me. He didn't know it then, but he knows it now. He wouldn't have allowed it; he would have given me half of what he had. That's the place of the mother: you give and don't take. Women are getting away from that now; with each age group it gets better, but I'm still old-fashioned.

I studied paleontology and I'm a mineralogist. As you go back in the history of mankind, women don't exist. They were thrown the bones that were left over; and in this century, we are standing up and saying, "We're hungry, too. We don't just want the bones; we want half of your steak."

It was terrible, trying to support yourself when the mills went out. My brother went to work for Chicopee in 1938. I was living with him then. He was working in the cloth room. Then my father and my other brothers went in, and finally I went in. My father was fit to be tied. "You don't want to work in the mill," he said. "There are other jobs. You can do something else." But it was before World War II, and there wasn't anything else, unless you wanted to go to the shoe shop. I had a family by then. My husband was gone in the service, and we needed bread and butter. I was alone with my children.

My father made sure that I got into the cloth room because there was a better atmosphere there. I was a quality inspector all those years. If you asked me how to do the job, I could never tell you; you just know. My father was the same way. I just feel cloth and I know.

□

All the former Amoskeag workers worked in the Chicopee. They used to work a good many hours in the Amoskeag, but from what I ever heard or observed, they never really worked that hard. At Chicopee they had to work hard. They were always under pressure. The Amoskeag was not a piecework place. The Chicopee was all piecework; and when you're on piecework, you're nothing but a machine.

When the southerners [from one of Johnson & Johnson's southern plants] came in, we had quite a turnover of management. They treated women better. They were gentlemen. They claimed they didn't discriminate against women in pay, that women doing the same jobs as men did not get paid less. I never dwelt on it that much. When you work that hard, you don't know how much anybody else is making, because you really have to push to make your own.

At Chicopee, we didn't work only with our hands. I did statistical analysis. It puts you in a different position. I worked out of the standards office, measuring faults in the cloth. I kept track of mistakes, the statistics of the cloth. I was hated. I told men that their work was no good, that they'd made a mistake. My father worked in the same room as me in the Chicopee, and I did statistics on his work. If his work was no good, I told him so, just like anybody else, and my father didn't like me either (laughs). But that's how I am. You have to do your job.

I had worked 25 years when they closed. When the Chicopee shut down, I was one of the first ones to leave. I was a pencil pusher, so they didn't need me. I kept telling the guys, "I'll be the first one." "Oh, no," they'd say, "they got to keep you." But they were wrong, and now they're not any better off than I am, because they haven't got any jobs either.

Bette Skrzyszowski

Bette Skrzyszowski, who is 52 years old, works in Manchester's last surviving textile mill, the Waumbec Mill, also located in a former Amoskeag building, as a battery hand on the night shift. Born in rural New Hampshire to parents native to New England, she came to Manchester in the late '30s.

Bette worked as a battery hand in the Chicopee Mill until its shutdown in February 1975. She raised her two sons while working the night shift by sharing child care with her husband, who worked the day shift. She is now so accustomed to working the night shift that she is unable to sleep at night when she is not working.

We visited Bette immediately following the announcement of the shutdown of the Chicopee.

You've worked all this time, and now you see it shutting down. You go up the aisle and see one loom running here, back and forth, and then stop, all empty.

When I first started, all of the looms were run on belts. In the weave room downstairs, there's a shaft on the ceiling, and the belts used to run from there down to the looms. It was like walking through a forest, it was so dark.

Everything is so quiet in there now. Only about 300 looms are going. You can hear some noise, but you can imagine what it was like when all of them were running. What a noise it would make!

This week some workers were laid off Tuesday, and some were laid off today. Next week there'll be a layoff in mid-week, and then another one on Friday. They let you know a day ahead of time exactly when you'll finish.

People don't say very much when they're leaving. They're sad, and a lot of them cry. It's a bad thing when there are no jobs to be had. If only you could say, "Well, the heck with it. I'll go out and get another job." But there's just no place to go.

Now you know your time has come, and you feel lost. You just have no place to turn. I've spent half my life in the mill, really, because I'm 50 years old, and I'm going on 23 years in the mill. I don't know how to explain it, but you're connected with the machinery. It's a part of you; it's your life. I love the mills, I love to work.

Three-quarters of the time the mill has been here, there's been a big turnover of help. That is the main reason for the low production. The young people, they come in the mill, and they're there for that week's pay. They're not in there for an honest day's work.

If you gave me my choice, if you said today, "Which would you rather have, a thousand dollars right here or the mills starting up tomorrow?" I'd rather have the mills start up. I'd feel secure then; I'd have a job. I'd know what I was going to do. I'd know that I could handle it. This way, I've got to go out and start over. ■

A photographic exhibit, "A Sense of Place: The Architectural Legacy of the Industrial Revolution in England and America," will be on display in Boston City Hall from Oct. 6 to 30. The Amoskeag mill buildings and workers are among the subjects of the 80 exhibited murals.