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An early twentieth-century photo of workers unloading large bales of rags for use in paper manufacturing at the Eastern Mill. Social history methodologies have helped capture the stories of laboring classes in a variety of places across America. Oral history adds to these perspectives in understanding more recent working class experiences, such as mill closings in Maine in the twentieth century. Maine Folklife Center.

THE POWER OF PLACE IN MEMORY: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE EASTERN CORPORATION IN BREWER, MAINE

BY PAULEENA MACDOUGALL WITH AMY L. STEVENS

"If preservationists are to be true to the insights of a broad, inclusive social history encompassing gender, race and class . . . it means emphasizing the building types — such as tenement, factory, union hall or church — that have housed the working people's everyday lives."[1] *This article introduces a special issue of* MAINE HISTORY *on the state's paper industry and particularly the fortunes of the Eastern Fine Paper Company in Brewer. The mill, which closed in 2005, was an economic and cultural mainstay of this Maine town, and in this article MacDougall and Stevens trace the history of a unique project that documented, from a variety of perspectives, the closure and its effect on the lives of the people who, for generations, had worked and lived in the mill community. Pauleena MacDougall is director of The Maine Folklife Center and faculty associate in Anthropology at the University of Maine. She received her Ph.D. in American history from the University of Maine in 1995 and has published widely on Penobscot Indian language, culture, and history, including* THE PENOBSCOT DANCE OF RESISTANCE: TRADITION IN THE HISTORY OF A PEOPLE *(University of New England Press). Amy Stevens, a lifelong Brewer resident, received her M.A. in history from the University of Maine in 2007 and worked for the Old York Historical Society, the Maine Folklife Center, Primary Source, and the American Folk Festival in Bangor, researching topics of special interest to Maine schools and Maine curriculums. She teaches elementary school.*

IN 2005, shortly after the Eastern Fine Paper Company in Brewer permanently closed its doors, we began contacting former workers to see if they would be interested in taking part in an oral history project with the Maine Folklife Center at the University of Maine. I had visited the mill for the first time with a group of arts and cultural organization representatives who had been invited by Drew Sachs, Brewer's Economic Development Director, to tour the mill and think about it as a multi-use space. At that time, Brewer was looking into ways to use the buildings, having decided that paper manufacturing was no longer an option. I knew from newspaper reports that several hundred people had lost their jobs, causing considerable hardship. I had also been thinking

that such an important Maine industry, based on Maine's woods and water resources, should be documented in ways similar to folklorist Edward D. "Sandy" Ives's documentation of the lumber industry in Maine.[2]

Brewer might not be considered a mill town in the same way as Millinocket, because it is located near Bangor, a center of population with various employment opportunities. However, the loss of a hundred-year-old mill caused considerable hardship to the city and its residents through lost tax revenues and wages. Workers in the paper industry earned considerably more than most workers in Maine. Forest economist Lloyd Irland reported that in 1997 a paper worker made an average wage of $47,585. Workers in other manufacturing industries averaged $31,721 per year, while workers in lumber and wood industries averaged $24,448 per year.[3] The location of the mill on the Penobscot River in South Brewer created a unique community of employee housing and small businesses that catered to the employees. A clothing store, luncheonettes, a grocery store, and a tavern all lost their customers when the mill closed. Eastern Fine was one of several Maine mills that either closed or scaled back around the turn of the twentieth century. With this important industry declining across the state, I conducted a series of interviews and documentary research in order to preserve the story of this place.

I arranged an initial interview and mill tour with engineer Richmond Smith. He, Drew Sachs, and photographer Bill Kuykendall from the University of Maine walked through the mill. I had a floor plan and numbered each room so I could coordinate the information Smith gave me with the building. Kuykendall photographed the rooms and their contents, with special attention to items and materials that either belonged to the workers or, in the case of graffiti, represented their expressions and opinions.

I asked Smith for some names of former workers. With the assistance of the City of Brewer's newly hired economic development director, D'arcy Main-Boyington (who took over when Drew Sachs left), we compiled a list of former employees and sent out letters inviting workers to a meeting at City Hall. At the meeting we introduced them to the idea of an oral history project that would transform individual stories into a collective historical and cultural narrative. Some key people attended our meeting, including City Councilor (now mayor) Manly DeBeck, City Clerk (now councilor) Arthur Verow, and former mill manager Bruce Hamilton. We videotaped the meeting and acquired additional names, gradually accumulating a list of roughly one-hundred former workers who might agree to be interviewed. We began with retirees, expecting that this would be a multi-year project. We interviewed all the

Recent images taken inside the Eastern Fine Paper mill in South Brewer. The equipment in the background (below) is an old paper machine. From left to right are Richmond Smith, Pauleena MacDougall, and Drew Sachs. Photo by Bill Kuykendall.

people who attended the meeting and several who were highly recommended as "must interviews."

The Maine Humanities Council provided the initial funding for the project. The Council helped support graduate assistant Amy L. Stevens and local travel expenses, with the expectation that we would produce a DVD based on our findings. We conducted about forty interviews and collected several hundred historical photographs and several boxes of documents. We also preserved hundreds of drawings and plans created by mill draftsmen.[4] Early in the interviews, it became clear that workers were willing to tell their stories and preserve the history of their mill. The workers provided photos, samples of papers, and small items they had saved from the mill. Some had copies of mill publications, such as newsletters and calendars, that they either donated or allowed us to copy. We set up a database for all the photographs, digitizing them as we received them. We conducted two or three interviews each week, transcribed them, and included notes and other materials the workers provided.

We invited former employees to a second meeting, open to the public, at the Brewer Auditorium where we previewed the overall design of the DVD.[5] We collected more names and more stories at that meeting. Finally, when the DVD was completed, we held a meeting at the Brewer Middle School and gave out copies to all the workers who attended. We also applied to the History Channel for a "Save Our History" project that allowed us to work with seventh graders at Brewer Middle School. The students conducted their own interviews, created a video, and wrote a series of essays about their impressions of the mill.

Once we had conducted a few initial interviews with women at the mill, it became apparent that an additional gender-focused project would be useful, so we applied to the Women in the Curriculum program at the University of Maine and conducted a series of interviews with women who had worked at the mills in Brewer, Bucksport, Old Town, Lincoln, and Millinocket. Amy Stevens and I prepared a summary of our findings and presented them at a Women's History Month lecture at the University of Maine in Orono. The mill employed both men and women, but few women worked in production. Besides office work, they worked in cutting, counting, packaging, and shipping. Early twentieth-century women paper workers were rag sorters, a job that brought with it various health hazards. Workers resisted changes brought about by management such as sexual harassment training. For example, one worker recalled an incident in which a woman attending the sexual harassment training session mooned everyone on the way out of the meeting, reflecting workers' resistance to changes mandated by management.

Both Eastern Manufacturing and Eastern Fine Paper employed women in their mills. Early in the twentieth century large numbers of women sorted rags, a job that entailed serious health risks. This photo (c. 1945) shows women and men sorting paper inside the mill. Maine Folklife Center.

We approached the workers with questions about how they learned their jobs, who they worked with, and what their daily life was like. We asked about pranks, accidents, and management-worker relations. We also asked them about the mill closing: why it happened, and how they felt about it. Those from production and management expressed similar feelings about the closing but placed the blame differently. Management blamed the age of the mill, global forces, and the inability of workers to accept change. Production workers held owners responsible for not investing in new equipment and for forcing the mill to purchase pulp at high prices from mills owned by the same company, and many expressed anger and frustration towards the last owners, who were "from away," while showing respect for the local owners and managers who previously operated the mill.[6] The 100-year history of the mill illustrates that success could be attributed to location on the water (for steam power, transportation for shipping paper and receiving logs, and processing), proximity to woodlands, and a plentiful labor force with experience in paper production. In the mid-twentieth century, however, the company sold its woodlands, converted its boilers from coal to oil, and purchased raw ma-

terials from increasingly remote locations. As a result, costs rose considerably. Facing these obstacles, owners built new mills rather than invest in old ones; they failed to replace ageing machinery, and they invested nothing in worker training. These factors, combined with the larger economic issues of markets and trade, led to the demise of the mill.

Inside the mill

One of our goals for the project was to understand the culture of the mill. What was it like to work there? Workers shared stories of hot, hard work, but they also mentioned the idea of the mill as a family. They did not mean the paternalistic actions of management and owners; rather, they pointed to their fellow workers. In fact, many of their colleagues *were* family. Some had fathers, grandfathers, uncles, aunts, mothers, sisters, and brothers working at the mill with them. In some families as many as five generations worked at the mill.

The mill was a way of life for the South Brewer community. For ninety-two-year-old Mildred Miscall, the festive colors and soft texture of Eastern's very first batch of red and green Christmas tissue paper are etched in her memory. Others recall the feel of stiff, starched dresses and handkerchiefs, and falling asleep beneath warm blankets, all made from linen and felt used on the paper machine rollers. Judith Boothby remembers singing her father back home from a company Christmas party in the 1940s: "Father, dear father, come home with me now./ The clock in the steeple strikes one./ You promised that you'd come straight home from the shop/ As soon as your day's work was done./ Come home, come home, father, dear father come home."

Judith and others living in South Brewer at mid-century did not need watches; they kept time by the shrill mill whistle: at noon Harnum's store would fill with hungry workers; 3:30 marked a shift change; and at five o'clock men and women, carrying tin lunch boxes and briefcases, went home for the evening.

Inside, the machinery endlessly roared and churned. Those living near the mill yard fell asleep to the *tunk, tunk, tunk* of pulp logs dropping from the conveyor onto piles hundreds of feet high. Archie Verow remembers exploring those piles as a boy one summer, climbing deeper and deeper amid the logs and emerging with a handful of snow that even the hot July sun could not reach. Living just down the road during the 1950s, Manley DeBeck, who grew up with asthma, recalls when Eastern's smokestacks released sulfur dioxide into the air. He would have to stay indoors because "it would just take my wind right away." He also re-

Those employed at the Eastern Fine Paper Corporation consistently identified their coworkers as "family." The mill culture was one of solidarity and community. Eastern workers Steve Leighton and Dola Hinckley were part of the close-knit mill community. Maine Folklife Center.

members the Penobscot River painted in vivid colors — reds, blues, greens, and yellows — by mill waste released into the river. In the days before environmental regulations "you could tell what color paper was being made that day" based on the Penobscot's bright hues.

Many years later, former mill workers still breathe in the scent of "good, fresh pulp," feel the intense heat of the machine room, the bitter cold of the log yard on winter nights, and hold a sheet of Atlantic Bond paper up to the light, admiring its high-quality fiber content and the bold Eastern watermark beneath its smooth finish. But the Eastern mill produced more than fine paper and fond recollections. A bedrock for the busy, close-knit community that grew around its perimeters, the mill was the economic base of South Brewer, providing for countless families over several generations. "The mill was a large employment base and a lot of the people that went in there [at a young] age would just stay there and retire out of there, and so did their fathers," says Archie Verow, who worked at Eastern for several summers during college before securing a position as Brewer City Clerk in 1966. "It was like if you got into the mill then you were all set. You didn't need to look for anything else. It paid well and you could build a house and have your family grow up."

Tracing Eastern's history is like plotting an enormous family tree.

Nearly everyone in the greater Brewer area during the past century had family working at the mill in some capacity, if he or she were not employed by Eastern. David Morrison is a "third generation papermaker" whose grandfather began working as a box maker at Eastern Manufacturing in the late nineteenth century. Craig Clement, a turbine operator in the power plant, still lives in the house his grandfather built while employed at Eastern Manufacturing. Manley DeBeck's grandmother, Rose D'Amboise, worked at the mill for forty years, and his mother, Louise, for seventeen years. Cyndi Wass, of customer service and administration, says "my parents both worked there, I had many, many relatives, cousins, uncles, grandparents," in addition to her brother Mark, a color boss in the beater room. Her mother, Lois Andrews, was executive secretary to mill owner Joseph Torras, and it turns out that pipefitter Ron Kearns married into the Andrews family. As he explains it: "Lois's husband is my wife's father's brother." Wendy Durrah, who would later meet her husband Keith at Eastern, worked in Customer Service for a time with Nikki DeCesere, whose father Vince was Papermaking Superintendent. Wendy is the niece of Ronald and Donna Holland, Finishing Department Superintendent and Vice President of Human Resources, respectively.

Craig Clement told us: "In the beginning, my father worked down there. My grandfather worked there, of course he died in 1947, but he was a foreman out in the yard for many years. My father worked there; I actually don't know the year he started but he retired, well actually he got done in 1968 when the mill shut down, never came back but he retired five years later, living up in Bangor. Those two there, my brother worked down there a little while when he got out of high school. I had uncles that worked down there you know, just part time and I think that's all my family."[7] The closing of the mill was a great loss to the workers — not just in wages but also in their connection with community and family through the mill.

We were interested in finding out how workers learned their jobs. With the exception of the engineers, most of the people we talked to learned from a co-worker. The positions were labor-intensive, as the Eastern mill was not a fully modernized paper mill run by computers. Crews worked in a boiler room, carpentry shop, machine shop, or testing lab, as well as on three paper machines, each with a stock prep area. There were paper winders, cutters, packers, and shippers. Eastern also had a paper coating lab. Stock preparation involved mixing pulp, water, and chemicals. Sometimes colors were added, which meant there were jobs that fo-

cused on creating the right color mix for the stock. Machine tenders were the production people who made certain that the paper was finding its way through the machine, and that it had the correct thickness, strength and brightness. There were also truck drivers, yard workers, and, until the pulp mill was torn down in 1968, pulp mill workers.

The work was hard but the production crew enjoyed working there. New workers were exposed to initiation rites and pranks. One of the most common was getting "starched." A worker would be sent to pick up broke (scraps of paper pulled off the machine) and as they put it into a cart, someone would pull a lever that brought down a cloud of white starch that covered the worker from head to toe. Other pranks included sending people to find nonexistent items, setting off firecrackers, hoisting a lunch box to the ceiling, or nailing it to a work bench. Mike Woodbury told this story: "If they nailed your lunch box to the table, you were all right. . . . They used to take . . . a bag full of starch and they'd say well, we lost a wrench over there . . . so you'd go over there and start looking for it. . . . You'd go over there like a dummy, you'd look for a wrench and then they would take a bag of starch and suck it right through the floor system. It would be just like a fog."[8] The work was not just hard, it was also dangerous, and there were accidents. One man was pulled into the paper machine and had his hips crushed; others lost fingers, and one man had his hair ripped from his scalp. Safety was the responsibility of the worker, not the management, as the WWI-era mill publications preached. Safety laws and inspections came later in the 1970s with the advent of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Richard Turner recalled how he was hurt on the job:

> We were changing grades of paper. It was on a real heavy grade which takes very little steam on the short nest to dry it. So I asked the machine tender, I says, "speed of slow so I can catch the steam." Well, he didn't do it and I couldn't catch the steam in time and the sheet rolled and it was all wet so I couldn't get out of the way. It wrapped around my feet and pulled me up into the pulp reel and I said, "what a hell of a way to go." The doctor said that's what saved me because I relaxed. Well anyway, I was in the machine upside down, my brother worked on number two paper machine. So out of about twenty men, him and another fellow kept their head. My brother come over pulled me back so I could breathe and the other fellow helped loosen the nuts and bolts to get me out. After I got out and on the floor, they had to send my brother home because he went all to pieces. I had another brother working in the finishing room; they told him I was, before he got down there, they told him I was dead.[9]

Richard was in the hospital for thirty days. He split his pelvis and had to learn to walk again. When he was well, he returned to work on the same paper machine. He said it was like getting back on a horse after you have fallen.

Growing up in South Brewer meant living near the mill, hearing the whistle blow, and being part of a family. In the summer, children swam in the river and played in the big log piles. The men played baseball. The women made clothing and blankets from the used felts from the mill, worn out from receiving wet pulp and being squeezed through the big, hot metal drums that pressed out the water and dried the pulp into paper. The stories the workers told us recreate a way of life in and around a work place that is now gone. This culture is preserved in memories and also in the interviews we have recorded and preserved in the Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History at the Maine Folklife Center.

NOTES

1. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), p. 11.

2. See especially Argyle Boom, Northeast Folklore vol. 18 (1976).

3. Lloyd Irland, "Maine's Forest Industry: From One Era to Another," in *Changing Maine: 1960-2010*, edited by Richard Barringer (Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House and Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine, 2004), pp. 368-369.

4. Interviews and photographs are housed in the Northeast Archives of the Maine Folklife Center. Documents and drawings are held by Special Collections, Raymond H. Fogler Library, University of Maine.

5. The DVD was designed and prepared by Adam Kuykendall.

6. NA 3408, Interview with Ron Kearns April 7, 2006.

7. NA 3396, Interview with Craig Clement, November 14, 2006.

8. NA 3433, Interview with Mike Woodbury, January 25, 2006.

9. NA3428, Interview with Richard Turner, August 28, 2007.