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“I’VE GOT A MILLION OF THESE STORIES”: WORKERS’ PERSPECTIVES AT THE EASTERN FINE PAPER CORPORATION, 1960-2004¹

BY AMY STEVENS

Maine’s modern history is punctuated by factory closings — the textile mills in the 1950s, the shoe factories in the 1980s and 1990s, and most recently the paper mills in various corners of the state. Although numerous studies document the economic impact of these unfortunate events, we have little recourse to understanding the human impact — the stories of the men and women whose lives were so closely entwined with the mills and the communities they so often founded and supported. In this article, Amy Stevens weaves together the documents and the stories that provide a multifaceted picture of the rise and fall of the Eastern Fine Paper Company and its “family” of workers.

IN THE second half of the twentieth century, Eastern Fine Paper Company, located in Brewer, Maine, reinvented itself as a tight-knit community that was not only a business but a family. This trend was seldom evident in company records. In the immediate aftermath of WWII, the company focused on profits and production rather than employee relations, and its publication, entitled *Eastern’s Family of Fine Papers*, included only an occasional expression of workers’ viewpoints. The publication was part of an aggressive new marketing campaign disguised with entertaining columns and “distributed to customers and others interested in the dynamic role of paper in the modern world.”² During the early 1960s, the Brewer mill distributed a smaller publication, the *Eastern Enterprise*, featuring “news of special interest to merchant salesmen,” but besides announcing winners of various sales contests and occasionally referring to promotions of those in managerial positions, the *Enterprise* reveals virtually nothing about Eastern employees.³

Although Eastern’s recent written record lacks a worker’s voice, it does provide a richer, more revealing source: the words and recollections of the living, breathing mill workers themselves. This article is based on



The late 1960s and early 1970s was a period of tremendous change for the Eastern Fine Paper Corporation. The plant closed in 1968 and quickly reopened under local ownership and control. During the next two decades, workers and management alike recalled the Mill's "golden period" of prosperity and stability. Maine Folklife Center.

first-hand accounts of more than thirty-five men and women who worked at the mill during the past forty years. Their stories are part of an oral history project undertaken by the Maine Folklife Center in 2005-2006, and they reveal a collective identity and a sense of "family" not only among co-workers, but also, surprisingly, between workers and local management. During the 1970s and 1980s, Eastern enjoyed a flourishing work culture that underwrote a sense of common purpose and unity.

EASTCO Federal Credit Union

Perhaps the first example of Eastern workers' collective identity occurred in April 1960, when employees chartered the EASTCO Federal Credit Union. At first, membership was limited to employees of Standard Packaging's Eastern Division — mainly, the Brewer mill. The union operated from Eastern's gatehouse until 1962, when a separate building was erected on the corner of the mill property along South Main Street.

In 1968, the charter was amended, and the union became the community-based Brewer Federal Credit Union. Over the next several decades, its membership increased, and today it is located across from Brewer City Hall on North Main Street, where it continues to serve residents of Brewer and surrounding towns and remains a testament to Eastern's efforts at building and improving the community. But compared to developments at the mill itself, the Credit Union was a small ripple in a large pond.⁴

The Bruce Hamilton Saga

Of Eastern's long and tumultuous history, perhaps no tale is repeated more often than that of the mill's closure and re-opening in 1968. The central player in the resurgence was manager Bruce Hamilton. Had lumberman and songwriter Larry Gorman still been working at the Eastern in 1968, he would have undoubtedly written a song about this local boy who returned from Louisiana to Maine in 1968 to save Eastern from permanent closure — and the surrounding South Brewer community from economic ruin. Phyllis Beaulieu, who worked in Eastern's laboratory, described the uneasy atmosphere among workers as the mill experienced hard times in 1968. Her worries began when Standard Packaging, Eastern's corporate owners, closed the pulp mill. Soon after, her suspicion that the entire mill would close became reality. The main office was full of people coming and going, and one day Phyllis was headed for work when she heard the news that Standard Packaging had closed the Eastern mill. On Tuesday, March 5, the *Bangor Daily News* ran headlines that declared, "1,200 Jobless in Mill Shutdown." Front-page columns included interviews with mill owners and stunned employees. Referring to the Eastern as an "impossible financial drain on the company," Standard Packaging President Lowell E. Krieg blamed "basic facility problems, plus depressed conditions in the pulp and paper industry." According to the reporter, the "first news of the decision was a notice on the company's bulletin board when the men reported for work Monday morning." Workers, including Phyllis Beaulieu, were left reeling: "there were so many down there that didn't have their homes paid for, and a lot of people were just about out of their mind, you know, because there was no work."⁵

The situation was dire. In addition to the more than 400 people suddenly out of work, local diners, department stores, and other nearby businesses suffered from a lack of patronage. To make matters worse, Dow Air Force Base across the river in Bangor had just closed down, and workers at Bangor Hydro Electric Company, another local employer,

were on strike. The “Twin Cities” — Bangor and Brewer — were in the midst of challenging economic times.⁶

Why, after more than ten successful years of ownership, did Standard Packaging decide to close the Eastern Mill? A New York-based franchise that owned a number of companies throughout the Northeast, Standard Packaging was struggling financially by the late 1960s. The paper industry is notoriously cyclical, with profits going up or down whenever a paper mill opened or closed elsewhere. Changes in demand necessitated upgrades to old machinery. Arthur Tilley, Eastern’s controller during this period, remarked, “I think Eastern knew the paper industry was in a downturn. I don’t think we were losing money, but we weren’t making much. And then the first thing we knew, they said Standard was going to close the mill.”⁷

Bruce Hamilton began working for Eastern after graduating from the University of Maine’s chemical engineering program in 1958. A process engineer at the company’s sister mill in Lincoln before joining the National Guard, Hamilton returned from pilot training in 1962 and worked “about five years [at the Brewer mill] as an engineer doing all sorts of things.” Hamilton left when Standard Packaging began selling off their woodlands. As he noted, “I . . . got kind of tired of watching Eastern . . . Standard Packaging go down hill . . . so I left and went down to Valentine Pulp and Paper in Louisiana.” Selling assets — some three million acres of woodland in Maine and New Brunswick — reduced their prospects for long-term viability. He was further discouraged when they shut the pulp mill down and neglected routine investments in parts and machinery. The end — for Standard Packaging, at least — was indeed just months away, and Hamilton returned to Maine in time to witness it firsthand. Convinced by the mill manager that “things had improved dramatically,” Hamilton took a job as “trouble-shooter” for the Eastern and Lincoln mills, working out of Eastern’s corporate offices in Bangor until the shut-down was announced.⁸

Not long after Standard Packaging’s closure announcement, the company president held a news conference at which he expressed his hopes that the mill would reopen under new management in the near future. Hamilton began to devise another sort of conference:

I talked with a friend of mine, Pete D’errico, [who] was the industrial development man in Bangor at the time and a radar operator that I flew with out at the Air Guard frequently. He was at my house one night and he said, “What are you going to do?” I said, “No idea.” . . . “Maybe there’s some economic development administration money available for somebody like yourself to buy the mill.” So I called two



In this photo, Dick Crommett (seated) and Bruce Hamilton are running a brightness test at the Eastern Mill. Bruce Hamilton is largely regarded as the savior of the facility. After the mill closed in 1968, Hamilton organized its purchase primarily with local capital. His leadership and management contributed to the general sense of community and closeness among Eastern's workers. Maine Folklife Center.

people, Arthur Tilley and Frank Knight. . . . Arthur Tilley was the controller [at Eastern], and Frank had been the mill manager, but he had been moved over to the corporate office as a long-range planner.⁹

Knight, a member of Merchants Bank's board of directors, spoke with fellow board member Bob Haskell, president of Bangor Hydro. Arthur Tilley recalled, "Somehow between the two of them they called a meeting at Eastern of all the business leaders in the cities. . . . We held it down in the meeting room at Eastern and . . . told them that we were going to take a crack at it. So everybody says fine, whatever we can do, we'll help."¹⁰



Leroy Chambers, Paul Coughlin, and Larry Beaulieu at work in the Paper Testing Department in the 1960s. Eastern Fine Paper attributed much of its success to the skill of its workers. Eastern developed prior to the computer age and therefore relied heavily on the specialized knowledge of its workforce. Maine Folklife Center.

After meeting with lawyers and drawing up balance sheets and projections, Hamilton, Tilley, and Knight spoke with representatives of Maine's state senators. Finally, the three men secured a three million dollar loan guaranteed by the federal government. The federal law required a show of financial support from the local community, Hamilton recalled; so first "we needed seven hundred thousand dollars' worth of bonds."¹¹

Some said it couldn't be done, but Hamilton, Tilley, and Knight pushed forward with support from a group of dedicated and enthusiastic men and women, many of them former Eastern employees willing to do whatever was necessary to get the mill up and running again. The bond drive was very successful. Business leaders, professionals, and individuals of all economic classes contributed. Former customers and suppliers also bought bonds to help finance the mill re-opening. Arthur Tilley was astounded at the outpouring of community support. "People started making telephone calls, and people who had worked there at the mills just came in and said 'I'll buy a hundred dollars worth of bonds' and we got some businesses to commit to ten thousand or five thousand,

and one company . . . that we bought the fuel oil from, I think they bought fifty thousand dollars' worth of bonds." In addition to buying bonds, many local people loaned money to Hamilton, Tilley, and Knight. Phyllis Beaulieu, who was laid off along with her husband, loaned \$500 of what little money they had.¹²

Re-opening Eastern was important to the men and women of South Brewer; Craig Clement, a long-time mill employee, described the key role the mill played in the community. He reasoned that nearly every home in South Brewer was purchased with money from the mill, sustaining generations of workers. Under the circumstances, the community pulled together, borrowed from savings, made phone calls, and bought bonds until the goal was reached. "Locally there was a lot of interest in it because Eastern was a big factor as far as jobs were concerned," Tilley stressed. And, as they had during World War II, mill workers rallied around the notion that paper was a necessity in everyday life: "At the time, people were saying 'Well, the bond's only as good as the paper it's on, you know.'" With \$700,000 in bonds and a \$3 million guaranteed loan from the federal government, Tilley, Hamilton, and Knight purchased the mill — after securing a loan from Northeast Bank using their homes as collateral.¹³

Months of feasibility studies, phone calls, and fund-raising paid off. Within seven months, the funds were secured, and the other components — labor, markets, and machinery — came together; Eastern employees were back at work. The machines started up, one after another, and by October the mill was producing paper. Workers came back to the mill and the South Brewer community was emotionally and economically revitalized.¹⁴ The South Brewer mill, which ran for nearly eighty years before its brief closure in 1968, was in business again. From its inception as Eastern Manufacturing — Fred Ayer's technological marvel — to part of Standard Packaging's massive East Coast holdings, Eastern Fine Paper now belonged to the workers whose dedication and perseverance brought it back to life.

E. B. Eddy Purchases Eastern

Those who remember these years best attribute Eastern's successful re-opening to the way the community worked together under Hamilton's guidance. And they were well within their rights to celebrate, as the business grew rapidly. Hamilton, who in 1968 was only twenty-nine years old, was revered as a father figure by veteran mill workers much

older than he. "I think the first year we did about 13 million in sales." Soon the mill outgrew the managers' ability to "finance it from within," however; as Tilley put it, "things went fine for awhile until the prices of raw material pushed us up against the wall." The mill lacked the capital to bridge the downturns. Hamilton, Tilley, and Knight decided to find someone interested in buying part of Eastern, and E.B. Eddy, a pulp and paper operation owned by George Weston Industries of Canada, showed interest. "One of the reasons that George Weston was willing to take over is that they owned the Canadian pulp and paper mill and they wanted to get into the American market," Tilley explained. Paper coming over the border from Canada was charged a tariff; control of Eastern "gave them access on this side of the border." Eddy agreed to purchase 51 percent interest in the Eastern mill, with an option to buy the rest after five years — which they did. The purchase was advantageous for all involved. "We had notes for the mortgages on our property," Arthur Tilley recalled; "and we felt [Eddy] should take over that responsibility and pay us back. So they said 'fine, that's no problem' They [also] insisted as part of the sale that Frank, Bruce and I stay for at least two years."¹⁵

Tilley stayed for the two years but then left to explore other business options, feeling there was little upward mobility for him at Eastern. He maintained ties with the Brewer Mill and benefitted from its success even after his departure. Following the 1969 re-opening, the company started a profit-sharing program, and by the mid-1970s the company was doing so well that Tilley and the other workers received a portion of the company profits. This profit-sharing agreement, established under Tilley, Hamilton, and Knight, was extremely popular among Eastern's workforce, who gained an even greater stake in the mill's success. Profit-sharing strengthened the bonds between the workers, who understood that they would all benefit by working toward a common goal. This was one of many examples of the exceptional labor relations that developed during the "Hamilton Era" at Eastern.¹⁶

The Hamilton Era

According to nearly all accounts, the South Brewer mill enjoyed a "golden era" in the twenty years following the 1968 re-opening. Eastern and E. B. Eddy proved an excellent match, for while the Canadian company took advantage of its new avenue into the U.S. pulp and paper industry, Eddy also trusted the mill to continue running successfully under its previous local leadership. As long as Eastern remained profitable, E. B. Eddy did not want to make major changes. Donna Holland, personnel manager at Eastern during the 1970s and 1980s, recalls, "Canada



The South Brewer Mill employed generations of families. The above image is a gathering of workers and families at an open house at the renamed Eastern Fine Paper Corporation. Often three generations of the same family worked at the mill, and nearly everyone in South Brewer had a relative employed there. Maine Folklife Center.

was happy with the way the mill was being run, and we very rarely saw them.” In response to this hands-off approach, the workers showed nothing but praise for the Canadian owners. Phyllis Beaulieu, who returned to her job at Eastern’s laboratory following the 1968 re-opening, remarked, “they were very, very good to work for. We weren’t without anything. They were wonderful.”¹⁷

Bruce Hamilton, whose legend is intricately intertwined with Eastern’s era of prosperity, continued to manage the mill at E.B. Eddy’s request, and remained ever esteemed by the workers at the South Brewer mill. In fact, many former employees refer to 1968-1991 as “the Bruce Hamilton era.” During countless interviews, these same men and women repeated, “Talk to Bruce. You need to talk to Bruce to get the whole story.”

Indeed, that Bruce Hamilton remained Eastern’s masthead in workers’ minds was closely tied to reality. For while Tilley and Knight moved

on, Hamilton went from vice president of the technical area to executive vice president, and then mill president in 1975, and those who worked under him sang his praises endlessly. "I really loved Bruce Hamilton as president," Anne Robinson recalled, and Phyllis Beaulieu agreed: "the best was the '80s when Bruce Hamilton had it. He was a very, very kind man."¹⁸

Like Family

In countless interviews, workers dubbed Bruce Hamilton the father figure of Eastern's vast family of employees — which perhaps explains why the notion of "family" was the connecting theme running through all thirty-seven oral histories. "In the Bruce Hamilton era, there was a good family [atmosphere], a lot of respect," Anne Robinson noted. "The mill was really a big family. We were. I knew everyone. They all knew me, and of course I got to know their spouses too." Mike Woodbury, a color boss/lead man in the beater room who worked at Eastern for 25 years, agreed. "We all knew each other. Most of us all grew up with each other." While many referred to a figurative familial bond among co-workers, Hamilton pointed out that many Eastern employees were related. "Most of their families, their parents had worked there, or one of their parents. It was kind of a multi-generational thing where children followed parents and grandchildren followed parents."¹⁹

Indeed, tracing Eastern's history is much like plotting out an enormous family tree. Nearly everyone living in the greater Brewer area during the past century had family working at the mill in one capacity or another, if they themselves were not employed by Eastern. David Morrison is a self-proclaimed "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, lived 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 recounted: "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. Wass's mother, Lois Andrews, was executive secretary to mill owner Joseph Torras in the early 1990s, and pipe-fitter Ron Kearns married into the Andrews family. As he explained 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's aunt and uncle, Donna and Ronald Holland, were vice president of Human Resources and Finishing Department superintendent respectively.²⁰

Eastern co-workers assisted one another during illness, financial troubles, and workplace problems, but being part of the Eastern family meant arguments and tensions as well. Dola Hinckley, a paper trimmer in the finishing department for twenty-six years and one of the first women to work on the mill floor, recalled: "you knew their families and their problems and you supported them just as if they were family. . . . And if you think you're gonna go through life without having some kind of disagreement you're fooling yourself, because it just doesn't happen. . . . The best thing to do is just forget it, get over it and go on."²¹

Workers often went beyond their job descriptions to help another employee. Seasoned employees mentored younger crew members in skill training, work ethic, and responsibility. Parties for holidays and retirement celebrations, in the main office or on the mill floor, also contributed to the sense of family. Bud Reed, who worked in Eastern's maintenance department and stores for forty-three years, remembers well: "to make your job a little more pleasant . . . some of the maintenance boys, Saturdays and Sundays, would have little meals they would put on. Every Christmas time, we would always have a Christmas party — big, big party."²²

Anne Robinson, whose duties in Human Resources included quite a lot of party planning, recalled the lavish celebrations thrown in honor of Eastern retirees each May: "[We] hired Pilots Grill, and there was steak and lobster offered on the menu, and of course fish. It was a big to-do, and there was a band and you could just party. It was all for the retirees and they loved it." According to Robinson, the administrative staff invited everyone in the mill to Christmas parties in the main office, where long tables were covered with food. "What food was left over I would take right out in the mill and set right up for the men on the paper machines that could not leave. They did appreciate that."²³

Fun on the job was not limited to parties. Jokes and pranks were an important part of the Eastern work culture. According to numerous accounts, newcomers and seasoned employees alike were often put to the test through ritualized pranks. Starch thrown into the blower system made instant human snowmen out of unsuspecting victims. Water hose fights helped workers wake up or cool off. Crew members had to watch their lunch buckets, which might be hoisted into the rafters, filled with



Revered by Eastern's workers, Bruce Hamilton managed the facility for over two decades and was in many ways a father figure to the company. Joseph Torras finalized the purchase of Eastern in 1989 and organized the mill under new management, a move that angered the workforce and eroded the sense of family and solidarity that had developed during the previous twenty years. Maine Folklife Center.

glue, or nailed to a bench, and if an unlucky fellow drifted off to sleep during a slow period, his shoelaces might be tied to the chair or polka dots applied to his eyeglasses. According to one story, a crewman actually slept through an entire snowball melting on top of his head and down his face. There were instances of workers "streaking" in the machine room. "Never a want for real characters down there," Hamilton recalled; "they were very nice people, but they were characters."²⁴ Some pranks were rituals designed to initiate the "new guy" and establish the pecking order among crew members, but for the most part they reveal bonding and affection among co-workers. It was important to be "one of the crew," and pranks, jokes, and nicknames contributed to this brotherhood and sisterhood.

Whether one was a prankster or the butt of the joke, a worker or a manager, every employee expressed intense pride in the Brewer mill and the high quality paper it produced. Vince DeCesere, papermaking superintendent and later manufacturing manager, knew Eastern's paper like no one else: "We made . . . 25 and 50 percent cotton content sheet paper,

a very expensive high grade of paper. We made bond, writing paper, mimeograph type paper, maps, food coupons, food stamps, map paper. Toward the end we had about 290 different grades of paper. We made everything from a brilliant bright white to a black." While most mills produced eight to ten grades of paper, the Brewer mill "specialize[d] in the ability to be able to do anything." DeCesere pointed out that "the bigger mills and even the medium-sized mills, if they did four or five grade changes a month they were busy. Our record month . . . was in 1999. We did 342 grades changes in one month!"²⁵

This pride was particularly evident in Atlantic Bond, Eastern's most famous brand. Manley DeBeck recalled that Atlantic Bond was "what that mill was built on. . . . Quality consistent from one box to another; the sheets were the same, brightness was the same, printability was the same. People used that for their letterheads. It was a piece of paper that, if you held it up and . . . [the watermark] said Atlantic Bond . . . , you knew you had the best piece of paper out there."²⁶ These fond recollections attest to the family atmosphere, mutual respect, and pride in product and workmanship that the men and women of Eastern enjoyed during the 1970s and 1980s.

That there were occasional problems goes without saying, but clearly the overwhelmingly positive work environment provided a sense of unity, not only among crew members but between mill floor, office workers, and local management. This was epitomized by the loyalty all felt toward mill president Bruce Hamilton, who frequently invited employees on golfing and fishing trips with visiting paper salesmen and potential clients. "Well, I know it made [the workers] feel good because they felt like they were important, and they were important to me. I think they enjoyed being with the customers." Hamilton felt that their interest in producing quality paper contributed to the success of the mill: "they'd find out what the customers liked, what they didn't like, and they'd get back to work and they'd spread that around and say, 'Look, I talked with this guy and I know that they don't like' something one way instead of the other way. I think it was very beneficial for the whole operation. . . . I think it made their work more interesting for them."²⁷

It was this sense of equality and respect that made Hamilton so revered. Many recalled that he would start each day by walking through the mill, greeting men and women with smiles, handshakes, and pats on the back. Hamilton appreciated the experience gained by long-time employees and understood that their loyalty lay in the close-knit bonds they shared as a working "family." Golfing and fishing trips with cus-

tomers boosted employee morale and self-worth, but often smaller things meant more. The end of Hamilton's tenure as president meant the end of an era of workplace community culture.

Joe Torras: The Beginning of the End

Eddy retained ownership of the Brewer mill for nearly thirty years, then transferred ownership in 1989 to Joseph Torras, head of the Massachusetts-based Preco Incorporated. According to Hamilton, Torras had been interested in Eastern Fine Paper for some time. "In 1968, Joe Torras bought Lincoln and the three of us bought Eastern. He did his best to prevent us from buying it. That's only a suspicion. I think it's well founded, but it was only a suspicion." Torras was more interested in Lincoln because of its pulp mill and tissue machines, whereas Hamilton thought the Brewer mill "had more potential" due to its brand names — Atlantic Bond, Manifest Bond, and Certificate Bond.²⁸

In the late 1980s, E. B. Eddy became interested in purchasing the Lincoln mill, but Torras turned the mill around and purchased Eastern instead.²⁹ Hamilton decided to stay at the mill under the new ownership, but eventually he was forced out. His downfall, most say, led to the permanent closure. Anne Robinson's explanation of events exemplifies workers' understanding that with Hamilton's departure — almost as legendary as the 1968 re-opening — the "golden era" was over. "I'll never forget Bruce Hamilton was then the president and he called his department managers in for a meeting. . . . My husband was one of them, and he told them about Mr. Torras purchasing the mill. He said, 'Within a year there's going to be a lot of changes,' and he advised employees to be ready. . . . In one year I saw nineteen managers lose their job, *in one year!*" Robinson remembered vividly as Bruce Hamilton became one of those nineteen:

I was filling in as the executive secretary, which was part of my duties. . . and I went upstairs that one day and I looked in and all Bruce's personal pictures were off his desk. Now he was supposed to ride his motorcycle to work that morning with my husband. [The Hamiltons] had a camp down to Branch Lake, and we lived at Branch Lake full time. So I called my husband and I said, "Where is Bruce?" And he said, "Well it's funny you say that. He just called me and said he wasn't going to work." He had told my husband that the night before Mr. Torras talked with him and told him he was all done.³⁰

Many employees considered it a personal affront when their long-time president, the man who had re-opened the mill and preserved their

livelihoods, was fired in 1991, along with a number of other long-time local managers. Bud Reed recalled his frustration: “these were good men to work there. It was nice to come in the morning, [and hear] ‘Good morning boys! What’s going on?’ And then all of a sudden you get these other people”.³¹ Hamilton’s sudden dismissal, likened to the unexpected death of a beloved friend, devastated worker morale.

After more than two decades of unprecedented financial success and high employee morale, the Eastern family lost its local hero, and according to every worker interviewed, the Brewer mill would never be the same. Phyllis Beaulieu’s recounting exemplifies the hard feelings that replaced the reverence workers had felt toward their former leader. Under Torras, it seemed, “everybody was a number. You weren’t considered anything but a worker. That’s the way most people told me. . . . The six months or so I worked under him, I could see the change.”

In subsequent years the changes accelerated, but the men and women of South Brewer still needed to make a living, so most remained at Eastern, despite the atmosphere of distrust. Torras eliminated the few comforts that made mill work a little brighter: easy chairs, radios, and relaxed discipline became serious infractions; the close-knit family atmosphere gave way to a business-like regimen.³²

According to Mike Woodbury, crew men in the beater room did not trust the management from the start: “I knew the day that Joe Torras bought the mill, this guy was a smooth operator. He reminded me of a used car salesman. Shut the mill down, bused us all over to this particular conference center, patting us on the back, telling us, ‘We are going to make millions together!’ and I felt like I was just bit in the ass by a snake.” Woodbury grimly recounted how the “Torras regime” eliminated the profit-sharing plan created by Hamilton, Knight, and Tilley. “It was the one goal that we used to work for. We’d all end up with \$500 or \$600 a year. Well, [Torras] didn’t want to give us that profit sharing.” During one particularly profitable year, Torras took the profit-sharing money and purchased a new warehouse. That was the end of profit-sharing at Eastern.³³

These examples demonstrate not only a change in work culture but also a change in perceptions of — and reactions to — authority. Where Bruce Hamilton was a down-to-earth local legend, Torras was “from away,” and from Massachusetts, at that. By firing Hamilton and other local managers, Torras instantly became the antithesis of all that was good in the Hamilton era. Ending the profit-sharing agreement proved the final, wrenching blow to the solidarity Hamilton had created between

managers and workers. Eastern employees felt betrayed, abused, and unappreciated.

Anne Robinson, whose position as Employee Benefits Services Coordinator included safety training and workplace hazards analyses, points to the connection between morale, accidents, production, and profit: “when your morale is down, yes you are going to have more accidents, definitely. When the lay-offs started, more accidents; chapter thirteen [bankruptcy], chapter eleven [bankruptcy], more accidents. Yes, that was a ‘big thing’ in Eastern’s latter years, under Torras.³⁴ Robinson’s comments were reminiscent of the mill’s earlier history, when “Safety First” slogans filled the pages of the company newsletter in an attempt to increase cooperation, productivity, and worker morale. Seventy years later, Eastern was again burdened by accidents and dispirited workers, and morale seemed to decline over time.

“You Could See It Coming”

Torras’s 1989 purchase of Eastern Fine Paper marked the first time in twenty-one years that the Brewer and Lincoln mills, whose histories had long been intertwined, were owned by the same corporation. In a 1993 *Bangor Daily News* insert celebrating the twenty-five-year anniversary of Eastern Fine Paper, Torras commented that he and others at Lincoln thought it seemed a natural collaboration. Since 1968 Eastern had bought Lincoln pulp, and managers were on friendly terms, occasionally visiting each other’s facilities. “Everyone sort of knew everyone else,” said Torras, describing a family atmosphere that the majority of Eastern workers did not experience after the merger. What’s more, he continued, “Eastern makes some of the finest correspondence and printing paper of any mill in the country, while Lincoln makes highly specialized tissue paper” and “some technical papers and commodity papers. For all intents and purposes, the mills are integrated. One makes pulp for both, and they both manufacture complementary paper products.”³⁵

This description of close-knit solidarity between the Brewer and Lincoln contrasts with the perceptions of Eastern workers. Still, Torras’ optimism was not unfounded. “Eastern Pulp and Paper Company,” as it was renamed, boasted seven paper machines altogether, producing about 500 tons of writing, printing, and tissue papers daily, not including Eastern’s growing coated products division. In addition, Lincoln produced more than 400 tons of pulp per day, half of this made from waste sawdust.³⁶

To Torras and his managerial staff, the financial benefits of the

merger seemed endless. So why did the Brewer mill spiral into bankruptcy within several years, after more than a century of successful paper production? The question points to the importance of using varied methodologies in historical investigation. If Torras' enthusiastic press releases were the only source, the researcher would come away with a different image of Eastern's latter years and its sudden bankruptcy. Even Bruce Hamilton, once so intimately involved in Eastern's success, failed to find an answer. Torras, he noted, "let almost all of the top management go, as normally happens in a case like that, and he was in bankruptcy — what? — four or five years later. When he bought it, the mill was making record profits, and in my opinion, it should be running today. . . . Our suppliers liked coming to Eastern because it was a little jewel as far as they were concerned. It was a clean mill. It was not a money-maker, but it was run by a lot of very, very good employees that cared about it."³⁷

Workers, though, could see the end coming. Some believed it had to do with changes in the grades of paper made under Torras. According to Ron Kearns, a pipe fitter who, as part of the nineteen-person skeleton crew that stayed to the very end, was one of the last people to leave Eastern: "[previously] we'd make food coupons and postage stamps and specialty papers like that, and for some reason [Torras] got away from that and . . . started making just computer paper and stuff like that, figuring they could compete with the IPs [International Papers] of the world. . . . I thought if we stayed with what we always did best, the government orders which I thought kept us going for the longest time, that maybe we would have still been running." Another popular theory was that, despite Torras's claims about the mutual benefits of the Brewer-Lincoln merger, his ultimate goal was to keep the Lincoln mill running while using up whatever resources Eastern could offer. "We always felt like Lincoln was his baby and he was going to milk us for whatever he could to keep that place running," Kearns speculated. "And we had heard stories too. We'd have chemicals come in down here, and we always heard that our mill had paid for it and he'd ship it up [to Lincoln]." Dennis Townsend added: "We'd see stuff come in and land on our docks, out of a truck, then it would get loaded right back onto another truck and go up to the other mill. It really looked like they were doing everything they could to save the Lincoln mill [but not Eastern]."³⁸

But in the end, many Eastern workers placed the blame on management by "outsiders" who failed to understand the history and capacity of the South Brewer mill and the energy and dedication of its workers.

Kearns remembered “a lot of the older supervisors who really knew that mill and had been there a long time . . . ended up being either fired or laid off, whatever you want to call it. As much as I may have disagreed with a lot of these supervisors, they knew the mill. They were people from the area.” Kearns contrasted these local supervisors with managers who “were what we call ‘foreigners,’ if you’re a Mainer.”³⁹

Townsend related that near the end he and several other men from the power plant asked Torras’ son Peppy, a mill manager, what was going to happen at Eastern: “He basically told us his dad had done everything he could to try to keep the place going. He really didn’t have a whole lot of information for us.” Then, upon leaving, “he couldn’t even find his way out of the power plant! I had to go get him, find him, so you know he hadn’t been around the mill a whole lot.” The incident did not inspire confidence in Peppy Torras’s ability to keep the mill running successfully.⁴⁰

The sudden and unexpected lay-offs in fall 2003 seemed to confirm the fact that mill managers were “foreigners.” Mike Woodbury remembered all too well the veritable roller-coaster ride leading to the closure:

I was on my day off, and then they said something about the Eastern on the news, that they had declared bankruptcy. That kind of shocked me. They weren’t going to tell us anything. I didn’t even know I lost my job until the week after I was done. We had a safety meeting that Thursday and we were scheduled to come in Friday, and they told us, “Oh we’ve got all kinds of money, we’ve got all kinds of orders.” . . . So I got a call Friday night, says, “Well, we are going to shut down today, and we are going to start up tomorrow.” Then the next day, “Oh no, we are going to start up Monday, and you’ve got to come in Monday morning” and do this and that, and I said “All right.” Then Monday morning — no, Sunday night — I got a call. “Don’t bother coming in, we are going to start up on Wednesday.” And I said “All right.” By the Wednesday that I was supposed to go in, Wednesday night — “No, we are going to start up Friday, and you’re going to work days.” So I was just getting ready to leave for work and they called me up and said “You don’t have a job any more.” I said, “Thanks for telling me!”

Shortly after the closure announcement, Woodbury was contacted by the local media. “One of the reporters come up and said to me, ‘We just toured the mill. . . . We walked in the offices and there was still pots of coffee, there’s half eaten sandwiches sitting on the desks.’ Well, what must have happened is they just walked in and told them to leave, and they got out.”⁴¹ The mill was closed permanently in January 2004.

The layoffs left a bitter taste in the mouths of many employees, and

this resentment toward Torras deepened their reverence for the former mill president. In fact, Hamilton's near-mythical success was so renowned that not a few people thought he might step in and rescue the Brewer mill again. Moe Williams, a fourth-generation Eastern worker with a forty-seven year record, expressed the anger, betrayal, and hope that so many former employees still felt in 2005: "I don't even go by that place and look at it anymore. There's no need of shutting it down. Bruce Hamilton's going to start it up again. . . . The mill shouldn't have closed to start with. I blame these guys right up to the city. I'll say to anybody else, all they had to do is go see Bruce Hamilton."⁴²

This time, no local hero emerged to save the day, and the Eastern workers faced the harsh realities that are becoming all too common among Maine pulp and paper mill workers. They sought unemployment benefits, enrolled in job re-training programs, and looked for work at Bucksport, Lincoln, and elsewhere. When things got tough, they tapped into their savings, sold their houses, and moved on in search of better opportunities elsewhere. Those who stayed opened food banks and ran fund-raising drives — this time for medical and fuel assistance. And they mourned for the loss of a landmark company that had provided work for countless Brewer families over several generations. "Losing your job is like a death in the family," Jim Dinardo remembered. After working at Eastern for ten years, Dinardo secured a job as a peer counselor helping laid-off mill workers secure financial assistance. "There's a period of denial, there's a period of anger, and there's a period of where 'Well, all right, it's happened but I don't know what I'm going to do.'" Ron Kearns, one of the last to walk through Eastern's doors, summarized: "I thought I had a home for sure. A lot of us used to say, 'I won't miss this place any if I ever left.' Well, you do." Manley DeBeck who kept in contact with former co-workers though his work with the Brewer City Council, noted that the men and women of the Eastern were still a tight-knit community. "We had a cookout at the [Brewer] Auditorium just to keep in touch with each other, because this is a big family and it still is, it always will be." According to DeBeck one of the best places to run into former mill workers was at the Brewer Credit Union, started by and for Eastern employees nearly forty years ago. "Generally, if I go in there on a Saturday I'll run into three or four of them. . . . When you run into them it's like running into a relative you haven't seen. We talk to each other, we still kid each other." Many testified that this was the part they missed the most: the laughing, the solidarity, the celebrations, and the teamwork on the mill floor. Long after the paper machines were sold and the doors

were locked forever, memories of the “family” remained. “I drive by that plant everyday, three, four, five times,” DeBeck noted solemnly. And every time I go by, the memories are there. . . . You just don’t forget that big a chunk of your life.”⁴³

Mingled with the sadness and wistful longing was a lingering anger toward Torras, whom many hold personally accountable for the hardships they endured after the mill closed. DeBeck’s powerful sentiments were common among those who once enjoyed good wages, strong work relations, and pride in the paper they produced: “personally I’d never, ever want to set eyes on the owner again. . . . Yeah, I’m very bitter towards him. I’m not going to let it rule my life, but I will never, ever forgive him for what he did, not only to me and my family but to all the other families.”⁴⁴

Change is inevitable. The men and women of Eastern Fine Paper realized this, but hoped that more than a century of hard work and history at the South Brewer mill would not be forgotten. “Brewer’s expanding, and that’s a good thing, don’t get me wrong,” Mike Woodbury mused. “But I don’t think the people realized — you don’t realize something until it’s gone. And then if you never worked in the mill setting, you don’t know what it’s like.”

A Maine Story

The interviews with former Eastern employees provide a history that stockholders’ reports, newspapers, and other written documents cannot: the perspectives and emotions of workers who thrived during Eastern’s “golden era” and suffered through its permanent closure. In many ways it is a typical Maine story: profit-hungry “outsiders” came into a community and disrupted the status quo, leaving behind a wake of financial and emotional ruin. But in other ways, Eastern’s story is distinctive. It traces the ebbs and flows of a distinctive local work community through a broad expanse of American history, highlighting a collective identity that demonstrates the heart and hardiness of Maine people. Devaluing this work culture — and the workers — devalued the business itself. In the end, this is what led to the downfall of Eastern Pulp and Paper Company.

If, as one local scholar has stated, we study history “in order not to lose our place in the world,” the story of the South Brewer mill offers a valuable lesson. The moral has nothing to do with historical methodology; it is in fact about top-down versus bottom-up management and the impact of these management decisions on workers. It is about commu-

nity, solidarity, and valuing the whole for its parts — from “broke” to finish and beyond.⁴⁵

NOTES

1. J. Bernard O’Kane, interview by author, digital recording, Brewer, Maine, January 18, 2007, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, Interview # 3415. Note: Other than occasionally removing repetitive and unnecessary words such as “so,” “and,” and “you know,” interview quotes used in this article have not been altered from their original diction and meaning. Punctuation is added for clarity when necessary.
2. *Eastern Family of Fine Papers*, vol. 3, no. 1, March-April, 1968. This magazine was published eight times yearly in Saint Paul, Minnesota, by Brown & Bigelow, a division of Standard Packaging Corporation.
3. *Eastern Enterprise*, March 26, 1961 (Bangor, Maine: Eastern Fine Paper and Pulp Division — Standard Packaging Corporation).
4. Neil Saucier, *The City of Brewer, Maine Centennial 1889-1989* (Brewer, Maine: L. H. Thompson Printing, 1989), p. 69.
5. See Edward D. Ives, *Larry Gorman: The Man Who Made the Songs* (Fredericton, New Brunswick: Goose Lane Editions, 1993). Larry Gorman wrote several songs while working in Eastern’s log yards circa 1903. Beaulieu, interview; Jack Moran, “1,200 Jobless in Mill Shutdown.” *Bangor Daily News*, March 5, 1968.
6. Bruce Hamilton, interview by author, tape recording, Brewer, Maine, October 11, 2006, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, Interview # 3404.
7. Arthur Tilley, interview by author, tape recording, Brewer, Maine, February 24, 2006, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, Interview # 3426.
8. Hamilton, interview.
9. Jack Moran, “1,200 Jobless in Mill Shutdown,” *Bangor Daily News*, March 5, 1968; Hamilton, interview.
10. Tilley, interview.
11. Hamilton, interview.
12. Hamilton, interview; Tilley, interview; Beaulieu, interview.
13. Craig Clement, interview by Pauleena MacDougall, tape recording, Brewer, Maine, November 14, 2005, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, Interview # 3396; Tilley, interview.
14. Hamilton, interview.
15. Hamilton, interview; Tilley, interview.
16. Tilley, interview.
17. Donna Holland, interview by author, tape recording, Eddington, Maine, June 29, 2006, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, interview # 3406; Beaulieu, interview.
18. Hamilton, interview; Anne Robinson, interview by author, tape recording, Holden, Maine, March 31, 2006, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, interview # 3420; Beaulieu, interview.
19. Robinson, interview; Mike Woodbury, interview by author, tape recording, Orono, Maine, January 25, 2006, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, interview # 3433; Hamilton, interview.
20. David Morrison, interview by Pauleena MacDougall, tape recording, Levant, Maine, January 13, 2006, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, interview # 3413; Clement, interview; DeBeck, interview; Cyndi Wass, interview by author, tape recording, Hampden, Maine,

June 23, 2006, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, interview # 3430; Ronald Kearns, interview by author, tape recording, Brewer, Maine, April 7, 2006, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, interview # 3408; Keith & Wendy Durrah, interview by author, tape recording, Brewer, Maine, January 24, 2006, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, interview # 3401; Vincent DeCesere, interview by Pauleena MacDougall, tape recording, Orrington, Maine, September 20, 2005, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, interview # 3398.

21. Dola Hinckley, interview by author, tape recording, Clifton, Maine, February 17, 2006, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, interview # 3435.

22. Burdett Reed, interview by author, tape recording, Holden, Maine, February 15, 2006, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, interview # 3418.

23. A. Robinson, interview.

24. Woodbury, interview; Verow, interview; DeBeck, interview; Hamilton, interview.

25. DeCesere, interview.

26. DeBeck, interview.

27. Hamilton, interview.

28. Hamilton, interview.

29. Hamilton, interview.

30. Robinson, interview.

31. Reed, interview.

32. Beaulieu, interview. See A. Robinson, interview.

33. Woodbury, interview.

34. Robinson, interview.

35. Eastern Fine Paper, Inc., "Buying Eastern Fine Paper Restored an Entity Broken Up in 1968." *Bangor Daily News*, October 14, 1993, sec. EFP, p. 4.

36. Eastern Fine Paper, Inc., "Buying Eastern Fine Paper Restored."

37. Hamilton, interview.

38. Kearns, interview; Townsend, interview.

39. Kearns, interview.

40. Townsend, interview.

41. Woodbury, interview.

42. Merlin Williams, interview by author, tape recording, Brewer, Maine, April 27, 2006, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, interview # 3432.

43. DeBeck, interview; Jim Dinardo, interview by author, tape recording, Brewer, Maine, December 28, 2005, Maine Folklife Center, Orono, interview # 3400; Kearns, interview.

44. DeBeck, interview.

45. Richard D'Abate, "On the History of Its History: St. Croix Island Celebrations and the Missing Indians," *Maine History* 43. (August 2007): 225.