Oral History, Working Class Culture, and Local Control: A Case Study from Brewer, Maine

Pauleena MacDougall, *Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine*

Stories of factory closings from many industries throughout the latter part of the twentieth century are common and numerous studies have documented the economic impact of these unfortunate events. In this case study of Brewer, Maine, oral histories with former workers at the primary source of local employment, Eastern Corporation, illuminate the nature of management-worker interactions at the mill. Eastern's former employee narratives reveal a surprisingly unified perspective regarding the closing of the mill that does not reflect the public narrative put forward by management and business leaders.

Brewer, Maine is a town with a working-class identity. The town sits on the east bank of the Penobscot River across from Bangor — the centre of commerce for all of central and eastern Maine. While Bangor has the large banks, industrialists' homes, major hospitals, and educational institutions, Brewer has always been the community with working-class homes and small industries including ice, bricks, ships, and lumber. In addition, throughout the 20th century, a pulp and paper company known as Eastern Corporation thrived on the Brewer side of the Penobscot River. Much of the southern part of Brewer was built around this company — company homes, small shops and restaurants, bars, and a credit union for employees.

In 2004 the mill, which had been so important to Brewer's history and economy, closed. This paper focuses on the workers' perspectives on that closure. Our study investigated this instance of deindustrialization, using oral histories of workers to ask the central question: what can workers' observations tell us about the process of deindustrialization? While the closing was described by management as a story of markets and downsizing, workers' stories of the mill's demise centered on mismanagement. Not only did the stories reveal a rich working-class culture with close kin ties in the mill (a common theme in industrial oral history projects), but they also shed light on an important perception that bears on localism and economic development. Workers believed that local ownership and local knowledge were closely tied to business decisions and when ownership and management were local, decision-making benefitted both the business and the workers. When an outside corporation purchased the business, it ignored the knowledge and well-being of the workers and the community to the ultimate detriment of the business.

ISSN 1923-0567

The history of Eastern in Brewer

Eastern was founded in 1884 when Fred Ayer purchased a sawmill located on the eastern shore of the Penobscot River in Brewer, incorporated it as Eastern Manufacturing in 1889, and decided to use the sawmill's waste materials in the production of wood pulp for paper. By 1890 he had built a pulp mill, followed by a papermaking facility in 1901. The mill's business was estimated at $1 million annually.[1] Ayer later added a rag mill to the premises to meet the demand for Eastern's high quality cotton content paper known as "Systems Bond" watermark paper.[2]

In 1912, Fred Ayer sold Eastern Manufacturing to Old Colony Trust Company in Boston. According to the local newspaper, Eastern Manufacturing then employed over 1,000 workers in its mills, with an additional crew of 1,000 cutting timber on 115,000 acres in Aroostook and Piscataquis counties. Forty million tons of lumber were processed annually, and 40 tons of pulp produced per day. To move lumber from the forest to the mills, and finished products to its customers, Eastern had its own railroad. In addition, it owned twelve ocean-going vessels which regularly visited the Brewer mill's mile-long tract of docks along the Penobscot River. Following the sale of his company Ayer remained on the mill's board of directors along with his son, Fred R. Ayer. This was a large and important company in the region.[3]

By October of 1914, Eastern had added to its holdings by purchasing the Katahdin Pulp and Paper Company in Lincoln. A year later, a service department was implemented at the Brewer site. In 1916, the Eastern Electro-Chemical Company was organized and a plant built next to the Brewer mill, which produced bleach liquor for both pulp mills. The Brewer mill faced leaner times during the early 1920s as it recovered from decreased production during World War I, but remained open. In 1927, Eastern purchased 16,000 acres of additional timberland at Moose River, Nova Scotia.[4]

Even as economic depression gripped the nation, Eastern continued to grow. In January 1930, Eastern Manufacturing purchased the Orono Pulp & Paper Company, consisting of 112,000 acres of Maine timberland, a pulp mill, and a paper mill on the Penobscot River about eight miles above Bangor, and a

---

[1] "F. W. Ayer & Co.'s New Mill," *Bangor Daily Commercial*, 10 May 1890:4; Edward Mitchell Blanding; *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Industrial and Labour Statistics for the State of Maine, 1899* (Augusta, ME: Kennebec Journal Print, 1900), 37, 41-42.
[2] *Bangor Daily News*, 4 February 1937, 3.
[3] Bangor *Daily Commercial*, 23 August 1889, 1.
[4] *Eastern Manufacturing Company Report to Stockholders* 1927; *Eastern Corporation 1942 Annual Report*. Eastern Corporation. *Annual Reports 1942-1951*. Bangor, Maine: Eastern Corporation, 1943-1952. Bangor Public Library, Bangor, Maine.

ISSN 1923-0567

hydroelectric station which developed electric power for the mills. The Orono mills remained under Eastern's control until 1942.[5] Throughout this period of economic turmoil, while many businesses closed, Eastern's sustainability was due in large part to its manufacture of rayon pulp, which in 1936 helped Eastern increase business to more than $1 million.[6]

In the spring of 1939, Eastern Manufacturing Company reorganized, changed its name to Eastern Corporation, elected a new Board of Directors, and moved its sales headquarters from New York back to Brewer, while maintaining sales offices in New York, Boston, Washington, New Orleans, and Chicago. In addition, an export department was established to promote foreign paper sales, particularly in Central and South America.[7]

As the company's fortunes improved, workers began to organize, and by 15 December 1939, the International Brotherhood of Pulp Mill Workers negotiated a collective bargaining agreement covering all the employees of the Brewer and Lincoln mills. The following April, Eastern signed an agreement with the International Brotherhood of Paper Makers.[8]

During World War II the US war department awarded Eastern Corporation with numerous contracts for paper. To fulfill the government contracts, Brewer and Lincoln mills ran twenty-four hours a day, and set new pulp and paper production records. In addition, pulp from the mills was made into paper, plastics, rayon, and explosives used in the war effort. Products were shipped via lend-lease and good neighbour policies to Great Britain, Egypt, and South America.[9] Expanding once again, in November of 1949 Eastern acquired Royal Lace Paper Works, Inc. of Brooklyn, New York, primarily a manufacturer and distributor of lace paper doilies ("Roylies") and shelf and lining paper ("Royledge").

By mid-century, Eastern Corporation's pulp and paper mill property in South Brewer consisted of sixty-one acres of land with thirty-three buildings, including the company's general offices and research laboratories, employing about 1,300 people. In addition, the mill had a mile-and-a-half of tidewater frontage along the Penobscot River, with docking facilities for ocean-going vessels with drafts of up to twenty-three feet. This was necessary as two of the mill's primary resources, oil and pulpwood, often came by ship. Some pulpwood came from Nova Scotia and other ports along the Maine coast.[10]

---

[5] *Eastern Manufacturing Company Report to Stockholders 1929*; *Eastern Corporation 1942 Annual Report*, 2; Lockwood Trade Journal Co. Inc., *1690-1940: 250 Years of Papermaking in America*. (NY: Lockwood Trade Journal Co. Inc., 1940), 93.
[6] *Eastern Manufacturing Company Report to Stockholders 1935, 1936*.
[7] *Eastern Manufacturing Company Report to Stockholders 1938*, *Eastern Corporation Annual Report to Stockholders 1939*.
[8] *Eastern Corporation Annual Report to Stockholders 1939, 1940*.
[9] *Bangor Daily News* 7 January1943, B1-2; *Eastern Corporation Annual Report 1942*, 3.
[10] *Eastern Corporation Annual Report 1950*, 12-13.

ISSN 1923-0567

Employees in the pulp and paper industry enjoyed high wages compared to other work in the region, but they also had to work very long hours in dangerous and uncomfortable conditions. In July 1951, Eastern Corporation's timberland transportation employees voted to form a union, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. A contract was negotiated between employees and management, and went into effect in late August.[11]

Labour relations were generally good into the 1960s. Workers were used to hard work, including long days cutting and moving wood in the lumber industry, and to seasonal work with occasional layoffs. They cut wood in the winter, moved it downriver in the spring, and often worked in the mill cutting it into boards and preparing it for processing into pulp. Work could be disrupted by weather and market forces, so workers adapted to various seasonal tasks and found ways to make a living with part-time farming and other work. Work in the pulp and paper mills paid relatively high wages and tended to be steadier, with fewer layoffs and work slowdowns than other industries.

The company was unionized but over the more than one-hundred-year span of the business, there were no strikes, largely because workers could make better wages there than in any other local business. Negotiations for wages and benefits took place each year between labour and management, but workers generally accepted the terms management put forward. The union played an important role in negotiating grievances. Often these involved the breaking of seniority agreements, changes in the standard work week or change in piece rates paid by the company. The union leadership denied many grievances — it did not always side with the workers. In addition, when an employee left or moved to a new position, the former position could be 'bid' on by another employee through the union. So the union aided workers in finding opportunities for advancement within the company.[12] The weakness of the labour movement more generally in Maine has historically emerged from regional economic and political forces. Few good-paying jobs could be found in Maine, layoffs were frequent, and Maine has historically been largely politically conservative. Historian Steven High's study of Great Lakes Basin workers suggests that unions in the United States moved to the right as the result of the Cold War, the left's anti-Vietnam War protests in the 1960s (as the AFL-CIO remained strongly pro-military), while Canadian unions continued to have a left presence, which helped to organize a wave of plant occupations in the early 1980s. Some Canadian companies were reopened under public ownership. High identified a powerful myth for Canadian organized labour

[11] *Eastern Corporation Annual Report 1951*, 7.
[12] Union records in the Maine State Federation of Labor 1914-1967 Collection, Special Collections, Raymond H. Fogler Library, University of Maine, Orono.

ISSN 1923-0567

— that US companies closed Canadian firms to protect US jobs.[13] Clearly, the union in the case of Eastern did little to prevent the negative impact of the mill closing on the workers, indicating its quiescent character.

The first hints of deindustrialization appeared in mid-century when the local management of Eastern was replaced with members of a New York-based franchise. Standard Packaging purchased the mill in 1958 and ran it successfully for ten years. The company continued to be profitable, but as the US economy moved from industrialization to deindustrialization, various industries began to close. On 4 March 1968 the company closed both Brewer and Lincoln mills. To make matters worse for the community, the mill shutdowns coincided with the closing of Bangor's Dow Air Force Base, another major local employer.[14]

Standard Packaging owned a number of companies throughout the Northeast and was struggling financially by the late 1960s. Unfortunately, the decisions this company made ultimately led to its failure. Arthur Tilley, Eastern's comptroller during this time, provided his perspective on the closure:

> *The first thing that happened was that Standard needed to show a good gain in their stock. They sold all of their woodlands that they owned in Canada ... That gave them a profit of several hundred thousand dollars on the books, and that made them look good. The paper industry was in a downturn, and Eastern wasn't losing money but they weren't making much of a profit. They were selling the assets. They weren't spending any money on the mill, and you can't run a mill without spending some money on it and making continual improvements. Those paper machines down there were old machines, and old machines need new bearings and new gears and new dryers and new a lot of stuff occasionally, and they just weren't spending anything on it. It was pretty obvious that the end was just over the horizon.*[15]

Tilley points to the central cause of Eastern's demise: the lack of connection between the mill owners and the local community. Standard's sale of its woodlands and closing of the pulp mill would make the company devastatingly vulnerable to higher pulp prices. Their decision was made to please their stockholders, not in the interest of maintaining the Brewer business. The company was publically traded, and the shift in ownership, along with globalization, shaped

[13] Steven High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969-1984*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 167-175.
[14] *Bangor Daily News*, 14 October 1993, "Eastern Fine Paper" 2, 22, 23.
[15] Interview with Arthur Tilley, Brewer, Maine, 24 February 2006; Northeast Archives (NA) 3426, Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono.

ISSN 1923-0567

company decisions more than an interest in keeping the mill running or in the welfare of the community and its workers.

Other employees sensed that things were not going well. Phyllis Beaulieu, who in 1968 worked in Eastern's paper-testing laboratory, described the uneasy atmosphere among workers as rumours became reality: "*At first [Standard Packaging] closed the pulp mill the year before... And I said you know, I have an awful feeling that they are going to close this mill. Well things kept looking terrible, more terrible all the time*."[16] Production worker Craig Clement also spoke of the reasons Standard Packaging closed the mill:

> *After that time, well the equipment was real old and the upkeep on it wasn't really good and the people that owned it in the first place, Standard Packaging they just let it run down. I don't know if Decesere [another worker I interviewed] told you that or not, some of the other guys probably will but the only reason the mill shut down in '68, most people think is they just didn't take care of the place. They didn't put any money into new equipment, not very much, just enough to keep it going. [Standard Packaging] was out in New York I guess, I can't remember now and they weren't even a paper oriented company, [just] packaging; nothing like [fine] paper. And I used to remember working, seeing a lot of white hats walking around at that time, you know people with helmets on, too many chiefs*.[17]

When Standard Packaging closed Eastern Fine Paper on 5 March 1968, 1,200 people lost their jobs. Referring to the Eastern as an "impossible financial drain on the company," president of Standard Packaging, Lowell E. Krieg, blamed "basic facility problems, plus depressed conditions in the pulp and paper industry." According to the *Bangor Daily News* "First news of the decision was a notice on the company's bulletin board when the men reported for work Monday morning." [18] The mills closing hit the community hard. In addition to unemployed mill workers, the mill closing led to local diners, department stores, and other nearby businesses suffering from a lack of mill worker patronage. In addition, closing the mill without notice to the workers was a terribly unkind act,

---

[16] Interview with Phyllis Beaulieu, Dedham, Maine, 23 January 2006. NA 3393, Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono.
[17] Interview with Craig Clement, South Brewer, Maine, 14 November 2005 . NA 3396, Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono.
[18] Moran, Jack. "1,200 Jobless in Mill Shutdown." *Bangor Daily News*, 5 March 1968, 1.

ISSN 1923-0567

illustrating starkly the lack of connection between the company owners and workers in the community.

In an effort to save the community from this loss, former company engineer Bruce Hamilton, company president Frank Knight, and financial vice president Arthur Tilley — all members of the local community — secured a three million dollar loan guaranteed by the federal government and started the mill up once again. Eastern Fine Paper now belonged to the workers whose dedication and perseverance brought it back to life. The new, local management was successful, but the loss of the woodlands hurt them when the prices of pulp became prohibitive. The business no longer had access to the vast woodlands or the pulp mill that once belonged to Eastern because they had been sold by Standard packaging. They needed additional capital. So Hamilton, Tilley, and Knight decided to try to find someone interested in buying part of Eastern.[19] Soon thereafter, E.B. Eddy, a pulp and paper operation owned by George Weston Industries of Canada, showed interest in the South Brewer mill. According to Tilley:

> *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. Anything that they passed through the borders between the United States and Canada, there was a fee charged... Coming in and taking over Eastern gave them access on this side of the border*.[20]

E. B. Eddy agreed to purchase 51 per cent interest in the Eastern mill, with the option to buy the rest after five years, which they did. As it turned out, Eddy retained ownership for nearly thirty years, until 1989. The purchase was advantageous for all involved.

> *Around 1975, the mill started making a good profit. I don't know how many, probably two or three million dollars or something like that. And one little thing that Frank and I and Bruce shared with the union to get them to come back [following the 1968 re-opening] was that we would establish a profit sharing agreement*.[21]

---

[19] Amy L. Stevens. " 'I've got a Million of these Stories': Workers' Perspectives at the Eastern Fine Paper Corporation, 1960-2004," *Maine History* 45.1 (December, 2009): 15-36.
[20] Interview with Arthur Tilley, Brewer, Maine, 24 February 2006; Northeast Archives (NA) 3426, Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono.
[21] Interview with Arthur Tilley.

ISSN 1923-0567

The profit sharing provided employees with added incentive to produce good products. Workers told us they were very proud of the paper they made, and very appreciative of the profit sharing bonuses that came at the end of the year.

During the 1980s, while other paper companies were closing, Eastern's continued success led to further growth and expansion. Then in 1989 Joe Torras, the owner and president of Massachusetts-based Preco, Inc., the parent company of Lincoln Pulp & Paper since 1968, purchased the Eastern Fine Paper mill in South Brewer. "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 which was made from waste sawdust.[22] But Joe Torras again closed the Brewer mill in 2004. Employees were given no warning and the resulting loss effected several small businesses near the mill that were also forced to shut down. This time the closure was permanent.

Deindustrialization

Before beginning the oral history process, we conducted some historical research on the mill and on deindustrialization scholarship in order to put the Brewer case in context. Deindustrialization in the United States is a late 20th century phenomenon that has had a huge impact on our economy. While economic growth was about 4.1 per cent in 1960 and unemployment less than 4 per cent, in the first wave of deindustrialization, productivity decreased to a low of 1.3 per cent in 1973 and unemployment grew rapidly to a high of 10.8 per cent in 1982. As imports rose, between 32 and 38 million people lost their jobs in the 1970s. While the top 20 per cent of the population gained income, the lower 40 per cent lost income. Wages and income rose again in the 1990s and manufacturing held a 2.5 per cent growth until the recession of 2008. When these periods of high unemployment take place, economists and business leaders talk about restructuring, while workers and communities suffer a sense of loss and betrayal.[23] These economic changes are not restricted to the United States. As Meg Luxton and June Corman point out in their study of working-class women and men in Hamilton, Ontario, the extreme political and economic changes due to deindustrialization have reduced the standards of living for many people in Canada as well.[24]

---

[22] *Bangor Daily News* 14 October 1993, EFP 2, 4, 21.
[23] Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcote. *Beyond the Ruins: The Meaning of Deindustrialization*. (Ithaca: ILR Press Cornell University, 2003), vii-ix.
[24] Meg Luxton and June Corman. *Getting by in Hard Times: Gendered Labour at Home and on the Job*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 4.

ISSN 1923-0567

Deindustrialization has been studied by sociologists, economists, historians, geographers, anthropologists, feminists, and political scientists. Most scholars point to large global developments to explain deindustrialization. Sociologist Arthur Alderson, for example, points to investments and imports as causes of deindustrialization.[25] Certainly, competition from South American and Asian paper companies created a tighter market for Maine paper makers in the latter part of the 20th century. However, not all paper mills closed. Some have continued to do well in spite of foreign competition and investments in global companies elsewhere.

Economists Baugh and Yudken question whether deindustrialization is inevitable and call for the cessation of trade deals with other countries until the trade deficit is addressed through the building of new factories.[26] This idea may work in some areas, but it is not likely to be a successful strategy for Maine. New paper mills have not been built in Maine. Older companies have been bought and sold, with new owners investing in improving equipment and facilities. New manufacturing plants might be the answer for some industries, but it is unlikely that a new facility — with very expensive start-up costs — would help the pulp and paper industry in Maine.

According to economist Lloyd Irland, in 1900 there were 35 paper mills in Maine and in 1999 there were only 17. In the United States the pulp and paper industry grew throughout the 20th century, although the Northeast lost companies due to competition from newer and larger mills in the south. Between 1989 and 1999, 52 US mills closed permanently, but then the US pulp and paper industry began to lose market share due to global competition and between 1999 and 2002, 105 paper machines closed.[27] The industry continues to be a strong economic force in Maine with fewer mills and fewer workers today because many processes have been automated. Although the Eastern mill was closed, other mills are doing well. The facility at Eastern Corporation was old but improvements could have been made by management. However, that was not to be. Instead, owners used the Brewer facility to strengthen other sectors in their ownership portfolios.

Economist Barry Bluestone argues that deindustrialization is cyclical and regional. He suggests that, although it creates great hardships in certain areas of the country, deindustrialization is only a result of the internal movement of

[25] Arthur S. Alderson. "Explaining deindustrialization: Globalization, failure, or success?" *American Sociological Review* 64.5 (October, 1999):701-721.
[26] Bob Baugh and Joel Yudken. "Is deindustrialization inevitable? " *New Labour Forum* 15.2 (Summer, 2006): 54-64.
[27] Lloyd C. Irland. "Papermaking in Maine: Economic Trends from 1894 to 2000," *Maine History* 45.1 (December, 2009): 53-74.

ISSN 1923-0567

manufacturing, not the end of industry in the United States.[28] Bluestone's argument relates to Eastern insofar as owners of Eastern used equipment and materials from the Brewer facility to enhance their factories in Massachusetts and Lincoln, Maine. This argument points to management decisions which appear to be made entirely without concern for local economies or for workers. This seems to be a central problem with capitalism: it is oriented entirely to profits and this inevitably means that the health and welfare of actual communities are expendable in the search for 'the bottom line.'

Anthropologist Thomas Dunk, working with displaced pulp and paper workers in Canada, suggests that the working class was deliberately manipulated into passivity by powerful forces that purged resistance from labour movements, thus allowing the owners to close the mills.[29] While we have seen a serious undermining of labour interests by policy makers in the United States, the union at Eastern was never particularly strong. Nor would it have been able to influence the decisions made by owners of the mill. What we learned about the union from interviews with workers was that the union primarily dealt with internal grievances and matters of seniority. One of the reasons that the union was not strong is that for generations the mills paid the highest wages and provided the most economic security in Maine. Those unions that did gain strength were broken or weakened in the 1980s. For example, in June of 1987, 1,250 workers at International Paper Company's Androscoggin paper mill in Jay, Maine, went on strike. Within two months, all the union workers were permanently replaced, and 16 months later, the strike was called off.[30] This and other similar incidents permanently weakened labour unions in Maine's pulp and paper industry.

When mills close, communities can be devastated. Often regional industrial decline and poverty — with its associated problems — are not addressed by policy makers. Too many communities do not develop economic planning that seeks enough diversity to sustain local and regional economies. Historians Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcote in their book on deindustrialization describe a serious, wrong assumption that many communities make: that fixed capital investment in resource extraction, heavy machinery, and value-added production defines a stable standard against which all subsequent changes are to be judged.[31]

---

[28] Barry Bluestone, "Is Deindustrialization a Myth? Capital Mobility versus Absorptive Capacity in the U. S. Economy," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 475 no. 1 (September 1984): 39-51.
[29] Thomas Dunk. "Remaking the working class: Experience, class consciousness, and the industrial adjustment process," *American Ethnologist* 29.4 (November 2002): 878-900.
[30] Peter Kellman, "Jay, Maine, Fights for Jobs and the Environment," *Labor Research Review* 1.22 (1994), Article 13.
[31] Cowie and Heathcote, *Beyond the Ruins*, 5.

ISSN 1923-0567

In a comparative study of displaced Canadian and American industrial workers in the Great Lakes Basin, Steven High found that American labour's conservatism left workers little power to negotiate for government protection, while Canadian labour organized and was able to make legislative gains in Ontario that required severance pay for workers and other protections.[32] We found a similar sense of powerlessness among the American workers we interviewed. They did not blame outsourcing or trade agreements as one might expect, or even the economic system as a whole, but instead they blamed specific managers' decisions for the mill's closing.

Listening to the Voices of Workers

Recognizing the impact the mill closing had on the community, history graduate student Amy L. Stevens and I conducted more than forty recorded oral history interviews in 2004 with former workers of Eastern Corporation, and Amy wrote her master's thesis on the basis of this research.[33] Our research focused on occupational culture: the types of jobs performed, how workers learned their jobs, initiation rites, accident stories, kin ties, gender relations, what workers understood about the reasons for the mill closing, and the impact the closing had on them and their families.[34]

These interviews suggest that workers' narratives can provide scholars with access to local knowledge, traditional knowledge, and insider knowledge. Local knowledge includes knowledge of the local community, the habits and cultural norms of the community. Traditional knowledge often relates to how work is conducted. We found, for example, that most workers learned their paper making skills from other workers rather than from formal training. Insider knowledge is the kind of knowledge that only workers within an industry are privy to, such as the impact of decisions made by management on the operation of the business. These alternative kinds of knowledge greatly enhance our understanding of work, labour history, and especially the effects of global economic forces on communities and individuals. Making visible the voices of oppressed classes and genders offers a critical perspective and questions the truth of some of the dominant narratives of deindustrialization. Other oral historians have investigated the effects of deindustrialization on worker's lives to better

[32] High. *Industrial Sunset*, 186-199.
[33] Amy Stevens: "From Broke to Finish: A History of the Eastern Fine Paper Mill, 1889-2004" (MA thesis, The University of Maine, 2008).
[34] Pauleena MacDougall and Amy L. Stevens. "The Power of Place in Memory: An Oral History of the Eastern Corporation in Brewer, Maine," *Maine History* 45.1 (December 2009): 5-14.

ISSN 1923-0567

understand how workers cope with massive layoffs and downsizing.[35] Our approach also yielded unique information about the causes of the mill's closing.

We approached the oral history project knowing that as academics we were outsiders, and that mill workers were going through painful transitions in their lives. We had some advantages, in that I had some experience with pulp and paper technology from working in a chemical engineering lab while in graduate school, so I understood much of the terminology used by employees and processes of the work. Amy Stevens grew up in Brewer and knew many of the local people. We both came from working-class backgrounds. In spite of these advantages, we also recognized the power differential between the academic world that we came from and the working world of the mill. I wanted to understand the culture of the mill and find the narratives that existed in the knowledge of the workers, to see if they matched the major narrative put out by mill owners and other 'experts' about the failure and closure of the company.

Our approach was reflexive, ethnographic, qualitative, and feminist. We sought to understand the workers' experiences of deindustrialization and through our research to provide some benefit to the workers while understanding that our presence in the process set up an uneven power structure. This unevenness was most apparent with workers who were not part of management and had not experienced higher education. Nonetheless, workers were no longer in danger of losing their jobs — that had already happened — so they were able to speak freely about their observations. We hoped that by interviewing a wide variety of workers who performed different jobs in the mill, we could better understand the process of deindustrialization filtered through the mill workers' experiences.

We began by enlisting the aid of the staff at city hall in Brewer (some of whom had worked in the mill) and invited workers to a 'get acquainted' session where we told them that we wanted to do an oral history project, and asked them if they would like to take part in it. We also circulated a paper for them to suggest others they knew who we should approach as well. The stories of the mill began that evening and there was much enthusiasm for the project. We promised to give them copies of the materials we collected and to archive the interviews, documents, and photographs at the University of Maine. Subsequently we asked each person we interviewed to suggest others to contact and so our list grew. There were a few people who were still too upset about the mill closing to talk

[35] Steve May and Laura Morrison, "Making Sense of Restructuring: Narratives of Accommodation among Downsized Workers," in *Beyond the Ruins: The Meaning of Deindustrialization*, ed. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcote (Ithaca: ILR Press Cornell University, 2003): 259-283; and Joy L. Hart and Tracy E. K'Meyer, "Worker Memory and Narrative: Personal Stories of Deindustrialization in Louisville, Kentucky," in *Beyond the Ruins: The Meaning of Deindustrialization*, ed. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcote (Ithaca: ILR Press Cornell University, 2003), 284-304.

ISSN 1923-0567

about it, but the majority of former workers who we contacted were pleased to talk with us. In addition, many had photos or small souvenirs such as paper samples and old paycheques that we were able to either copy or obtain for the archives.[36]

Our method for conducting the project included engaging the community and trust-building. We told participants the interviews and associated documents and photographs would be archived at the University of Maine and we would develop a documentary which we would share with them. We listened carefully to the stories the workers told. At the end of the project all of the participants received a copy of a DVD with our documentary: "The Writing on the Wall: Stories and Pictures from the Eastern Fine Paper Mill."[37] All of their interviews, transcripts, photographs, and documents were archived at the University of Maine and are accessible to the public.

Some of the key themes we explored with workers were questions of gender relations, class, and racial diversity. Most of the workers we interviewed worked at the mill during the middle part of the 20th century until it closed in 2004. Some were retired before 2004. We interviewed both men and women because we wanted to understand how experiences of men and women, management and production, retirees and laid-off workers, might differ. Most of the people we interviewed were of the working class, who tended to be local. Some of the former managers we interviewed were also local, having grown up in Brewer. We did not interview the final owners of the mill who lived out of state. Most of the women we interviewed worked in the office or in shipping and packaging, but a very small number of women had made their way into the higher paying production areas. We asked both men and women about gender relations. We asked about relations between management and workers. We asked about race. From these questions we learned something of the mill's working-class culture.

The most surprising thing we learned from the interviews was that in spite of gender or ethnic differences, all workers agreed on the cause of the mill's demise. We found that the community of workers had strong negative feelings — not towards management in general — but to management from outside the community. They viewed these 'others' as invaders who plundered the mill and drove it to its eventual demise. We found, therefore, that we were not just

[36] Using images of some of these materials as well as photographs, we have created an online exhibit on the Maine Memory Network: http://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/2146/page/3548/display?use_mmn=1

[37] "The Writing on the Wall: Stories and Pictures from the Eastern Fine Paper Mill." DVD. Three hundred photographs, video and audio interviews, glossary of terms, map of mill, historic timeline, and mill worker biographies. Produced by the Maine Folklife Center at the University of Maine.

ISSN 1923-0567

recognizing race, class, and gender differences, but also differences based on geographical origin. Perhaps the non-local management might have been more readily accepted had they acknowledged the experience and knowledge of the existing staff rather than ignoring them or in some cases replacing them.

When we asked about the causes of the mill closing, the workers' narratives focused strongly on the issue of local vs. non-local ownership and control, and the impact of local vs. non-local ownership on the community and ultimate failure of the mill. Their observations reinforce the notion that the owners' connection to community — or lack thereof — influences the kinds of decisions they make in their businesses. In addition, our research suggests that the rules that structure capitalism favour growth, volatility, and change — not stewardship, democracy, and broadly shared prosperity. When a local business grows large enough to be purchased by an outside firm it becomes vulnerable to decision-making that is not grounded in local or even state and regional well-being. Yet unlike High's study of Canadian nationalist responses to mill closings, we did not find any anti-government rhetoric, nor did workers blame large corporations for their job losses. Workers did not appear to have any interest in protesting or occupying or organizing politically to change the situation. Yet they received no advance warning or severance pay from the company.

The history of the mill — as seen from the workers' perspective — makes clear how being 'from away' had a direct impact on the decisions management made and on the damage to the mill and the workers that resulted from those decisions.

Torras' purchase of Eastern in 1989 took management by surprise. 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*." Back then, Hamilton says, Torras was more interested in Lincoln because of its pulp mill and tissue machines, whereas "*we thought Brewer had more potential. Brewer had the brand names and we thought those were important: Atlantic Bond, Manifest Bond, Certificate Bond*." [38]

Hamilton told us that in the late 1980s, E. B. Eddy became interested in purchasing the Lincoln mill. "*But [Torras] turned it around, and purchased Eastern instead: I elected to stay with Eastern*." Hamilton's decision to remain with his workers in Brewer under the new ownership was unfortunate for him, because soon Torras replaced him and other managers with his own staff and Hamilton was out of a job. Torras also did away with the very popular profit sharing arrangement the company had with its workers. Thus, employees lost the little control they had enjoyed under Hamilton's leadership.

[38] Interview with Bruce Hamilton, Brewer, Maine, 11 October 2006; NA 3404, Maine Folklife Center, Orono.

ISSN 1923-0567

Torras' 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 25-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*."[39]

Torras' characterization of a close collaboration between the two mills stands in stark contrast to the perceptions of Eastern workers. Still, Torras' optimism was not entirely 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 which was made from waste sawdust.

To Torras and his managerial staff, the financial benefits of the merger were seemingly endless. So why did the Brewer mill spiral into bankruptcy within several years? Why, in January 2004, after more than a century of successful paper production, did Eastern Fine Paper close its doors forever? If Torras' enthusiastic press releases were solely relied upon, one would come away with a very different image of Eastern's later years, when it seemed everything was going fine and then, suddenly, the mill announced its bankruptcy.

Our oral history interviews provide unique insights into this problem. Workers voiced many opinions about just what led to the mill's closure. Their opinions reflect a culture in which new management ignored or disparaged the knowledge of local workers and local management in favor of outside management and decision-making. Workers believe that 'outside' management — that is managers who did not grow up in the Brewer area and who did not move up internally within the company— made decisions that led to the mill's demise. Arthur Tilley was at first optimistic about the merger:

[39] Eastern Fine Paper, Inc., "Buying Eastern Fine Paper Restored an Entity Broken up in 1968." *Bangor Daily News* 14 October 1993, sec. EFP, 4.

ISSN 1923-0567

> *When Lincoln took over Brewer, I had a feeling that it was going to be good because Bob had told me what was being done at Lincoln and I got the feeling that they were good managers and that coming into Brewer and so forth and they were just going to be a good thing for both mills and I was really surprised when I started to hear that Brewer was going down, going down, going down, going down and so forth until it was closed.*[40]

Bernard O'Kane, head of paper sales at Eastern, was shocked when his experience and knowledge of the paper market was ignored by the new owners:

> *I wanted to sell paper that brought in more money. I wanted to get into a cotton content paper. I had New England business forms, NEBs they called it and that was a private water mark sheet. That [the water marks] was one of the things I mentioned earlier today that that stuff was the cream of the crop that added value and more money. See that's what Joe Torras did away with. Because he wanted to run pulp off his pulp machines up there [Lincoln] and he would disregard any you know, ideas from anybody. He wouldn't listen to anybody and consequently for all the things he did, we were against him.*[41]

Engineer and former president Bruce Hamilton was also frustrated by the new management's decisions:

> *Immediately after he (Joe Torras) bought it, it started going down. I shouldn't say things like that but it started going downhill very rapidly. And he 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 but it was; I think it was badly managed; … our suppliers liked coming to Eastern because it was a little jewel as far as they were concerned.*[42]

---

[40] Interview with Arthur Tilley.
[41] Interview with Bernard O'Kane, Brewer, Maine, 24 February 2006. NA 3415, Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono.
[42] Interview with Bruce Hamilton, Brewer, Maine, 11 October 2006. NA 3404, Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono.

ISSN 1923-0567

Workers who were not part of management had similar reflections on the reasons the mill closed. Maintenance worker Bud Reed told us:

> *Then Mr. Torras came along who at this time he had already owned the Lincoln mill. And I'm going to be right up front with you; from this point on until 2004 it was history for Eastern. Joe made up his mind to close Eastern Fine Paper. He wanted to run Lincoln. Eastern Fine Paper was known as making the best paper in the world. We had certificate bond, made a lot of copy papers and we went into the coating business, made a lot of coated paper for National Geographic. I had one cover I think it was back in early 70s, mid 70s there that shows how the reflection of a, you look at an image and then it changes. Well this is the first time that National Geographic had made a cover like this and it was thanks to the coating department*.[43]

Workers spoke with great pride about the products that they produced. Clarence Modery, an oiler, remembered the specialty paper they manufactured, and saw it as a distinctive symbol of the plant's possibilities of survival:

> *That's one thing about the Eastern, you know over the years I've seen a lot of people come and go and I know that a lot of those people were really good, clear-minded people that make good decisions and I know that if the Eastern was still running today, it would be a profitable mill. It had the potential but…the owner made some bad choices I guess, got into commodity grades instead of specialty stuff. We made a lot of specialty stuff. We made, years back we made paper for Turkey, a special paper for money we made in Turkey. Yes. Way back when they had the war going on over Desert Storm, that's what in 90, 91 whatever it was. We took our number one machine and for a solid month ran nothing but map paper for the government*.[44]

There was a common narrative about the closure that emerged from employees engaged in all parts of the enterprise. Human resources staff observed

[43] Interview with Bud Reed, Brewer, Maine, 15 February 2006. NA 3418, Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono.
[44] Interview with Clarence Modery, Brewer, Maine, 19 June 2006. NA 3412, Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono.

ISSN 1923-0567

the same issue as central to the mill closing as that voiced by production and management staff. According to Ann Robinson:

> *I'll never forget the day that we were all bused over to the Bangor Motor Inn and there was a huge area that we all sat in and Mr. Torras spoke, and a lot of his other managers spoke, and one thing they said to us they were changing the product mix. Now Eastern Fine Paper was known for a fine writing paper. They were changing it to commodity grade. Now every mill in the country would do commodity grade and that was the beginning of the demise, the end right there*.[45]

Workers also noticed that the Lincoln mill was favored over the Brewer mill. Dennis Townsend, who worked in the coating department observed:

> *Yes, you really could see the writing on the wall. I actually was kind of surprised it lasted as long as it did. Many of the people that I worked with said, "Oh no, we're going to make it; we're going to make it," but you know they just, they didn't have the money to buy anything to make any of the repairs that they needed to make and it seemed like, because he owned two mills; the one in Lincoln as well and 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 that they were doing everything they could to save the Lincoln mill.*[46]

Jim Dinardo, color boss, explained in more detail why the conversion from specialty paper to commodity paper was a move that inevitably led to failure. His observations underscore the local knowledge that workers had about production, although this was discounted by management:

> *They put six, seven, eight million dollars into the number two paper machine and they converted it to make a grade of paper that was being made at other paper mills by machines that were a 300 inch decal which was the width of the roll of paper and the biggest that we could make was 108. They could run at 2,000 feet, we*

[45] Interview with Anne Robinson, Holden, Maine, 31 March 2006; NA 3420, Maine Folklife Center, Orono.
[46] Interview with Dennis Townsend, Brewer, Maine, 25 April 2006. NA 3427, Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono.

ISSN 1923-0567

> *couldn't run at 1,500. So they were making two or three times as much paper an hour as we could make in what they called a commodity grade which was the low end of the pay scale for the paper and it just, in hindsight it just seemed like a real foolish thing to have done but it was done*.[47]

Joe Shorette, who finished and embossed paper reinforced this explanation:

> *Because it was a specialty mill and we had our own bonds, did our own brands of paper that were well known. You know when they got away from that, tried to get into commodities but you know try to corner the market on these new ideas and stuff, it just never panned out. There wasn't, I don't think it was a big enough mill to begin with, you know; I mean that's ok for a big mill like Georgia Pacific where they've got a lot of property and capital. They can afford to experiment like that but when you've got a two-mill operation you know, I never understood that as a marketing strategy from my point of view*.[48]

Even Lois Andrews, who was the executive secretary for Joe Torras, and one might expect someone who was loyal to his views, provided the same explanation for the plant going downhill, which stressed new management's inability to draw on the actual, existing knowledge of workers:

> *And I believe, if my memory serves me correctly, that we had the corner on cotton content papers and then when the Torras group took over we found ourselves sliding away from these niche markets into more economy type grades which was the downfall of that paper mill I am convinced <u>and tried to tell them</u> but you couldn't tell him anything because he wasn't willing to listen or he might listen and then just dismiss that*.[49]

Most Eastern employees believed that despite Torras' claims about the reciprocal benefits of the Brewer-Lincoln merger, his ultimate goal was to keep the Lincoln mill running while using up whatever resources Eastern could offer.

---

[47] Interview with James Dinardo, Brewer, Maine, 28 December 2005. NA 3400, Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono

[48] Interview with Joseph Shorette, Brewer, Maine, 25 May 2006. NA 3423, Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono.

[49] Interview with Lois Andrews, Brewer, Maine, 6 January 2006. NA 3391, Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono

ISSN 1923-0567

"*We always felt like Lincoln was his baby and he was going to milk us for whatever he could to keep that place running*," says Kearns. "*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]*."[50] But in the end, many Eastern workers come back around to placing the blame on Torras and his managers being 'outsiders' who really did not understand the history and capacity of the South Brewer mill. In their view, these outside managers never appreciated the energy and dedication of the workers. The layoffs, occurring as they did without warning, left employees feeling cheated and deceived by Torras.

The Eastern Corporation oral history project illustrates how oral history can illuminate important events and processes when brought together with standard historical research which provides information about economic forces, general cultural trends, policy decisions, and other important issues. Each method is partial, only revealing a portion of the story. Oral histories provide insight into the nature of human relationships, such as management-worker interactions, particularly how these are interpreted and remembered, and then become part of local history. In this case, it is especially interesting that workers and local managers seemed to be of one mind regarding the closing of the mill and the lack of jobs. Certainly they are not objective observers, since all of them were hurt by the mill closing. But none of them pointed to labour costs, trade deals, or any of the other kinds of explanations for deindustrialization that are most often cited in the dominant academic and media narratives.

Workers' observations led to additional insights into the causes and effects of industrial decision-making and capitalism in general. They provide valuable information for policy makers and economic development decision makers about how best to balance the large, resource-based industries with other economic development activities in their communities. Large manufacturing firms provided better-paying jobs throughout the 20th century. Rebuilding manufacturing strength in the country is desirable for the many unemployed, but there is a cautionary tale here about ownership, local control, and community health that should be considered by policy makers. Perhaps businesses could better cope with global competition if they paid attention to local knowledge, and perhaps community policy makers can find incentives to keep businesses open rather than moving elsewhere.

Finally, our approach — reflexive, ethnographic, qualitative and feminist — has much to recommend in terms of oral history methodology more generally: we broadly sampled mill workers from different positions throughout the business, included many questions about culture and relationships within the mill,

[50] Interview with Ron Kearns, Brewer, Maine, 7 April 2006. NA 3408, Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono.

ISSN 1923-0567

reviewed interviews to see what interviewers might agree or disagree upon, and paid attention to gender and class differences. This approach not only yielded important insights about the narrative of 'outsiders' versus 'insiders' in this local instance of deindustrialization, but it also sought to do no harm to the interviewees and wherever possible to provide benefit to the community and the individuals involved. The result of our research provides information on a broad range of subjects within the overarching process of deindustrialization. Since all of the materials — interviews, transcripts, photographs, videos, and associated documents — are housed in a publicly accessible archive, the materials will be available to other researchers interested in labour history and culture as well as to those who experienced, first hand, these momentous changes in their local community.

****

Four years after the closing of Eastern, Cianbro Corporation, a Maine-based employee-owned construction company purchased the site, razed the old paper mill and built a new manufacturing facility that makes modular industrial structures for oil refineries and mining operations. The Cianbro Eastern Manufacturing facility opened on 15 August 2008.[51]

[51] http://mainebusiness.mainetoday.com/newsdirect/release.html?id=6061

ISSN 1923-0567