



Weaving World

1920-2008

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Lewiston's Millworkers

For 150 years, Lewiston, Maine has been a city of weavers. The Androscoggin River powered large textile mills, employing thousands of workers. Lewiston bedspreads, sheets, and woolens were sold across the United States. Along with the shoe factories of Auburn, the mills gave rise to Maine's largest industrial center.

Defying harsh conditions, millworkers and their families created a rich, resilient social world. It was woven of many cultures: Yankee, Irish, German, Greek, Polish, Lithuanian. But from the late 19th century, most mill families hailed from French Canada, and their values, customs, and language predominated in the millworker's world.

Between the 1850s and the 1960s, Lewiston saw good times and lean times. Water wheels gave way to hydroelectric power, local entrepreneurs to regional corporations. Then, in the late 20th century, facing global competition and underinvestment, the mills closed, one by one. Today a single shop, Maine Heritage Weavers, sustains the traditions of Jacquard weaving. Yet many elders, now retired, remember the migration stories of their parents, the hard times before World War II, and the better times that followed.

"Weaving a World" tells their story, from the years of the Great Depression to the decline of the mills. The exhibit touches on war and strikes, technology and business. But mainly it recounts the lives of the people who worked in the mills, their families, and the community they made.

"Weaving a World" draws on both personal memories and the historical record. It brings together documents from local archives, mementoes and photographs saved in shoeboxes, tools and machines salvaged from the mills, and the voices of oral history. It is the product of a partnership between Museum L-A and Bates College. Retired millworkers, community historians, college teachers, and students worked together to do interviews, collect artifacts, investigate archives, and weave the story told here.

"...and while my grandmother was eating her lunch, my mother would start working to learn the job..." "...my father came here on a Thursday, and Monday morning he went to work at Bates Mill..."

"I remember my father telling me about my grandfather..."