
S.D. Warren Company

Stories of Maine's Paper Plantation

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Interview with Arthur Gordon

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Arthur Gordon

Tape One

Side One

86 The Warren management was wonderful .. they paid and gave almost as much as the union shops, almost as much, and so there really wan't that great incentive... and it was a good, fairly good work environment.

118 Union official caught embezzling in 1980s blew his brains out.

Why they unionized:

150 "We weren't equal with the other workers in the other paper Maine paper mills."

523 Describes high incidence of repetitive motion injuries on guillotine presses

525-550 Effort to redesign guillotine presses by adding button fails as both workers on bonus and supervisors conspire to end-run safety feature.

556 "Later on, the mill managers would be there for a very short period of time – perhaps two years. Their main concern was not the well-being of the mill, not the employee, but making a name for himself."

560 " I think the reason we got along so well was the Warren family. Long before we started to organize seriously, the Warrens, Joe Warren – I believe he was a nephew or something, from the founder – took a particular interest, in the workers. [He] tried to know as much about them as he could and speak to them, inquire about them... I think that helped – it created excellent morale and that of course would deter organizing.

578 "The chaps were making outrageous bonus and if they just back off they would be better off, because they would make so much bonus – there would be a great push to cut back on the bonus and that would occur to a degree."

Side Two

91 "Sometimes we'd have employees that were really not good employees, always finding fault with something, filing grievances."

95-110 If workers were sent home at the end of a shift and then management discovered they needed more product they might put a management person on the machine in violation of the contract. The union would grieve this and the worker sent home would get paid time and a half for time management worked. "We loved that .. while your [manager is] working, you are going to be paying the chap at home."

188 -23

Key story

In one story, he remarks that people would leave (in the finishing department) before the end of their midnight to 8 am shift. “Within the departments, they would relieve different jobs at different times.”

But in fact the crew would start in at 7:15, 7:25, 7:30, 7:40, 7:45 - everybody is out of there at least 15 minutes before their given time. ... And I remember we had a supervisor come in, in this finishing department that was labor intensified, and he said ‘ this was the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of - I never know who is going when or what.’ Of course the foreman knew and the crew knew that such and such a position would leave a half an hour early. And, anything after so much time is ... a person being relieved would receive overtime. So the person would require overtime before the 8 o’clock period ... And the supervisor just thought that was ridiculous, so everyone was going to leave at the same time. Everyone at four o’clock.... Of course no one liked that. And they’re all going to put up a terrible fuss. The supervisor didn’t realize that the parking lot would not hold two shifts’ cars - it wasn’t large enough - this dragging it out, so to speak or relieving early, so to speak, made the parking lots workable.

His tone of voice become stronger, more assertive.

And then the chaps would, would all around this area coming into this section of the mill, would stop their cars, put up their hood and poke their head underneath their hood there with a perplexed look ... And they were jamming up traffic you couldn’t get in and out of the parking lot, you couldn’t get around the streets. Pretty soon, the emergency response people, the fire chief and the police chief - they can see something terrible is going on and they’re concerned about safety vehicles getting through, just a terrible traffic snarl. Well, uh, I think that, uh, program didn’t last a week. We went back. And everyone was happy, smirking away, happy-happy you know. And they took care of that, what they considered foolishness, you know.

365 Did foreman respect your knowledge of your machine?

Not really, not really. In my case, I could always go faster and I knew about what I could do and that was it. And I would pretty much stay the course. And they would cajole – they wouldn’t really demand, but really, cajole – ‘can’t you get a little more, can we do this, this, this’ – we were always making bonus. And of course bonus is 100% plus, so when we made bonus, we were doing 100% of the work required. And anything above 100% would be bonus. So there wasn’t that much that they could discipline for.

On shift work

445 “And she said [his wife Barbara] ‘I dreaded the midnight ‘ – I was always grumpy on my long weekend because I dreaded going in at midnight... And the children knew it too. “Dad’s going in on midnight” - Along about Sunday I’d get grumpy..

451 Did you ever get used to it?

452 No, It gets worst. It gets worst. The body never, never will adjust to the circadian rhythm, we have etched, And as we get older, it’s more difficult. And when I retired, I should have been working all these extras – so I could have gotten my pay up for social security – and I didn’t.

456 I just didn’t want to. It was difficult. And I was not very happy about working 16 hours – as time went on. But when I was first – much younger – I didn’t mind the 16 hours. I could work 16 hours, come home, grab my 6 hours sleep and go right back in.”

461 They were forced to work 16 if our relief didn’t come in. If they couldn’t find anyone you could be forced to work 16.

473 We had one weekend a month, I guess [with shift work].

480 We worked most holidays. – It takes a long, long time to shut down machines and a long time to start them up.” (paper machines and lime kilns)

502 Most of the other holidays we worked – Thanksgiving they worked and we worked as we speak... “

He mentions that they got paid a total of double-time and a half with their union contract for holidays. I asked him if he felt it was worth the money:

507-520 “Holidays, in some cases we could have had off, but we worked them. We always worked them. I look back. My children were each in the high school marching bands. And I had never seen them march in the Memorial Day parade. And I regret that now.” *He’d have to decide in 30 seconds whether or not to stay and work on holidays. He could have gotten somebody else to cover. “Later, I’d want to kick myself.”*

529-537 His area was climate controlled to 67’ - they figured out how to get it warmer by putting a damp rag over a thermostat.

542-575 Union effort to study and change shift work was rebuffed by workers.

Tape Two

Dumb management stories

STORY NUMBER ONE

61-90 A bearing would be breaking - the operator “would notice it – we could either hear it, or feel it, or see it” and report it. But the “foreman didn’t

want to shut down because he didn't want to lose production." Eventually a shaft breaks and the machine is down for ten hours instead of a few minutes.
94 "I think that better managing techniques could be employed – I, I just - stupid!"

STORY NUMBER TWO

100-126

The union did not have influence over hiring. Arthur Gordon goes to a foreman – a “good friend” – to discuss a recent hire still in his probationary period:

“He’s saying ‘I’ve got to make a performance report for John Doe – John Doe is useless, John Doe is always late, he doesn’t do his work, he leaves everything in a mess, he’s no credit to his fellow employees – he won’t work with them, always filing grievances. John Doe is not a good employee.’ So I say to the foreman, ‘well, that has to be easy, because he is going through his probationary period and... is he acceptable?’ ... And the foreman says: ‘No. I’m going to give him good marks. Anyone as *bad* as he is, has got to be related to someone. And I’m not about to find out who he is related to.’ And I say – ‘well *we’re going to be stuck* with him.’ And he says: “No, no, no. We’re going to ship him over to the other side of the mill.”

130 How he got hired. He was a friend of the mill manager’s secretary.

139 “It used to be a lot of family members. It was a family mill. There was a not of nice French families. And they had a lot of children. They were good workers, and, see, the families would come in that way.”

314 -323 Women in the finishing department.

Many of them were unwed ladies. They had been maybe younger members of their family or older members of the family and if they were older members, they were taking care of the younger children. And then they were up in there thirties and forties, and their parents needed help so they never married. Wonderful women, awfully good workers.

357 “Played politics. Westbrook state rep from mill management had a horrible labor record. They published his voting record in the union newsletter. Defeated him and was replaced by Ronnie Usher.