FINAL PROJECT:
An Oral History of Life in a Textile Mill
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For my final project, I interviewed my maternal grandfather, Lucien Filion. He had flaming red hair in his younger days and has had the nickname "Red" all of his life. On the tape, I refer to him as "Red" and pretend that I do not know him so that the transcriber will not be confused.

My Pepere had never talked to me about his work before and he retired when I was only six years old, so this was a real learning experience for me. Before this interview, the only thing that I knew about his job was that he worked at Bates Mill. He loves to talk about sports or friends, but not about work!

Because my Pepere does not like to talk about himself, I also interviewed my mother. We listened to the tape together and she added to what my Pepere said. This really helped me because I also heard a family member’s feelings about the mill. My mom never worked in the mill, so her views were not as nice as my Pepere’s. She was also able to supplement the background information that my Pepere told me. He’s not young anymore and his memory is a little off.

I went over to my Pepere’s house for the interview and he was very excited about it. He was hoping that he could explain how the cotton goes from the fields to becoming a beautiful bedspread. However, when I informed him that I was more interested in personal information, he was not nearly as enthused. He still agreed to do the interview, but stated that
he did not have much to say. I told him that I would ask him questions and that he did not have to answer anything that he did not feel comfortable with, and then we started the interview.

Red was born in a little town in Canada called Garthby in 1915. His parents were farmers and they lived off the land. Red lived on their farm with his one brother and six sisters. They moved to Maine in May of 1923 on the Grand Trunk Railroad along with many other French speaking people from Garthby. The Canadians chose to move to Lewiston because they heard that there were lots of high paying jobs and that there were many French speaking people here. They debarked at the Lincoln Street station and found an apartment nearby and his parents got jobs at Bates Mill right away. They had to buy all new furniture because they had left theirs behind. Red said they lived there for about a year and then they moved further down on Lincoln Street for a couple of years during which time Red and his siblings went to school at St. Mary’s Parish. His family continued to move to different apartments on Knox Street for the rest of his life and the apartments got nicer every time. Red and his siblings transferred to St. Peter’s Parochial School, continuing their educations until they reached working age.

Red started working in a shoe shop when he was only 16, but he could not remember the name of it. This was before the union, so he worked more than full time and sometimes he had to work on Saturdays. He said he thought the job was strange at first, but
he got used to it. He worked there for six years, until the
great shoe strike in 1937, and was without a job for about a
year. He said the strike was a "funny game" at first because
everyone thought they would give in early, but they didn't.

Red finally landed a job at the Bates Mill in 1938. He
stayed there until he retired in 1978. He worked at Bates for a
total of 36 years. He got drafted for World War II and was gone
from 1941-1945, but his job was held for him while he was at war.

At Bates, Red started as a cotton boy and he brought the
cotton to the women working on the frames. He got the
opportunity to work in the slashing room. He was promoted to
"slash-attender," which was one of the higher paying jobs. He
was responsible for separating the strands of cotton string and
setting them up on the loom. This was very challenging because
sometimes there were thirty to forty thousand strings or "ends"
that had to be arranged in the correct color scheme. He said he
enjoyed working on the production line because he accomplished
something and got to see the results. They made beautiful
bedspreads, sheets, and some shirts. He found his job
challenging because it was a trade and he was good at it.

The (NRA) set the minimum wage was fourteen dollars a week,
with a cost of living increase every year. They had paid
holidays and insurance coverage. Workers' compensation was much
stricter. You had to have hurt yourself while you were working
and you needed witnesses. He only had one minor accident when he
broke his big toe, and he limped for a couple of weeks. However,
there were other jobs that were much more dangerous, and he saw many accidents.

The intense heat in the mill was very hazardous to the workers' health. There were steam conductors in the mill, two of which were in the slashing room. The workers drank lots of water and took salt pills, but many passed out on the job. Red said that he got used to it, but my mother has very different memories. She said that he used to come home pale and weak, sometimes even vomiting. She said it was awful. In the summer, he would go lay down right when he came home and not do anything all evening.

Red was not close with the people that he worked with. He would visit a couple of them, but everybody mostly kept to themselves. He mentioned that there were quite a few arguments on the job. The union improved the working conditions in the mill and the foreman/worker relationship. Before the union, you could be fired on the spot. After the union, it took three warnings and a review in order to be relieved of your job.

Red had many hobbies outside of work. He said that the mill was where you did your work to make money and that was it. He was a semi-pro baseball player for which he got paid ten or fifteen dollars. He also played hockey for the Nordiques and was a referee for schoolboy hockey games. He is still in good shape! If his father hadn't have died, he wouldn't have had to go to work at the mill, and he might have played for the Red Sox!

He was not willing to tell me any stories about working at
the mill. He said that there wasn’t anything to talk about; it was just work for money. My mother said that he worked very hard, and he was always tired. Red got married when he was about 35, and a short while after they had my mother. Red was then bumped by seniority from first to second shift, which was really hard for their family. They only had one child and my mother thinks that is because it was too hard for my Memere to take care of a baby all by herself.

All this makes you wonder why Red stayed at Bates Mill. He said that it was for the job security and the money. Most of the other people who worked there did not have any other skills, so they had to stay. Red, on the other hand, chose to stay even though he hated getting up and going there five days a week because he had seniority. There were some minor strikes over wage increases and benefits, but Red always felt that his job was secure. He said there was very little violence during the strikes and they did not last long.

Red never held any union offices and he never received any education from the union. It was only for job protection, safe working conditions, and fair wages. He said work is work; you do your work and you’re all right. He said working at Bates Mill was the same every day; it’s not very exciting and there’s not much to tell. Sadly, I have to agree with him. I think a majority of people feel the same way and that’s why we have so little record of labor history. At least I did my part to pass on a little bit of the past.
Interviewee: Lucien Filion (Red)  
Interviewer: Tammy Berube

Tammy: Hi Red, how are you doing today?

Red: Oh, very good, very good today.

Tammy: OK, I'm just gonna ask you a bunch of questions, uhm, where were you born?

Red: I was born in Canada, Garby???, little town in 1915.

Tammy: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Red: I had ah, one brother living and ah six sisters still alive except ah, five are alive today.

Tammy: Wow! Uhm, what did your parents do for work in Canada?

Red: Well, ah in, in a the period of time they were living on a farm in Canada and they were working as farmers, get the goods off the land and live, cause that was the only thing going on.

Tammy: When did you move to Lewiston, Maine?

Red: We ah, we came in Maine I think it was in May of 1923 on the Grand Trunk Railroad.

Tammy: Wow!

Red: And we ah, we debarked at the Grand Trunk Station on Lincoln Street where ah, my father looked around for rent and ah, we managed to find one on Railroad Alley, not far from the Grand Trunk Station, so we moved in right away. We had to buy some furniture, he had left everything behind, had sold it, so he bought enough furniture to get a little setup and that's where we lived for ah oh maybe half a year, six months to a year. And then ah we went further down on Lincoln Street to another building and we stayed there for maybe a couple of years and then ah this is where I first started my schooling in St. Mary's parish, at the parochial school...

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: ...and ah, from there we ah, ah moved up again further up north in the city up on Knox Street and there we stayed well, for the rest of our lives going from one end of Knox Street moving to the other end and ah, I was going to St. Peter's School and so were my sisters. The oldest ones were working at the mill.

Tammy: Uh, uh.
Red: They managed to get jobs at the Bates Manufacturing Company and ah that was the system going on until later on in years when we reached the working age, well I started working at the, in the shoe shop for a couple of years until the shoe strike came along and then I was, I was out of work for a year or so until the strike was settled.

Tammy: How old were you when you started working?

Red: I was sixteen, fifteen going on sixteen...

Tammy: Wow!

Red: ...ah,

Tammy: And you worked full time?

Red: Ya, oh ya. We, we worked full time. As a matter of fact we worked more than full time. In those days there was no union so if, if they needed the work in a hurry we had to stay over, we had to work sometimes on Saturday mornings in order to get the work out on time.

Tammy: What is your earliest memory of going to work?

Red: Well, it ah, at first it was a little strange cause it was some jobs that I had never, had never dreamed of doing and ah I was completely raw on the job as we say and I learned and ah, after a while you get used to it. You have to work somewheres to earn a living.

Tammy: Ya. What kind of a job did you do?

Red: Well at first when I come in, in textiles I was "cotton boy". I used to bring the yarn to the, to the women working on the ah on the frames and ah later on I, I got a chance to go in the slashing department where I went in and worked there ever since, and I retired.

Tammy: Uh, uh. What did you do there?

Red: I, I learned how to be a slasher tender and ah, that was a better paying job than the rest of the workers and ah it was interesting work, so I stayed on until I retired.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: Thirty-five years.

Tammy: Wow, that's a long time.

Red: Well, it is a long time but... years go by and you don't
Tammy: How did you feel about your work? Did you like it?

Red: Well, I enjoyed working ah, especially that type of work cause it was on the production line ah, ah...seems like you accomplish something that ah you know is gonna do some good results.

Tammy: Uh, uh. Was it hard work?

Red: Well, not exactly hard work but it, it was a, a constant ah, lookout. We had some 4000 ends?? to take care of so every time one broke we had to stop the machine and patch it up and get it going again, cause once the machine, once the machine was in a starch box, a size box ah, you couldn't stop more that maybe 15 - 20 seconds because the size would dry up and the yarn wouldn't go through the comb in front. It'd break all up. Which meant that you had to start all over again from right from the beginning to the end.

Tammy: Wow.

Red: So that was, that was the hard part of the job ah. Learn how to do it and do it fast and do it so that ah, you won't have a break out of it.

Tammy: Uh, uh. You mentioned the strike. Did you take part in that?

Red: Well, the shoe strike, I did. Ah, I got out like the rest of 'em and I never did go back in.

Tammy: What was that like?

Red: Well it, it was, at first it was mostly a funny game. We thought that they would ah give in early but then they have a, they have a union the shoe shop owners and they all got together and put the squeeze on the union so much that the union had to give up...

Tammy: Ah, ah.

Red: ...after some 18 months, I think. So by that time I managed to get a job in the textile industry where I stayed for the rest of my working days.

Tammy: Uh, uh. Ah, how much did you make at your job?

Red: Well, in the, in the early stages it was a question of the National N R A rule that they passed that they had to pay a certain amount which was fourteen dollars a week.
Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: But then depending on the type of work that you did the rate increased a little bit, but the minimum was $14 a week for a 40 week, ah, 40 hour week.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: But later on with the union contract it called for a raise every, almost every year. Maybe 5 percent, or 7 percent so they brought up your hourly wage income.

Tammy: Did you have any benefits?

Red: Well, the benefits included ah, time off on holidays and we had insurance coverage which wasn't 100% but it was fairly good, and ah that was about it.

Tammy: What about workman's comp?

Red: Well, the workers compensation was, was in at that time but it didn't cover as much as it does today. Had to be accident on the job itself, and you needed proof to show that ah that the thing occurred while you were at work. So it was, it was a little different than today.

Tammy: Were there a lot of accidents at the mill?

Red: Oh, ya, there were quite a few. Some people are more careless than others and sometimes it's the machinery that breaks and it causes accidents, like in the weaving department sometimes the shuttle that goes out, goes out of joint and then it flips in the air it'll strike somebody on the head or ah, that was what happened to me. It occurs once in a while, not too, too often but ah, same as in the, the winding department ah, sometimes it happens the ladies get their hair caught in, in with some of the rolls, pull their hair off.

Tammy: Ow! That must have hurt.

Red: But not, not too often. Once in a great while.

Tammy: Did you ever get hurt on the job?

Red: Just one time, I dropped a press roll on one toe, one of my toes, a big toe and ah, I limped for about a couple of weeks and that was it. That was the only accident I ever had.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: One guy next to my machine got his arm caught in one of the dry rolls and busted his arm right up to his shoulder almost.
Tammy: Wow.

Red: He was out of work for three months, three, four months but ah, accidents do happen and when they do you just can’t prevent them, it does happen and that’s it.

Tammy: Uh, uh, ya. Um, what were the, the conditions um, in the mill like, was it dirty or was it clean?

Red: Well, in the slashing department it wasn’t exactly dirty but it was hot. It was a very hot department because ah, in order to dry the yarn after it got out of the slice box we had a series of cylinders, steam inducted and ah, on my machine I had three of them and it really got hot. On a warm day in the summer if it’s 90 - 95 outdoors it probably was 125 inside.

Tammy: Wow! Bet you lost some weight on those days. (Laughter)

Red: You drank a lot of water and salt pills and ah, you get used to it. Sweat it out.

Tammy: Uh, uh. Ah, what was your relationship with the people that you worked with?

Red: Oh, we, we were friendly. There were quite a few that had something to say but they were all in the same boat as I so everybody did his job and little arguments that we had they were minor so we, they got over it.

Tammy: Did you get to be good friends with them?

Red: Well, friendly but not ah as we say ah, good but ah fairly, visit once in a while each other and but they too had their problems and we had ours and everybody stuck by their own family I guess, as much as they could.

Tammy: Uh, uh. How did you feel about your bosses, your foremen?

Red: Well, naturally ah, the foremen ah is, you don’t exactly feel too, too much enthused about ‘em because they give you orders sometimes that you don’t like and you don’t want to do ‘em, but you had to do it so, it causes a little friction between, between the foreman and the help. Naturally the foreman has to obey the company’s orders so he passes it down the line and the worker gets the, the result. He’s got to do what the foreman orders.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: But with the union, after the union come in things got a little better because the, the foremen actually didn’t have as much authority as they had before the union come in. See, they couldn’t fire anybody unless they, they gave ‘em three, three kinds???
warning and each warning they were entitled to a review of your case, so it took a long time before they could fire a man. Before, before the union it was just a case of either you please the boss, do what he tells you, make him little favors and you stayed and if you didn’t well, you were out.

Tammy: Wow!

Red: See, there was no, no protection.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: But once the union got in, it ah, protected the worker quite a bit.

Tammy: So, did you get married while you were working at the mill?

Red: Yes, yes I did get married while I was working at the mill. My wife was also working at the mill.

Tammy: Did you meet her there?

Red: Ah, no we met somewheres on a party somewheres or a reunion or something.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: Either at the skating rink or somewheres. It must have been at the skating rink, I can’t recall exactly.

Tammy: Uh, uh. Did you go skating a lot?

Red: Oh ya. Skates, we was on skates half of the time.

Tammy: Ya?

Red: During the winter we used to start early, around Thanksgiving. In those days it was cold and we used to start around Thanksgiving and go until March.

Tammy: Playing hockey?

Red: Skate everyday. Playing hockey and skating and ah other thing. We kept going all winter long.

Tammy: So did you do this at night when you got out of work?

Red: No, well at night after work, at first we didn’t have any lights on the rink. We couldn’t practice until ah maybe five o’clock, six o’clock to the latest but then after a while we installed a system of lights so that we could practice after dark.
Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: Then there was Saturday and Sunday we played hockey games and ah...

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: ...but it was mostly skating most of the time. We went skating every night of the week so, put on the skates and jump on the ice and GO! (Laughter)

Tammy: Did you have any other hobbies?

Red: Well, playing baseball, but hockey was mainly the main ah...baseball we kept occupied pretty well with it too. At least I did. I used to play in the younger days we used to play one game in the morning, one game in the afternoon and one game at night in the old Franklin Pasture here, at the Eagles, at the Eagles ground.

Tammy: Wow, was this before you started working?

Red: Ya, while I was going to school.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: And then later on after I started working, played a little bit of semi-pro ball and then the Army come in so that shut everything off.

Tammy: Did you get paid money to play semi-pro?

Red: Well, a little bit underhand. We're not suppose to get paid but ah, we did get a little something out of it.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: Not much, but ah, course in those days they're, they're only charging twenty-five cents at the gate to see a game, so it took a big crowd to get a little pot. They had to pay the other team a guarantee to come in, pay the umpires and by that time there's not too much to divide.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: But we did get ten, fifteen dollars. In those days it wasn't bad.

Tammy: That's almost as good as working at the mill. (Laughter)

Red: Ya.

Tammy: A lot more fun too I bet.
Red: Oh ya, ya. I love baseball. Same as hockey. As a matter of fact I, I love every sport. But those were the two major ones that I, I was most occupied with.

Tammy: You mentioned, you mentioned the war.

Red: Well, that was, that was a call for everybody. Everybody got called.

Tammy: You got drafted?

Red: I got drafted early in the in '41. In July. I stayed four and a half years in the, in the service, so I, I had my share of the Army.

Tammy: What did you do in the Army?

Red: Well, it was a series of ah different ah locations, different ah assignments. I wound up as a radio operator on the low speed Morse Code in Burma during the war with the CVN/CVI Theater?? and ah, after the war was over well we dropped back to Calcutta to be discharged to be sent home for discharge.

Tammy: Uh, uh. so when you came home did you start working in the mill right away?

Red: No, not exactly. We had ah, there was a clause there in the Army regulation that said that ah, you could stay out, I think it was for two months, and then return to your old job which was held back. You could have your old job back, but you had to go back within a certain amount of time. I can’t recall if it’s two months, I’m sure, I’m pretty sure it’s two months.

Tammy: So that was good, you didn’t have to look for a job, you just went back to your old one.

Red: No, oh, no. Then we were on the "twenty-one club" as they called it. We had twenty-one weeks that we was getting $21 a week, a month rath...$21, $21 a month, ya. So we used all of that up before going back to work.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: Most of the boys did.

Tammy: At work did you tell stories of stuff that had happened to you?

Red: No, no I, I never did bother to relate too much of the happenings. Nothing to brag about anyways, so...all of the sufferings and hard times we had, what’s gone is gone.
Tammy: Uh, uh. So after you got married, did your wife still work in the mill?

Red: Well, she did for a number of years and then ah they made some changes in the personnel where she was working in the room she was working and ah she was laid off. Then after a little while she went back to the Continental Mill for a year or so and then there too she, she quit. She never did work again except at the flower shop there. In her spare time at the flower shop.

Tammy: Uh, uh. So did you have any children?

Red: Well, this is, this is the time that Monita, my daughter, got born. So she was staying home taking care of the baby.

Tammy: Uh, uh. How did your working at the mill affect them?

Red: Well, eh, at the beginning I was on the day shift, then I ah, after a while I, there was some changes made, I had to go on the second shift. See with the union they work by seniorities so if a guy is young...older than you on seniority list he has a choice to take the shift he wants.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: So this one guy was ahead of me so he took the first shift.

Tammy: So you got bumped to second.

Red: And then I got pushed to the second shift but ah, after a while it turned around that one guy left on the first shift so I was next in line so I got back on the first shift...

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: ...where I stayed the rest of the time. When I retired I was the oldest one on the list. I had the most time in the mill, so the job was protected as long as I did my work and if the mill stayed in business I was all set.

Tammy: Was that ever a threat that they might close down?

Red: No, not ah, not in the, in the eighties. Was only at the end there in the nineties when the mill started going down, the textile business started sagging and ah, started closing some different rooms and styles of work they were making and eventually the thing folded up. Now there's only a handful of people working.

Tammy: Uh, uh. Ya. In my class, ah some, some of the men that are in the union at Bates Mill came in and talked to us about, about their work. Very interesting.
Red: Well, now I think that it's only ah the section of weaving that's running and the packing room to ship it out, inspect it. There's only a handful, maybe some seventy workers.

Tammy: Ya, ya.

Red: In those days there was over 2000 of us in the mill, dropped down to seventy.

Tammy: Wow...

Red: Ya.

Tammy: Big change. So did most of your friends work at the mills too?

Red: Well, some of them did while others worked over the city, different part, different business. The shoe industry and...but most, most of the most of the French people in the early thirties and forties were in the mills. Mills and shoe shops.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: That was the, the only work available that they could do. Some had enough ah, schooling to go in business but most of 'em ah, they, all they could do ah, plain labor.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: Because in those days when you reached working age school had to be left out. You went to work.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: That was the ah...

Tammy: Ya.

Red: And most of the kids were they were getting along ah, 14 - 15 they'd quit school anyway and go to work, so...but today it's just the opposite. You have to, to get a good education in order to get the good jobs.

Tammy: Ya, definitely.

Red: In those days there was plenty of basic work ah, that you didn't require any education.

Tammy: Uh, uh. Ya, you even need a high school diploma to get into the service now.

Red: Oh, ya, ya. Oh ya. Everything is technical and if you don’t
have it you don't go nowhere.

Tammy: So, when, while you were working at Bates Mill were there any um, other strikes or anything like that?

Red: Well, we did go on strike a couple of times but not for long, maybe for a week or a couple of weeks.

Tammy: What kind of things were you striking for?

Red: Well, the usual thing was a raise.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: Which they also included the fringe benefits ah...

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: That was mostly the disagreement. Naturally, the owners didn't like to give too many raises too often so they'd make a contract for two years, ah, three years at the most. So every two or three years you had the same problem.

Tammy: Uh, uh. Was there a lot of funding?? over going on strike?

Red: No, not too much ah. Well, there's always a few that get out of hand, but on the average there, there wasn't too, too much.

Tammy: How did you control those people that got out of hand?

Red: Well, usually ah, when they have a general meeting like that they have police protection. There's cops and then the members themselves, if there's something that breaks out they, they try to calm it down.

Tammy: So was everyone in the union that worked at the mill?

Red: Most everyone, oh ya. Most everyone. It's pretty hard if you're in a union mill if you don't get into the union. You run into problem with the rest of the crew.

Tammy: Ya.

Red: They ah, they don't want to be called rats, some of the..., so they join the union.

Tammy: Ya. Did you ever hold any offices in the union?

Red: No. But there's always, there's always a few that disagree with the union arguments. They feel that they're well off the way they are. They want to stay that way. They're afraid that the
mills gonna close or afraid they’re gonna be laid off, this and that but ah on the average ah, most of the workers were satisfied with the union. They, they enjoy the relationship, they were given good job protection and raises every once in a while so, ah the cost of living went up so, at one time we had a clause in there that the wages would go up with, according to the cost of living.

Tammy: Ya.

Red: Later on they dropped it. Knocked it off but ah those were certain benefits that we had and that we enjoyed...

Tammy: Uh, uh. Is there anything else that you can tell me about your work, about what things were like working in the mill?

Red: Well, it’s...work is work regardless of where you go. You have to put in your time and get your work out to the best of your ability, I guess. Make things ah agreeable with the foreman and ah don’t miss out too, too much on sick leave or this and that. It’s like any other thing, you do your work and if they’re satisfied, you’re alright.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: In places with unions, they have job security, they can feel at ease. Well in other places where there’s no union well then it creates a little problem. You don’t know from day to day what’s gonna happen.

Tammy: Uh, Uh, ya.

Red: So that covers about everything.

Tammy: Do you have any stories about working in the mill?

Red: No...not too much.

Tammy: (Laughter)

Red: No, things are pretty quiet in the mill. You go in, you do your work, you get out, go back home, next day it’s a repetition of the same thing. It goes on for weeks and months.

Tammy: (Laughter) Never ending.

Red: Not much going on.

Tammy: Well, you’ve been very informative, Red.

Red: (Laughter) Oh....ho, ho, ho.

Tammy: Thank you very much for talking with me this afternoon.
Red: Oh, no problem! Except for the dates and this and that I don’t remember too well.

Tammy: Was a long time ago. (Laughter)

Red: Ya. Well that’s it. It’s let’s see ’34 to ’94 that’s 60 years.

Tammy: Uh, uh. And if it was the same thing every day...

Red: Oh, ya, oh ya.

Tammy: I’m sure hard to differentiate.

Red: There’s no, no great difference on the work load, so it was always the same thing, cause the carbine that we were working on had to go through the same process, to put the starch in it, dry it up, and send it to the weave shed.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: So it was the same thing every day, every day.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: The only difference was that some days we had small sets, other days we had larger sets. Some days we had some sets of maybe 1200 ends. Other days we had some 5000, another day we had 4000, so...

Tammy: Did that depend on the type of...

Red: On the style.

Tammy: ...the stuff that they were making?

Red: Ya, on the style.

Tammy: What did they make at Bates mostly, blankets?

Red: Well, they were making bedspreads.

Tammy: Bedspreads.

Red: Bedspreads and ah, sheets. At one time they were making sheets, in the early thirties. In the thirties and forties they were making sheets and pillowcases.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: Yard goods.
Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: Then they discontinued the sheeting, but they were making spreads mostly. From ah, low priced spreads to the, to the Martha Washington. Today I think they sell for 150 bucks.

Tammy: Wow!

Red: They were good spreads though.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: They made millions of 'em.

Tammy: Heh, heh.

Red: Oh, ya. Gee, they used to, I think they used to take out about 30,000 a week.

Tammy: Wow!

Red: Ya. Oh ya, they were going.

Tammy: They had all the hard workers.

Red: They had three weave rooms going, one there for the, the larger bedspreads, they had one for the ripplette, that low ah, and then they had one for the sheeting. So they kept 'em going three shifts most of the time.

Tammy: Uh, uh. Did people change around jobs a lot?

Red: Well, there was quite a, quite a few that did, ya. The ones with the low paying jobs, ah when they posted ah, they had a board and they posted all the jobs that had to be replaced. But you had to sign for it,...

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: ... so the ones that had low paying jobs if there was an opening for a higher paying job so they sign for it and then the one with the most seniority would get the job. So there was quite a few transfers from one department to another and but not a mass transfer, maybe one or two or three a week would ship department...

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: You always try to better yourself. If you can get an extra four or five or maybe ten dollars a week extra, well you go for it.

Tammy: Ya, makes a big difference.
Red: Even if they don't like the work, they go. Heh, heh. But most, most of the places where, at the bottom of the line the work is dirtiest. In the card room, the picker??? room, but as you go along and the cotton is solid there's not so much ah, dust going on. Like in the slashing there's hardly any dust, there is dust but ah, not com...anything compared to, to the other rooms.

Tammy: Was there a lot of problems with lung infections? And like tuberculosis?

Red: No, not in the slashing, but in the other rooms they had, when the ah, when the government stepped in there, they were forcing the people in the card room and the spinning room to wear dust masks.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: Jeepers, they couldn't wear 'em. It was so hot in there the sweat was running down your face. With a mask, holy cow, nobody wanted to wear 'em.

Tammy: Um. Ya.

Red: But they, they were forcing them. Either they did it or else they'd lose their job.

Tammy: Too many people were dying.

Red: Ya. This OSHA, the government agency that goes all through the industry, they're the ones that put the law to them.

Tammy: Ya.

Red: They had to install blowers and things like that to try to remove the waste.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: Cost them a lot of money.

Tammy: Did you have any friends who got sick?

Red: No, not that I know of. Well some, I know some people who worked 50 years in the card room that never got affected, it never bothered them.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: This old man he had worked in the card room over fifty years, he was old when they let him go, Jeez. Every day he used to come in, used to come in on Ash Street right across the entrance to, to Bates Mill, the brick building...
Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: ...he used to stand there with his pipe and watch the mill... everyday.

Tammy: Heh, heh, heh.

Red: Oh ya.

Tammy: Just look at it?

Red: Just look at it, he just wouldn't move. He had his arms like that...

Tammy: (Laughter)

Red: ...look at the mill. He'd been there so long he never forgot it.

Tammy: Wow...

Red: Ya.

Tammy: Were there a lot of people worked there their whole lives?

Red: Well, most, most of the guys, the older ones, the young ones they didn't stay too, too long. Some just come in, work one day, half a day then skip out.

Tammy: Was it too hard?

Red: They wouldn't stay, ya. It was too hot, too hard ah, but ah the older people, once they got in most of 'em stayed.

Tammy: Why do you think they stayed?

Red: Well, they couldn't do anything else. That was one reason and the pay was good enough for them to live, I guess.

Tammy: Is that why you stayed?

Red: Well, ah I could have gone somewheres else but ah I figured that the place was safe at that time, so...oh, I would have liked to worked outdoors, worked carpentry work or thing like that, learn it, learn how to do it. But, never bothered. Long as I could do my own, it was enough. Like a carpenter, to get into those good paying jobs you got to move out of state. So you go at ah, New Hampshire there places where they build these atomic plants and things like that jeez you get $20 an hour, $22 and hour plus Saturdays and Sundays at time and a half.

Tammy: Uh, uh.
Red: That's where you make the money.

Tammy: Ya.

Red: But ah, you make the money but you're away from home. See, that's, that's one benefit that you lose.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: While here at the mill when you work, you put your day's work then you come back home, you're safe.

Tammy: Did the union ever um, do things for the workers like um, have um, famous people come for lectures, or anything like that?

Red: Oh, no, no.

Tammy: No? They never tried to educate you?

Red: Oh, no, no, no. They, they had ah, at the end there after OSHA come in, they had formed a committee, Safety Committee, they, they had lectures every, every week I think they had, same as the overseers. They had safety meetings every week. But as far as hiring somebody, some textile experts trying to put in new rules about safety in the game, I never saw any, never heard about it.

Tammy: No? Ah, did you ever go away on any conferences or anything?

Red: No, no. The only thing that they had installed there at the end before I left they had a kind of a program trying to get the workers, if they had some ideas of something to better a job or things like that, to go to his overseer and explain it and bring it to a safety meeting like this and if, if they ah, rule his idea was good and they use it, they give him a little bonus, maybe, I don't know how much, but they were suppose to get a little bonus.

Tammy: Wow...

Red: Some did. There's always ah, something that can be done as a safety measure and as a ah, costly mea...cost ah, reducing cost. It doesn't take an overseer or a foreman to have those ideas,...

Tammy: Right.

Red: ...a worker who does the job itself knows what could be done to better his job and this and that.

Tammy: Knows it better.

Red: Oh, ya. Me, I had ideas about that but I never told anybody, I kept it to myself.
Tammy: How come?

Red: Well, I figure if I release this, this certain way to do things it’s going to increase the workload on the rest of the crew, and on myself too for the same rate of pay. The little bonus they’ll give me I’ll lose it in maybe six weeks. So I never ah, bothered to come up with anything. Very simple, very little easy things but if you don’t tell about it, if you keep it to yourself, you hang on to what you have.


Red: There was this one case there in, the guy working on my machine on the second shift every time that we tied a new beam or something like that, that was about a stretch like this of yarn that we cut.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: We used to roll it and dump it, throw it out. So he suggested that we roll it like this and put it, stack it in a pile and take it back to the, to the card room, where they mix it up with the other yarn and use it. So he got a bonus out of that.

Tammy: So you were using all those three feet pieces of yarn?

Red: Ya, ya. Same as the yarn that comes in from the cotton fields in the South there. It’s all big bales. It’s raw cotton, and they send it to the picker room where they split it up and then they make strips like this about this wide and send it to the card room. Well, this stuff that we were using that yarn, after we got done, was just a little ball about this big, and yet they threw that away. So, saving it they put it back in the picker room, they clean it up, re-use it again. It was recycling, that’s all it was.

Tammy: Ya. That makes sense.

Red: So he got a bonus.

Tammy: Heh, heh, heh.

Red: I don’t believe the bonus were too, too high, cause the way they were operating and, after, after 25 years they give you a little pin about this big, to show 25 years of service.

Tammy: They should have given you a big, huge medal.

Red: Oh, jeez. I never bothered even to go and collect mine. The super in charge had to come over my machine and give it to me.

Tammy: Heh, heh.
Red: I said, "The heck with that."

Tammy: So you weren't very proud that you worked there?

Red: Ah...I knew what they were, I had seen them. I says, "It's not worth making the trip to go in the office and wait around maybe an hour before he comes in. If they want me, they'll find me. They know where I am."

Tammy: Heh, heh, heh. So did you get retirement benefits when you retired?

Red: It was a small pension, just a little pen...little bit. They only give ah, two percent I think, per year for the number of years that you worked, so it doesn't bring up...

Tammy: Ya. When did they start the pension plan?

Red: That started after the union come in. Once the union come in they started the pension plan. The worker gives in so much and the company gives in so much.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: But the percentage is so small that you wind up, a thirty year man is maybe he's getting $30 - $40 pension, so...the rest of the unions like the miners and the electrical workers they get six, seven, eight hundred, nine hundred dollar pensions. Same amount of years working.

Tammy: Not much repayment for all the hard work you did.

(Side one of tape is over.)

Tammy: Before the tape stopped we were talking about your pension. Ah, is there anything else you'd like to say about um, your feelings about retiring? Were you anxious to retire?

Red: Oh yes. I was anxious to retire because ah, just the idea of coming home and not having to get up in the morning ah, it was a great help to me cause during the wintertime it was tough and rough. Start shoveling the driveway early in the morning, at 5:30 in the morning in order to be ready for a bus or take the car down to work for seven o'clock.

Tammy: Um, uh.

Red: Do everything by hand, so ah I felt that once I got home if I, if I knew it was stormy outdoors, I'd just stay in bed, no worries about making the clock at Bates Mill.

Tammy: (Laughter)
Red: So that was one good thing.

Tammy: Ya.

Red: Oh, ya. After a number of years you feel that ah, you done your share of work, you want to slow down a bit.

Tammy: Uh, uh. Did you consider your job to be challenging?

Red: Well, in a way, yes. Depending on what style of work you did. Some days it was more interesting than others. If you worked on plain, plain white, it was just a question of counting each end one by one, as if you worked on a pattern style, you had stripes ah, maybe four - five different colors, maybe 20 ends on one color, fifteen on the other, ten on the other,

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: So you had to match that one by one. You had to come out perfect or else you had to start all over again, so in tho...in a question like that you have to be more careful, more attentive to your count to make sure that you do the thing right.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: Cause if you don’t have it right at the end you have to start the thing right all over again. If you have maybe 4000 ends to count...

Tammy: Wow...

Red: ...it’s, it’s not ah, welcome news. It takes maybe 5 - 6 hours just to pick it, just to count it.

Tammy: Wow, so it must take you a whole day just to set up one...

Red: Just, on the colors, on, on, it would take almost a full day, ya. On the white stuff well, maybe in four hours you can count it and get it ready. That was about the only exciting thing about it.

Tammy: Heh, heh, heh.

Red: That you start counting a set with colors like that ah, you’re kind of anxious to reach the end to see how you come out, see if you have it right or if you have it wrong.

Tammy: Did you get to see the finished product?

Red: Oh, ya. Ya, some shirts, not like this but some shirts with stripes in, we’d show, they’d come up and show us the pattern and the way it was and how it looked and later on you’d see it on the market and say, "Oh, this, this is some stuff we did." That was
about the only challenge about the job. Either you did it right or else you had to go from the beginning again.

Tammy: Uh, uh.

Red: Specially on the patterns, you had to be right because ah, if there were two - three ends that didn’t belong on a certain stripe you’d wind up with a shorter stripe than the other one at the other end of the wall, so it had, it had to be right.

Tammy: Oh, I couldn’t imagine spending all that time just...setting up.

Red: Oh, well, that was, that was the bad part about it.

Tammy: Well, is there anything else that you’d like to say?

Red: No, that’s about all. That covers about everything.

Tammy: OK. Well thank you very much Red,...

Red: Oh, you’re welcome.

Tammy: ...for doing this interview. It was a lot of fun.

Red: It’s not every day that you relate your story. (Laughter)

Tammy: That’s right. Well, thank you very much.

Red: Ya, ok.
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Date: [Date]

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Interviewer: [Signature]
Date: [Date]

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Interview Agreement

I, Tammy L. Berube, in view of the historical and scholarly value of the information contained in the interview(s) with Lucien Filion and designated as accession number ________, knowingly and voluntarily permit the Franco-American Collection of Lewiston-Auburn College the full use of this information, the tapes and transcripts and all other material in this accession, and hereby grant and assign to the Franco-American Collection of Lewiston-Auburn College all rights of every kind pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are now known, recognized, or contemplated, except for such restrictions as are specified below.

May 8, 1994
(Date)

Tammy L. Berube
(Interviewer's signature)

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(Director)

(Date)