INTERVIEW WITH ANTONIO POMERLEAU

Mill Worker/Union Organizer

Age 87

Interview Conducted by Ralph Roy on April 22, 1994

at

Mr. Pomerleau’s home

32 Boston Avenue

Lewiston, Maine
Roy: …conversation, so I’ve got to write a paper on this for the school for my grade too at the same time. Uh, what uh, well just beginning, where are you from? Where were you born?

Pomerleau: I was born in Canada. But I left Canada, I was three years old. I never went back.

Roy: You never went back. So you’ve been in the United States ever since. Where did you come into the United States?

Pomerleau: When?

Roy: Where? What town did you come to? Right to Lewiston?

Pomerleau: Saint Methot de Stock???? That’s in Québec.

Roy: Uh huh.

Woman: When you left Canada, where did you go then? ?????Smith?

Pomerleau: I came here right away.

Roy: Right to Lewiston?

Pomerleau: Oh yeh. I stayed here from there on.

Roy: And what was Lewiston like? Do you, I mean, in growing up? At the time, there wasn’t much, right?

Pomerleau: No there wasn’t much, because there used to be big brick buildings on Canal Street in front of all the mills, and these companies used to tell people from Canada to move in here, and they give them jobs in the mill, because they didn’t have nobody to work here. Not enough people. So that’s why we started. But I didn’t start in the mill at that age.

Roy: No. When did you actually start?

Pomerleau: I start in middle of, about fif…, sixteen years old.

Roy: Sixteen years old? Uh. How was the uh… At that time, were there, one of the things that is brought up a lot is children working at that time. Did you see any, were there any children younger than yourself at that time? Working?

Pomerleau: A lot of them about my age.

Roy: Yuh.

Pomerleau: About my age. But I don’t know whether they come from here or other place in Canada or some other State. I don’t know. I graduated fourth grade—in parochial school, so I can’t tell you too much. I stopped going to school at about, I started twelve years old, I went in
the woods with my father. Summertime, then wintertime we come back here, then go back in the summer again. And I kept doing that so I was mostly in the wood with my father.

Roy: Where was that? The woods?

Pomerleau: It used to be, oh my God. Some was in Belgrade, some was in Philip—Philip, Maine. I can’t recall all the places. I work in New Hampshire—in Milo, New Hampshire, for my uncle, as a cookie. Help the cook. My brother was there with me. We both working in there, then we come back here, the mill was stop, and it start over, so .....

Roy: Uh, what made your family, for Lewiston, did they publish jobs up there or? How did they find out.

Pomerleau: My father was working the woods, and I was with him—twelve years old, and then he was working the Box Shop in Auburn. Built these big bread box built to carry the bread in the store these times. I don’t think you ever seen that anyway.

Roy: Yuh. Probably not.

Pomerleau: I did. Because I work with my father in that shop for a while. For a couple months. That’s why they stay here. He work in the wood in summertime, in wintertime he left the shop, I mean, in summertime he work in the wood, and in wintertime he came back and work in the shop. These shop close out after a period of years.

Roy: Uh, How was, you know, growing up prior to your working? What was the environment like? Uh, I mean. You went to school for a short period of time, and then right out into....

Pomerleau: Off and on. When we went in the wood, we had no school sometime. That’s why we went to work at twelve years old.


Pomerleau: So the father with the brothers.

Roy: They had it hard in those days. How many was in your family?

Pomerleau: Six. Three boys and three girls.

Roy: And your Mom and Dad. (Here, there seems to be two different male voices.)

Pomerleau: And Mom and Dad plus.

Roy: Did they ever work in the mill?

Pomerleau: Yes. I had a sister work in the mill, and two brothers work in the mill.

Roy: What was your first job at the mill?

Pomerleau: Filling truck. We used what they call the dolpher (spelling?) there, we fill up the truck for them—for the women and men that used to dolph. Pick up the bobbin for the machine,
put it out, so he does his work too. Then I went up on dolphing, then I went up on spinning, then I went up on fixing. I'm a fixer.

Roy: The first one was dolphing, the next one was? Could you explain a little bit about each job?

Pomerleau: We used to fill up the truck. The truck for the dolpher.

Roy: Right.

Pomerleau: These truck has two bed—one on each side with a box in the middle. Then the dolpher come over, take the bobbin, put it on the machine, the put the full one in the box, and they dump it in the weave room. The stock in the weave room for the cloth.

Roy: What was your next job?

Pomerleau: The roving man. The roving. The spool that the cloth was on it to make thread out of it. They call it, how do you say that in French?

Woman: It’s raw cotton. It’s raw cotton into a tube. And they put it up there, it goes into a machine and it ends up being into a thread. It keeps getting smaller and smaller all the time, and once it’s a thread, and once it’s on the machine, there’s people that come by and take out the full one put empty ones, and what he was doing was emptying the box for the production people.

Roy: Okay.

Pomerleau: Then we put these spool on the top of the tray. So I done that job too. So I did everything from sweeping, to truck filler, and dolpher, and spinner and fixer. That’s where I built up.

Other Male voice: His last job was fixer.

Pomerleau: I went foreman in the delivery mill too.

Roy: Now the next job? Could you explain a little bit? I need to know a little bit about each job.

Pomerleau: You mean for fill up the truck?

Roy: Yuh. No after the thread.

Woman: After, after that. Après que t’a été un rovin’ man, qu’est ce que tu fesait après ça?

Pomerleau: I was dolphing.


Pomerleau: Just like he did. And then I went spinning—off and on. We swap job once in a while. Now from there on, I move from mill to mill, so I learn fixing. I started at the Little Androscoggin Mill—the back mill. Then I went to the big mill. Then I went to the Hill Mill. I got married at the Hill Mill. Then I move back to the Androscoggin Mill. They start over again. Then, from there on, I went to Brunswick for a couple months when it closed down. Then I went
back in the Androscoggin Mill and the Hill Mill. Then I moved back—they close everything up, I went to the Bates Mill. I stayed there thirty-five years. That’s where I retired.

Roy: These other mills—are they all along?

Male voice: Yuh. The Hill Mill is right uh….

Pomerleau: Well, Androscoggin, there was all mills on the River Road, and then the big Androscoggin Mill is on the Canal Street. Then from Canal Street, Androscoggin to the Hill Mill. Then the Hill Mill to the Bates Mill. Then when I got back the second time to the Bates Mill, I was offered a job foreman in Libby Mill and fixing together. So I went there for six months. Then, the Androscoggin Mill started over again. So I went back there, I didn’t like the job. I’d rather find a job--wash my hands all the time—so a fixer, I was fixing. Then they closed down the Bates Mill.

Roy: Were these, uh these mills, were they the same owner or were they different?

Pomerleau: No. They was different company that time, then they merge together. They all merged together. The Androscoggin closed down, they went to the Hill Mill, the Hill Mill closed down, they went to Bates Mill. There’s another—the Continental Mill in the—on River Street—Oxford Street. But I didn’t work there. That happened to have closed down before the Bates Mill. The Bates Mill still running a little bit.

Roy: Uh, What was your attitude working in this--in these mills? How did you feel about working in them?

Pomerleau: Well, I used to love fixer—at the beginning. I love to repair machines. I used to love it. Because at the Bates Mill, they want to put me foreman up there. The superintendent asked me a couple times. I said I’d rather be in the grease way up here than be a foreman because I was once at the Libby Mill and I didn’t like it. So, I kept working there as a fixer. I used to love it because I used to develop pattern. Here, you know, the loop, something on the machine, make it better.

Roy: Uh, While working in the mills, what were some of the good and the bad times, you know. What were the rough times?

Pomerleau: The rough times, there was no air-condition. You sweat from top to bottom.

Laughter in the background.

Pomerleau: That was awful tough. ‘Cause as far as foremen, some were pretty good, some were bad. But you had to go along with them. Some were awful good. Because some of them didn’t have the experience with the machine that we had, and they wanted to know something, so they come to us and ask us. ‘Cause the cotton, you know, it operate in a different way. It’s er, that yarn sometime is very bad. And the boss didn’t know what to do about it, so they ask the fixer so we told them how to change the gear, how to stretch it, or…

Male voice: Or shrink it.

Pomerleau: Or shrink it. They didn’t know about it. Sometimes they change foreman, and like the Hill Mill, when they stop, they come to the Bates Mill, which was fifty percent different. So
then they come to us, and they were pretty good with us, so we told them what to do, and what
would be better, but when they change the weight, the gear on the yarn, it changed the weight.
It’s either heavier or lighter. Then if ……, you can’t even run it sometimes. Then they come to
us and ask what’s the trouble? We tell em, It’s too light. So we’re going to put it a little
heavier—and it helps. But, they don’t like it in the office, because they put more yarn, and ……,
but the yarn is better. But that’s not the attitude of the company. The company likes to save
more, see.

Male voice: The other bad thing is they had to work fifty-eight….

Woman: Fifty-four hours.

Pomerleau: Fifty-four hours a week.

Male Voice: But that wasn’t bad. That was the way of life. That wasn’t just here, that was the
whole world.

Roy: Now, that fifty-four hours a week? Was that when you first started off? And when did that
change to—did it gradually get to less and less hours? By law, or….

Pomerleau: Yes. By law. Roosevelt came in power in Washington. Then, he brought that down
to forty-eight hours, then it went down to forty hours. That changed everything.

Woman: Do they have forty hours in the mill? That’s right they went from forty-eight.

Pomerleau: We end at forty-eight.

Roy: How did people feel about that?

Pomerleau: Oh, my God. We were up in the air. It was heaven. Well, I worked so hard, I was
so tired, it was time to change jobs because I don’t think I would be able to stand it. I was almost
ruined out.

Woman: They went out and got two jobs. Ha! Ha! Ha! They were used to it. Ha! Ha!

Roy: What was your pay when you first started? And what, how did they progress?

Pomerleau: Well, I started at $13.82 a week the time I remember.

Roy: And that was for?

Pomerleau: Fifty-four hours.

Roy: Fifty-four hours. And how did that change? How did they give you increases?

Pomerleau: Well, how it started, now when it come down, I started that way, $13.82 a week, and
I went down to $7 a week. My wife was working in another mill when I was married, and she
was making more money than I did. Wait a minute, $7, I think she was earning $8 a week.
Another mill.

Roy: What years were these?
Pomerleau: Oh, my God. That you’re not going to find that out from me, ‘cause I don’t remember that.

Roy: Yuh, yuh. So your wife was working at the mill too?

Pomerleau: Yuh. She was working the Hill Mill, I was working the Androscoggin Mill. From now on, that’s why the forty-hour change to Washington.

Roy: Okay.

Pomerleau: It picked up a little more, a little more all the time.

Roy: Okay. You went from 13.82 to $7. What was the next step? How come there was such a change in that money? Why?

Pomerleau: They didn’t need nobody, and they had all the people they want, so they cut down the wages. That happened in the box shop of my father was earning—er, that’s a good one too--$21 a week. $21 a week. Running big saw, hard wood, making big box for the bread, everything, and then the foreman over there began to tell them the owner of the company, he said, You can cut these wages down to $18 at least—maybe $10. He said, You think so? He says, Yeh. Alright, we’ll put it to $10. So he did, but he brought down the wage of the boss too to $10 a week. So everybody went down to $10 a week. It didn’t last long. But they closed the shop.

Woman: It was the beginning of the Depression.

Pomerleau: Yuh. The Big Depression. It was depression.

Woman: People didn’t realize, but the companies were struggling also.

Roy: How did they pay you? In cash, checks, or?

Pomerleau: It’s all cash.

Roy: All cash?

Pomerleau: Oh, wait a minute. Wait a minute. No. We had cash in these first years. And then we were paid by check.

Woman: I had cash. We’d get it in an envelope.

Pomerleau: Yuh. They. After that, when she was there.

Woman: There was still cash when I left.

Pomerleau: I don’t know how many years we were paid by check. You was paid by check too.


Woman: See I left, I left in ’50, ’53, and I was….
Pomerleau: You must have a big check that time. You go out at the bank on Canal Street and change it after you go out Friday night.

Woman: They had switched. They had switched to checks in my time.

Pomerleau: These first years, we were paid by Saturday in my time. And then they brought that to Friday.

Woman: We used to play poker on the twenty-dollar bills on the numbers.

Roy: Uh. What were the conditions at the mill?

Pomerleau: Well, the condition was a sweat shop. But then it turn out, they start to put air condition in it. All that stuff came in. That’s where it stopped.

Roy: When did that happen?

Pomerleau: I don’t know what year.

Woman: It didn’t happen all at once. It just kept progressing. See the textile, they made humidity inside for a reason. It was better under humidity conditions, so it wasn’t just that they had to have it, you know, no air-condition, no refrigerated air, because cotton wouldn’t run under refrigerated air, so they put a water cooler system, which made humidity—but it was better, because you had a breeze.

Pomerleau: … humidity, as I said a while ago, to change the weight on the yarn. It makes the work go better or worse.

Woman: The humidity affects it.

Pomerleau: Very off and on, off and on. You remember that. We couldn’t run anything. Il y avait. Comment ce que t’appelle ça de la dentelle? De la dentelle. To connait pas ça de la dentelle en français?

Woman: I don’t know what that is. I’ve lost a lot of my French.

Pomerleau: Quand to tricotte là, to fais toute sorte d’affaire….

Woman: That’s yarn, that’s yarn.

Pomerleau: Yuh. When you make that, well, we call that de la dentelle in French, but er,

Other Male Voice: I don’t know how to say it in English.

Pomerleau: I don’t either. But er….

Woman: It’s not a thread. It’s a yarn.

Pomerleau: Well, that yarn comes down, it start to go bad on the machine. And we call that dentelle. So that goes all down the floor, the roll gets all busted, the spreader stop the machine, was woman spinning, stop the machine, you lose time. You lose yarn. And that’s why we call it
this way. And that’s why the humidity was best in the mill how it happened, because in the Libby Mill, when I was foreman there, and fixer, the dam was down—the river was coming down, and me, my little skill in my hand, there was two overseer down there—two superintendent, one overseer—and when they left at night, I was the foreman. I took care of the whole department. So because of the humidity, I left the window open because the people need air, so that changed the humidity, so the work start to go better. Then the people that used to work on the first and second shift, they changed shift. But I didn’t change. I stayed on the second. Every week they changed shift. Now, suddenly, they didn’t want to go back on the first shift. They tried to find out why. So I didn’t want to tell them. I let it go for six months, then I give my notice to go back to the Androscoggin Mill when they restarted working, because I make more money there. So I told the overseer, I’ll give you a secret. If you want to know what was the difference, why people want to come on my shift. He said, What it is? So, I says, I keep the window open. You get the damp coming down there. The humidity comes in and you run the humidity down here all the time without noticing how high it was, so I close it, but they find out why the bobbin comes so big—you know the bobbin they used to dolph for? With yarn on it? They get soft. Well there’s a bend running from the cellar to that spindle, that run that bobbin, so that’s why they change the size of the bobbin. It gets humid, well the bend gets stiff. So then the bobbin gets shrink on it, it get tight. When I close it up, it gets soft, so the dolph? came in before time, because some of these bobbins, they call it filling and warp, so the warp of the bobbin goes up and down the thread, way up until it’s filled up. So naturally, when the bend gets soft, the bobbin gets soft. So in that time, they had all the humidity, it gets tight, so, the dolpher on the first shift argue, Well my shift, it run the same way. The running time wasn’t the same at the other shift. It had to dolph it four times, because the bobbin was tight, but mine was softer. So I told him, You notice it by that time. So I went off. So that’s what you learn through your head, not on the book. In twenty years, they always go by the book. I remember doing some work on the machine, the overseer want to know I was working. He told me what to do. So I do it his way. It didn’t run. So I say, I’ll do my way, it worked. So they sent another guy around my work to see what I was doing. I didn’t want to do it. When I see the guy I ask him what are you doing around my job? Oh, nothing. I put my tool on the floor and I walked out. When he went out, I come back and do my job. They stay there for years. They never found out. They never did find out.

Some background laughter.

Roy: You hear the same thing over and over again.

Woman: I hope the whole country don’t run like that.

More laughter.

Roy: Was it very noisy? What kind of….

More than one person is talking, and I can’t make out what they’re saying. Laughter.

Pomerleau: … that depends on the department. Like the weaving department—awful noisy. Some, it would never bother their ears, but some it does. The late years, they discover a plug to put in the people’s ear. But some couldn’t work with it, and I couldn’t work with it. So I went down to the belt shop. They had tools to push little holes in anything, so I went down and I punch mine and I put it in my ears, so they never knew if I work with it. Otherwise, I couldn’t be able to work, probably ‘til go home. In my department, we didn’t have that noise, but they forced us to do it just the same. But at the end of it, nobody was wearing them.
Woman: The spinning room was a different noise. It was more of whistling. It still hurt your ears—high pitch.

Pomerleau: Some people it would hurt them, but me, it never bothered me.

Woman: Nobody wouldn’t dare. We became lip-readers.

Roy: What about the quality of the air? Safety conditions?

Pomerleau: We didn’t have none in these times. You opened the window. That’s all there was, and you have the canal, in the late years, it was polluted. And even your toilet, the toilet was all yellow and blue. You couldn’t even drink there. I remember one woman tell me, every time I go drink the water, I get sick. So, at this time, we had the Union, so I went, I used to get along pretty good with the Company because I always tried to be fair with them, they was being fair with me, and so they tell me to look that up, they check it up, and they had to change all the piping. We had better conditions coming in the water. But the air, the air, we got it from outside.

Woman: There’s a film of dust out constantly.

Pomerleau: I remember that woman’s name, it was Bazinet. Every time she was sick, she’d go out, she’d come back in a couple of weeks, she feel alright. Got back sick again. Just the air that comes in from outside hurt the stomach of the people.

Male voice: I’ve seen times there, it was so hot in there, they had to close for a week.

Pomerleau: Oh. A hundred degrees. A hundred two degress.

Male voice: That’s how hot it was in there.

Pomerleau: It’s when they start to put air-conditioning in there.

Roy: What about accidents? Were there many accidents?

Pomerleau: No. It wasn’t too bad for the amount of people working. These times….

Woman: For the type of industry, there were very few accidents.

Male voice: That’s true. That’s true.

Pomerleau: Like the Hill Mill, there wasn’t—thirteen hundred people working at least during these years.

Woman: I’ve seen a woman get killed because she didn’t hold the rule. They have these huge motors on the ground—they were probably this big, as big as a table—and they had four belts running these suckers, ‘cause they’d be hanging, the motor would be hanging from the ceiling running four machine, and you’re not supposed to go through this, and this one gal, she had long hair, and she went through that one time, and she got her head, and she it slapped her against the ceiling.

Pomerleau: They had to cut that off after a while. I remember when my wife was working at the Hill Mill….
Woman: Yuh. They took out these machines.

Pomerleau: They had to put fix their hair up and put something over their head.

Woman: The only accidents they would get is if people didn’t follow the rules. It was a pretty safe place, really.

Pomerleau: That kind of rule, ‘cause there was big belt, four-inch wide. When the fixer have to take care of that, when they’re too loose, they have to stop the motor, cut it off, take it back, and run it over again. But there’s an open space between the machine. Everybody’s going by there. There was no rule that you can’t go by there.

Woman: They used to tell us, “Don’t go there.”

Pomerleau: No. Because you had to go around. First thing you know, you had to go around there. Sometime there’s something act a little funny, or somebody go around as short a distance as you can.

Roy: Of the activists, what type of activism. I mean, you can’t go act …… What type of activists, if they had any, would they have?

Pomerleau: Well. In my type of work, I was a fixer. And, we had put it that big, put it that big, put it that big. Some were twenty-one inch big—the size—and when we change the machine, ‘cause we had to pull these out or there’s something we had to pull out, there’s a key went in there, and you look….. knock it out with a hammer, sometime a crowbar to pull ‘em out, but sometime, one time, I went to pull one out, and somehow my foot slipped, and I went down. I had a hernia. It wasn’t the fault of the company. It’s simply accident because I tried the best way I could, but it happened to me.

Woman: You cut your finger.

Pomerleau: You cut yourself with a knife.

Male voice: Probably burns too.

Pomerleau: Oh yeh.

Male voice: Sometimes you would hit those tracks, it would burn.

Pomerleau: The belt……. Even when they work on the machine, these bobbins, you go underneath, are a little bent, and it bend your arm. We know about that, but be careful, and we don’t think sometimes. We go too fast. Like me, I used to be a fast worker, well sometime, I have to get burnt.

Roy: If somebody got hurt, how was it taken care of.

Pomerleau: Oh. Pretty good. We had nurse. A roaming nurse, special in the mill. We can’t complain on that. We have doctor comes in too. After you get hurt, you still working, the doctor comes in twice a week. You have to go down to see him, like I had a hernia, well, he says, it’s not a rupture, he says, just forced. Baloney. I worked like that for years, and when I went to the
doctor I had the rupture for over a year, but the doctor didn’t tell us, he didn’t want to tell us. He probably worked for the company. To save the insurance.

Woman: They had a whole medical deal like. In my time, hell, you could go down there and get a flu shot for free.

Pomerleau: Oh yes. In these times, not in my time.

Roy: I was going to say, when you started, what kind of medical did they have?

Pomerleau: They didn’t have any. When I first worked in the ……… the overseer, the boss, say you go to the doctor on your own—not the company’s own.

Roy: When did you start actually having medical?

Pomerleau: It takes years and years after that. The big mills started.

Woman: The mid-forties, something like that.

Pomerleau: I must have been eighteen, twenty years old, when it started.

Woman: Hell, we’d get hurt at home, we’d go down there and have it fixed.

Pomerleau: Well, some of them, they got hurt at home, they didn’t say, they came in the mill and say I got hurt in the mill, they work on it…..

Roy: Uh, your work--work ethics. Were people? The types of work that they did. Were they fast or slow? Were they penalized anyway for doing bad work or good work?

Pomerleau: Oh yes.

Roy: How did they treat that?

Pomerleau: ……. They notify you about the …. and then, I’ll lay you off, I’ll fire you. Especially when they have too many people working. When they didn’t have nobody, well, they’re more careful, or they put you on vacation for a week or two days—It depends what it is.

Roy: How do they watch you in work? Was somebody always watching you, or did they pretty much leave you alone?

Pomerleau: Well. It’s like uh. Well, they have time-study. Show how the people how they work. If they have good working days. How long it take them to do such a job. I happen to be in the Union that time, and they ask me to go on time-study--to study such a person they didn’t like. So me, I forgot, I’ve got to be honest and do the job I’m supposed to do, and I done it. And they couldn’t do anything to that person. That’s what happened at the Bates Mill, during Berube’s time. But they had some of their own time-study all over the mill to make sure they had enough work to do and did they have enough, or could they increase the workload. If they can’t they had to decrease it. And due to the Union, well, if you get with the superintendent pretty friendly, like I did one time, he works there that time, and Curtis was superintendent. Do you remember that time? I told him how the work was doing, like I would say, the job was going all down the floor. We stop the machine. He put a guy on my work, fixing, because I was doing this, and we sit
down at my work at the bench. I show him all the work, and I had in my mind how much work the people could run. How many side, how many machine, and I says, Mr. Curtis, you go down so many machine, and you’ll take off two persons off the job because they are spare hands—they could help people who are busting. So he said, what do you suggest? So we decide to the spinner, and by God, he done it, and he gave an increase of fifty cents to go over there to the spinner and they divided the work, two persons were spinning, and they had good quality work, that was that time. It works good. That’s why, some of the boss in these mills, if you had a good steward who worked fairly on both sides, I used to work that way, and we can get a lot of stuff. I was appreciated by the mill a hell of lot about that. And the other bit was they liked it because the Union—some of the head of the Union, to pretend that people were working and the other, so I cut everything off. I went off it.

Woman: That’s when the Union started to go crooked.

Pomerleau: Yuh. Fine. I didn’t see the work.

Roy: When did the Union come in? And how?

Woman: My father was an organizer.

Pomerleau: I can remember. It’s when the Androscoggin Mill close out.

Woman: Nineteen thirty….., thirty-six.

Roy: Nineteen thirty-six? Because my father was an organizer.

Pomerleau: Yuh. Because he work with me …. In the office together.

Roy: You helped organize?

Pomerleau: Well, I helped to organize the Union for sure. And by late years, I helped to disorganize it.


Pomerleau: We were contacted by ……. by the name of Jarber? From Waterville. He worked for the CIO organizing from all the State, and he contacted us once, we had no meeting, probably ten, fifteen of each mill, and we discussed how the work was here, how they work the people, how the company work with the people, and that’s where it started, and finally, they got enough people to go to a vote, and we got it in.

Roy: How did the company react?

Pomerleau: Oh, first of all, it was opposed to it. We had to go out on strike, walk on the street, and finally, my mill, the Bates Mill, the wages were pretty good, and they start to be fair with people, and we tell ‘em, We want to be fair with you if you’ll be fair with us. What belong to us, in your pocket, we want to keep it. If it belong to us, we don’t want to give it to you. And there were some overseer, like mine didn’t want to do it. I says, some day, I’ll be honest enough that if you, if it belongs to you what should be done, I’ll give it to you and I’ll tell you. He came for years after that, but my God, I went and tell him….. Furthermore, I was in the office with the
whole Union business agent, and the company, and I bet my overseer, I said I’ll bet you suit—a branch new suit—and you’ll give me twenty-five dollars if I win. If you don’t win… I win!! In front of the agent and superintendent, and he never want to pay me the suit.

Woman: He didn’t buy you the suit.

Pomerleau: No. He didn’t buy me the suit, but I buy it just the same, because finally he comes down and finally tells the truth of the Union some place was fair, but some it’s not. You take people don’t want to work, and they go out from their job, they had time, like the overseer, he used to dolph. But some of them, they don’t do that. And they get slack between their job like the sweeper, he goes some room, he jump out the window on the railroad track and run away. When the steward is there, he knows it, he’s seen it. If you’ve got a conscience, are you gonna go and tell him he never done that? I couldn’t do it. I said, Yes he did. He left his work. He went out. What happened to me? People would hate me at the Union. Some didn’t like I didn’t work with the people because they wasn’t honest with me.

Roy: Because you were telling the truth.

Pomerleau: I tell the truth! And that’s why I was appreciated by the head of the company. And I could win like I did a while a go. I could win to divide the job, and get the worker an extra fifty cents. That’s not bad, fifty-cents.

Roy: In those days.

Pomerleau: In those days. For the whole week, and I won it. But like she said, when the Union start to get a little crooked underneath, some steward, or the person with the company—of the Union—start to work with his friend, look what you do, we’ll get you there. I’ll wash it out.

Woman: In those days, the Union was needed, but it went, whew, the other way. Today, most management are pretty educated. If you’ve got good people, if you don’t pay them, you’re not going to keep them. I know because I was on both sides of the fence. I grew up with union organizers with my family—my dad was an organizer, and he was gung-ho union, and I left and went to California and I had a manufacturing plant with 175 people, and I know both sides of the fence.

Roy: What kind of relationship did you have with your superiors, you know, during the Unions.

Pomerleau: Well. That’s where I gained with the company because they know they found out I was honest. Because through the mill, they offer the job to be foreman, and I said I don’t want it. I’d rather be a worker, and I can help better this way. Finally, they come to me to ask me how to deal with this and this and how can we make it better? That’s how I became familiar with them. When I was in the machine shop, I go down there, I have everything from the worker, the boss in there, I was like that with them because I was honest with everything. If you’re dishonest, well, you can’t get nothing. So I make them understand it.

Roy: How about your co-workers?

Pomerleau: Oh, co-workers were pretty good. Oh. There was a few of those who were opposed to the Union, it was…. So, naturally at the end of it, they had to. Naturally, if they don’t like you or you don’t like them, if you’re a steward, but I try to talk to them. I try not to get mad with them. I tell them what’s better for them, but I said You don’t have to, I never force them to join
the Union. It’s up to you. But everybody said, At the end of it, do you want to do good. Now
the Company knows better. They pay the employees more money. Like at Geiger Brothers, they
got some foremen out there, they tried to get the Union there. Through me, I don’t really ………
Nine ten people there, and I told them what the Union was, and it can be done, I told then what
they can uphold to do, but they can hurt you. As far as I’m concerned, if I was you, I’d stay
where you guys are. I’d forget the Union. It never worked there. They tried three times, they
couldn’t do it. I told them not to spread my word, because you tell that to people, it’s not good.
But I’ll tell you what I think is good and what’s not good. To my thinking.

Roy: How long did the Union last in the mills?

Pomerleau: Oh, by God, I remember when the Bates got out. When they shut the mill there.
They went to Augusta the last time.

Male voice: Once they got in, they never got out.

Pomerleau: They left when the mill shut down. Because there’s no more now.

Woman: It’s a hard process to get out. I did it with the Teamsters.

Male voice: I did it some years ago.

Woman: I had to go to war. The Teamsters…..

Pomerleau: When he was working there boy, he had a tough one too.

Roy: What? In comparison, your wages through the years?

Pomerleau: Well, I can tell you where I ended. I stop at the Hill Mill at $100 a week. That’s as
far as I got. During the war, I make 101 hours a week on work. At the end of it, when everything
was stop, it takes some year, when I retired, I make $100 a week. For a fixer. That wasn’t
wages.

Roy: How did the war affect the mill?

Woman: Cost plus. It didn’t matter what they spent. The government was paying.

Pomerleau: They spent anything because it had to be done. Like the Bates Mill, there was only
one kind of yarn that they would do for the parachutes, otherwise, they were working on the war
material. But the Hill Mill, was …………

Roy: What did they make?

Pomerleau: Oh,

Woman: Gabardine they used for uniforms, and everything. You know, everything. All kinds of
different cloth.

Pomerleau: The Bates Mill made hospital spreads too, and they used some for the service.

Mrs. Pamerleau: The made the silk for pu???
Roy: Uh, Did you ever, from start to finish, what kind of benefits, vacations, holidays, any?

Pomerleau: All the vacation we had, a week’s salary for each year that you worked. And I worked thirty-five years, but the Company, through the Union, at the end of it they cut me two years off.

Woman: That was your retirement. Vacation was what, two weeks a year?

Pomerleau: Two weeks.

Roy: When did that start? Did you always have that, or?

Pomerleau: Oh, No! No! No! After the Union was in a while. So many years you had one week, and then you had two weeks. The most you ever had was two weeks. But you had, on retirement, the only pension you had is one dollar a week of salary, you figure that out on all the years you had. I’ll tell you what I had. I had. It give me a thousand some dollars at the end of the years. That’s my Social Security.

Woman: After thirty-five years.

Pomerleau: I was stopped two years. All the holidays were paid.

Roy: That was after the Union had been in there a while?

Pomerleau: Yes. Oh yes.

Roy: How long, when the Union started, how long after they were there that things started to change that was better?

Pomerleau: Oh, it takes a few years—three years—before we get organized, the company can understand everything, and get people to understand everything. People have meeting after meeting after meeting so we’re supposed to vote for it, and they vote against it, so they couldn’t put it in. It takes five years before it start getting a little better. The condition get a little better and the work after five years. But the hours changed a lot. They cut down to forty hours a week. I told you a little while ago, I remember, I was pooped out, and then when change came, it was getting better, and I felt better, I tried to rest. Then the war started up, I was rested up, then we worked a lot.

Woman: A different time, a different age. When people thought of their jobs first and they gave the company eight hours a day. Today, well, it’s hard to do. It’s hard to find—especially in California. If you can get four out of each, you’re lucky.

Roy: You mentioned time studies. You ended up being involved in those?

Pomerleau: One time because the people didn’t trust the employees from the Company on that. The regular time study. They used to take all of these people and……for years. In order for them to find out that such a person. I said, I will, I’ll be honest with you. That’s all you want to know. That’s how it happened. We had no trouble after that.

Roy: What kind of job did you do in time study on?

Pomerleau: I can’t remember if it was spinner or dolpher.
Male voice: Dolphing, spinner.

Pomerleau: I think it was dolphing at that time. No. It was spinner. It’s a spinner. That’s where I gained more when the superintendent and the conditions changed the workload. They were overloaded.

Roy: When did you retire? Were the mills already in a decline?

Pomerleau: They were starting. Some was closed. Continental Mill was closed, the Androscoggin Mill was closed. When I retired the Hill Mill was closed. The only one left was the Bates Mill.

Woman: For the last twenty years they’ve been struggling to survive.

Pomerleau: Yuh. The Bates Mill start over again. They don’t work too much. They probably hire, they have about 150 people working now.

Roy: How did the people feel when things started to decline? What were some of the reasons?

Pomerleau: They do worry about their, I mean their retirement pay.

Woman: Losing their jobs.

Pomerleau: Nothing to do. They lose all their jobs--no more work. They get a pink slip and go to Social Security. It was in that time, it kept going going good. It’s still the same.

Roy: Do you know any other reason why some of these mills closed?

Woman: Foreign trade.

Pomerleau: Trade from out-of-State, from other countries, hurt the mill awful bad. And then they changed from cotton to other materials and all that stuff. It wasn’t wearing like cotton. Now cotton seems to be coming back a little bit. People don’t like it.

Woman: It’s a whole chain reaction. You get people make cotton in other countries cheaper, you get different materials that people use, you know.

Pomerleau: …………..in London???. For nothing. My son-in-law is down there with my daughter. They both work. He’s a superintendent, and she’s a foreman in……… They work for nothing. The cost of living costs nothing there. You get a big big house, all-electric heat, the water, the sewer, your dog, your license, your cat, $250 a week—I mean a month, a year. My daughter’s over there. She says, We don’t pay nothing, but we don’t have any work here.

Roy: Yuh. Right.

Pomerleau: That’s why they moved out there.

Woman: We live in a funny age. I think we have lived in the best.

Male voice: I think so too.
Woman: I see it in my kid’s business. They really have to struggle. There’s too much competition. But that’s it. That’s human nature you know. This planet can only hold so much people.

Roy: What did you like most about your work life, your…..

Pomerleau: Well, I went to work in the shoe shop, I didn’t like it, I went to work in the box shop, I didn’t like it, and I went back to the mill, and I liked better the mill. I used to love work in the mill. Always. I didn’t like to work in the woods—lumberjack for my father—but I had to. My father was sick, my brother and I was working together in the woods—fourteen years old. My brother and my uncle and my father and I were working together. My older brother left my father. It left me. So at the end of the day, they come to see me on my job, I told my brother, How are you going to know? When we go down the hill, the trees are all stuck down there. We pull the saw out, and ………so we can cut another one. We have to do that all the time. When they got done, they take an ax and they say, Get out of the way. ‘Cause they was good. My brother was older. They chop underneath. When the tree goes down, ………they come to help us until my father was better to help us out. That was our life. That’s why I didn’t go to school. I didn’t like this.

Male voice: You weren’t the only one. Ha, ha, ha, ha.

Woman: But the mill was really a fun place to work. There were so many people, you’d go in there, especially if you were……

Pomerleau: People were all friendly.

Woman: Half of the jobs in the spinning department were all piece work. I mean you’d go there and hustle your ass off. You know. You’d have a ball. It was fun.

Roy: Was Bates Mill mostly Franco-American, or were there many many cultures?

Woman: It was 99% Frenchmen. There were very few English. And your bosses were all Frenchmen, because they’d promote within. Except they used to bring, you know, top supervisors, stuff like that, but there was only a handful. Mostly your foremen and overseers were all Frenchmen.

Pomerleau: They start the foremen by building them up in the……..in the room. They start at the bottom, go up the top, then want you to be foreman, but me, I didn’t want to. I didn’t like. I was once at Libby Mill, and I said, No more.

Woman: When you become a forman, your friends don’t like you no more—because you have to give them orders.

Roy: In some cases that’s what happened. Did that happen to you when you were a foreman for a time?

Pomerleau: Oh yes. Yes, but I always keep my straight line. I told them. When I was at Libby Mill, they put me foreman on my job, I said, I don’t care. That’s a job, I’m going to do it this way. And I’ve never have any ………like I tell you a while ago. I was fooling the company on the ………..team. I was changing it so the people did better on the second shift. They didn’t
understand why. Because I did that for a year. When the Hill Mill closed, they couldn’t run the spinning in the Bates Mill. It was all different machines. The came to us. They didn’t bend down on their knees, but they…………the good guys. How can we do that job to do better? Put that gear over there. Then we put it in. Go ahead, put it in. Sometime he didn’t tell the overseer, Don’t tell him, put it on. I hurry and put it on, the work goes better. We used to cheat about the other boss. The overseers were hired from second hand. The second hand told me to cheat, so I cheat, and there’s a card, ……………there was a race, you know sometimes, they mark it in ink, we can’t erase it underneath. So I changed the gear, I put another gear, it goes better. That happened in every department.

Roy: Uh, Oh! All of these mills made different products, or different yarns?

Pomerleau: Most of them……

Woman: ……..different material.

Pomerleau: The material, like the Bates Mill, they had a jacquard. Jacquard, it’s card that’s piled up to the ceiling, that run through the mill with all the holes in it. And they make a pattern on your bedspread. Like the Martha Washington. They still do that, but the other mills never, they can’t do it.

Roy: What did the other mills make?

Pomerleau: Cloth for shirts or dress, or towels.

Roy: What mill was that?

Pomerleau: Androscoggin. Little Androscoggin when I start to work, they make towels that you wash your hands, put them on a roll in the house, and wipe your hands on it.

Woman: Gabardine for pants………..

Pomerleau: For pants. There were all kinds. Different mills did different things.

Roy: The Hill Mill. What was that?

Pomerleau: The Hill Mill was practically the biggest yarn for the broadcloth.

Woman: And then the ‘Scoggin was silk.

Pomerleau: At the end it was all silk. ……..it was all junk. ………was towels.

Woman: The Bleachery was ………..finish. And the Libby was wool.

Pomerleau: Wool and cotton both. When I was there there was wool and cotton in my department.

Woman: Wool and cotton? The Bates was bedspreads (End of first side of tape. There’s nothing on second side.)