
S.D. Warren Company

Stories of Maine's Paper Plantation


8-2-2001

Interview with Ron Usher

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Recommended Citation

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Ron Usher

Active in town politics – switched from Republican to Democrat after mill unionized (track 22 – Republican managers in politics were compensated – Ron as Democrat in politics was not compensated, track 24 discusses how the Governor’s exec council ran the state and had two S.D. Warren representatives); terrible accident (track 14) => mangled fingers; remembers shouts of joy when mill unionized. “Takes a special person” to work in a dirty mill (track 12)

Track 4 How people got paid in the 1940s

Track 5 “Right on the footsteps of the mill” in the 1940 – playing as kids in and around the mill. Describes “cog railroad” used to transport logs.

Track 6 “How much the mill was involved in the Fire Department” – “When the whistle blew, they were allowed to go to the fire.”

Track 7 Mill helped out Little League team.

Track 8 Worked on Nixon-Kennedy campaign in 1960. “I would say just about all of the family is very strong Republican”

Track 9 Gets out of the military.

Track 10 How he got his job at the mill. “My wife wanted me to go to the mill.” “Just one favor – go sign your name” [at the mill’s personnel office]. When he was hired “Gee, my wife was jumping up and down.”

Around 1960, “So, I started off at \$1.26 an hour.” “I never had a big bonus.”

Track 11 “How [we] changed our shift” Was working on a six-hour shift typically six days a week. On Saturday, they worked 12 hours straight to change over to next shift (e.g. from 6 am to 6 pm when changing over from morning to afternoon shift).

Track 12 “Why don’t you try for the paper machines?” “How old this mill is – it takes a different kind of person to work in an old mill.” Describes the dirty, wet, polluted environment of mill; need to use piles of rags to keep equipment, self, clean. 2:36 “That’s why it takes a special person” to work there.

Track 13 Difficult and unsafe working conditions. People were left to work alone inside or next to running machines by supervisors. He describes working in a confined space inside of a moving machine.

Track 14. Accident: his fingers get mangled in a machine. “The lighting was out on the machine” “they were just like a banana ... they were peeled right down to the bone.”

Track 14 “Back in those days, they put you right back to work.” They put him to work several days later in storeroom for Christmas season.

Track 16 Joins fire department in 1961; goes on to paper machine and now worked roughly 50 hours per week.

Track 17 “In 1967, the union was voted in.” 0:40 “everybody was hollering... ‘Things are going to change’ – well yes they will.”

1:10 Favoritism described – no fairness in extra assignments

2:00 a lot of things went on ... certain guys always get the gravy.”

Paper machine department workers were the union leaders. Mentions Ted Barbecue.

Track 18 Organizing drive/why people joined the union.

1:30 “What it was? Scot purchased us, and that scared us... I think that probably was it.”

3:08 Unhelpful to have crafts in separate locals.

Track 19 Mother Warren

-Built hospital, mill relief, injured workers never saw the doctor’s bill.

Track 20 Becoming a Democrat “I’ve been a Democrat ever since.”

Gets on ‘70 Coater. Describes how they put the machine together, trained -“we started from nuts and bolts, right up to the machine” Became a second hand.

Track 21 Describes his political involvement in the 1970s – was on city council. Was supported by city unions – became more dominant with union support. Dropped from a 13 to seven man council; was 4 to 3 Democratic. D’s and R are worked together on City Council “but we worked very closely.” Arthur Gordon was first on the city council before.

Track 22 All the mill managers, etc. in town politics were Republicans - “matter of fact, the Republicans that served out of the mill, were compensated... and I was never, never once.” Managers came over at the mill and said they were surprised that they weren’t covered.

1:20 Getting recruited by the union to run for House of Representatives. Marv Ewing and Joe Francouer (IAM president) 4:08 Two existing Democrats in State House an insurance salesman and mill staff member who was anti-union – neither voted union in legislature. Was active in St. Hyacinthe Church.

Stories about Longley as Governor. How we refused to pay for state’s bills – “a couple of years of cleaning up his mess.”

Track 23 How hard it was to maintain job at mill while working in State Legislature. Hard to get guys to cover his shifts. Shifted over to day job - odd jobs moving materials. Too few hours one year – got a week of vacation taken away. 4:00 shifted over to Carpenters and Joiners; became Vice-President. Picket line during 1985 strike. Became co-chair of United Way.

Track 24 Was on mill's contributions committee - \$350,000 per year given by Scott. Before the union was in there, only management people handled it. 4:00 "They wanted to keep the spirit going" for Scott worker's communities. Tells a story about giving \$1200 for a ball field backstop.

Three people from research, several department heads, engineering manager, and Ron Usher was the only worker. A new P.R. person recruited him. (Sandy Price)

Describes Governor's Executive Council. 1:46 It was two big shots on Governor's Advisory Council from S.D. Warren – Slim Trafton and one other. They had the

Ray Bossineau a Warren manager was in the Legislature.

End of Disk 1

Disk Two

Track 1 57% of employees lived in Gorham, Windham, and Westbrook in 1980s.

Scott added the 25 year pins. 40 year club got a banquet under S.D. Warren (before Scott) 4:51 "They were equal if not above" Warren ownership in treatment/recognition of employees and community.

Track 2 Economy was poorer in late 1980s; made final 3 of city manager of Standish. Dropped out of legislature, but didn't get the job in Standish. 1:38 "Things weren't going to well" Jay strike was discussed a lot at work and money was raised. 2:20 A boss from Boston come up "let's do things different."

Harlie Wood and he were on jointness committee. First 4 or 5 meetings were unproductive. Two salaried guys were negative and provoked a lot of the arguing. Dropped down to 18 – 4 management were told to leave. Eventually 16.