
S.D. Warren Company

Stories of Maine's Paper Plantation


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Interview with Joe Jensen

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Joe Jensen (see also summary notes at end of the transcript)

Worker-union leader-supervisor (years at the mill:1960-1997)

Track 3 Work slow-down in the finishing department in 1960

0:00-0:33/0:55-1:20 1:25-1:50

Track 4 **Unionization: Why it happened?**

-- Because of unequal pay, favoritism, pay below unionized paper mills. Before: loyalty to mill had thwarted early union efforts.

“The union came into play – the big issue was money, at the time. You know, at that time they had roughly about 5000 workers in the mill, and I don’t know how many different pay scales [note: Howard Parkhurst]. I could, for example, be a roll handler or a floor man at that time, and there could be, the 4 of us, it could be that neither one of us would be making the same rate.

0:44 It all depended – it was kind of a favoritism system. YK, if your foreman thought you were real good, and you were doing a good job, he’d give you a little bit more. So, YK, that became a problem, b/c yk, everybody felt that they contributed – and there were a lot of good workers, you know, an equal amount, and , so, yeah, that became an issue.

1:07 And also the pay rate. It was at a time when things were beginning to cost a lot and a lot of the other mills were making a lot more money than were making here, that were organized.

1:22 And then there was overtime pay issues, and there was a lot of issue which is the reason the company lost it to the union.

Track 5 Mother Warren/Getting a Job

As a matter of fact, it was a real close-knit family mill.

YK, you almost had to have family in there in order to get in there. It was very difficult to get in there if you didn’t have what you called “ a pull.”

O:25 Hiring was done at the mill itself. That didn’t change until some time after the union got in there and it was

0:48 Before that though you really had to – it wasn't an overnight thing – I went down there for, I don't know, 3 or 4 months. Almost every day – you had to be persistent. And if you went down once every two or three months, you were a long time in getting in. So I used to go down there every day, and a lot of people who got in there quicker, that's how they got in there – was to keep stopping in there, and they saw you had a real interest.

Family members spoke for you, but they were looking for you to show up, too. You had to have a combination.

1:50 **Organizing the union**

Basically, the union – that was not there first try. They tried that a number of years ago – my father had tried to help them, so. ... [Why had it failed in the past?] I believe it was a matter of loyalty. A lot of older folk in the mill at the time – I think it was a matter of loyalty. It wasn't that they didn't have issues – they certainly did have issues, but there were a lot of real loyal people at that time. I think that was one of the big issues.

Q: Were people signing cards?

2:40 Yes, you had to – and you have to picture this back a little bit – because before production organized, it was already organized in the mechanical unions, in there. And I think that was a help, in getting the union in the rest of it. **Track 6** But we had to have people sign cards to show that there's an interest. And they had to be – the exact number of cards I don't remember, but there had to be a percentage sign up to show there's an interest before the government came in and be there for an election.

0:27 I worked with the int'l reps in getting the cards signed and getting the word to the people, yeah.

0:45 We didn't have any trouble getting cards signed, we didn't have trouble with a lot of them. B/c a lot of people, I think view it as "it's an election – it's either going to fly or it's not going to fly." YK, we would explain the benefits of the union to them. And back in that time, YK, in thinking back, at that time when the petition for the election I was running a winder, and back then, a winder man made \$2 and fifty cents an hour. IM, that wasn't much, back then. When you look at the whole thing.

Track 7 Massive inefficiency: unionization forced mill to modernize and saved mill.

They had for an example, people working in there – they had one man who used to just change batteries in transporters all day – the mill was really antiquated. You had women hand sorting paper, YK, all day long. And at that time, if the union hadn't gotten in there that mill probably would have gone under a lot sooner. IM, you *cannot carry 5000 workers, and do everything by hand*. They had very few trucks. They used to truck paper with very small transporters – little electric battery transporters. YK in the

shipping department, when I went in there, they had I think two or three little fork trucks, and at night they used to the big fork trucks from Boston and Maine RR. But the shipping department it was, a lot of it was by hand.

1:05 The company realized that in order to keep up with the market, and keep up with the wages and the benefits we were looking at, and to keep up with the other mills in the area, that they were going to have to modernize, and that's exactly what they did. I think it actually - it saved the mill at that time.

1:40 Company efforts to thwart union drive – the union wins/mill manager gets upset.

Oh, yeah, there's no doubt about it. **You were really suppressed in there. They didn't want you floating around the mill, or being in there when you weren't working, or.** They, a matter of fact even the mill manager was down there the night of the election – that was Rudy Greep, yes – the talking was over at that time, they were counting the ballots, and they had a number of those people down there. And you could see him getting upset, because the number of yes ballots were stacking up, and the nos were down – the yeses they kept pushing them down so they wouldn't stack so high. So, yes, you could see he was getting upset.

2:43 Basically, their argument was: “you know we've always been loyal, we've always stuck by our people,” and that type of thing. They were always there for them. **But, YK, people realized you were at a time and era where this was a changing world. People began to realize that.**

Track 8 Ethnicity didn't play a role in election. Franco grandfather changed name to get into the mill.

0:30 Those that were in favor of the union was very high; there were very few that were violently opposed to it. YK... I don't know that there was too many people that weren't from around the area I don't know that there were many black people in there. ...

1:27 There were a lot of French people there, some of them from Canada. My grandfather, he was a supervisor on the paper machines, he was originally from Canada. *But they changed the spelling of their name when they got here, interestingly enough.* Because it was hard to get into the mill, coming from there (Canada). So they changed the spelling of their name Barrows for Burroughs. YK, but that was part of the story.

1:52 At that time, it was mostly local people in there.

Later, the Maine Job Service sent in (later) “deadwood”.

Track 10 Union brings much higher wages

Winder job doubles wages. Gave out contract books at other mills during union campaign –

Because this mill had fallen behind the whole system. You do it by hand and you do it by numbers.

0:50 “They were, they were (shocked by wage disparity). And it was long after that the company started investing and changing there methods. They could no longer afford the luxury of all those people.

1:06 But yeah, benefits increased, retirement benefits increased... They used to have describes mill relief. Mill relief was pretty much out of style.

2:40 A lot of mills had better benefits, and you weren’t paying anything for it.

2:57 Your retirement benefits increased by quite a lot. ...Yeah it increased by quite a lot. ...Every year (with the union) the rates were increased.

Track 11 Union addressed problem of favoritism by implementing seniority.

Summary Notes:

(Worked at mill 1960-1999; organized union and became vice-president - production worker for 15 years, and became a supervisor for 24 years)

- Describes organized work slowdown in his first assignment in finishing department. Folks weren’t happy with bonus standards and were slowing down until they were improved. Mgmt’s countered by moving new workers in and current workers out.

- Described organizing of the paper workers’ union in 67.

- very articulate on why workers wanted union. Organizers showed workers the very large gap between what SDW workers earned vs. unionized mills. Claimed that **his wages doubled with the first contract.**

- fairness was issue; favoritism in job/extra assignments were common.

- mentioned John Nee’s letter.

- described company’s views on keeping it out.

- Said the mill had been grossly inefficient because of low wage labor. Once unionized, the company made extensive investments in capital/technology improvements b/c of

unionization's affects on wages.

- Very forceful explanation of SAPPI's callous approach towards local, lower-management. Elimination of overtime pay and "bottom-line attitude" were a big problem, along with speed-up caused by extensive downsizing of management. Refused to do some of what he was asked to do (weekend overtime with no pay), and was happy to take early retirement in 1999.

- He believes that top managers knew in the 1970s that the mill's days were numbered, long before the workers new it.

Overall, excellent observations on many topics. Generously provided pictures and momentos.