

BY THE SWEAT OF THEIR BROWS: MILL WORKERS AND THEIR LIVES

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A worker operates a picker at the American Thread Company in Willimantic, CT, in this c. 1950 photo. The Company preferred to hire big, burly men for this very physical job. From the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.

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Many Ethnicities. The men, women, and children who worked in Connecticut's textile mills came from many countries and cultures. The earliest mill workers, at the beginning of the 19th century, were Yankees, mostly from small rural communities but a few from cities like Boston or Providence. By 1800 farmland in Connecticut was becoming scarce. Families that could not afford a farm of their own, or the teen-aged children of poor farmers, either migrated to the frontier or took jobs in the new mills. Like Harriet Hanson in Lowell, Massachusetts, many of them were so-called mill girls, adolescent girls or young single women seeking to supplement their parents' income. Then, beginning in the late 1840s, Irish immigrants arrived. After the Civil War (1861-65), many other immigrant groups came. According to the U. S. Census, by 1910 nearly a third of the population of the town of Windham, CT (which included the city of Willimantic) was foreign-born: 3,702 of 12,604. Of those, 46% were French Canadian, 15% Irish, 15% Polish, 6% British, 3% Swedish, 3% Italian, 2% Lebanese, and 2% German. Another 2% were Eastern European Jews who spoke Yiddish as their primary language. The last major group to come to Connecticut and work in the textile mills were Latinos from Latin America, especially Puertorriquenos. There is strong evidence that, throughout most of the industrial era, many of Connecticut's textile mills only hired whites, even for menial jobs. Altogether, at least 26 different nationalities were represented among Willimantic's mill workers.



A worker (right) concentrates on processing sliver into roving at the American Thread Company in this c. 1950 photo. From the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.

Low Wages. Whether immigrant or native-born, most workers received low wages – although more than they would have made as farmers. Mostly, they were paid piece rate, by the quantity of goods they produced rather than by the hour. Although piece rates varied according to both the time period and the type of job, workers' buying power generally declined over time, from fairly high in the early 1800s to quite low in the early 1900s. Following President Franklin Roosevelt's pro-union Labor Bill of Rights (the Wagner Act, or National Labor Relations Act) in the 1930s, however, union membership increased and wages rose. Wages also tended to increase during wartime, when government demand for uniforms, tents, insulation, parachutes, and other textile burgeoned, only to plummet as soon as the conflicts ended. Skilled workers made more than unskilled workers, men were paid more than women, and children made less than adults. According to pay envelopes in the Museum's collection, in 1924-26 workers at American Thread made between \$9.65 and \$17.95 per week, or only \$110-\$205 in today's currency – which explains why whole families (men, women, and children) took jobs in the mills: one income was simply not enough to support a family.

The lowest paid workers were doffers (mostly children, sometimes as young as 10), unskilled laborers, workers in the packaging department, and winders. Spinners, weavers, and seamstresses in sweatshops often received low wages, too, despite their skills, because they were women. Better paid were skilled male workers, such as dyers, carpenters, machinists, firemen (steam boiler operators), and fixers. Engineers were well paid. Overseers, chemists (dyemasters), agents, and managers earned the highest pay.

Because wages were so low, as time went on workers developed strategies to maximize their incomes. They worked quickly, sometimes risking serious injury. And they relied on the labor

of the entire family. Most working-class wives had jobs, as did most of their children over the age of 12.

Speed-Ups, Ethnic Rivalries, Blacklists, Company Housing, and Company Stores. Mill owners found numerous ways to limit payroll and recapture wages. During times of sluggish market demand such as following World War I, they lowered piece rates; the result was speed-ups, where workers worked even faster. Owners also attempted to prevent workers from forming labor unions, sometimes by playing upon ethnic rivalries. Workers who joined unions risked losing their jobs and, worse, could be blacklisted by their employers from finding work at other mills. The mills also built company stores and company housing to recapture some of the workers' wages. Workers could purchase food and dry goods at the store, paying by credit. The employers then deducted the debts from the workers' weekly pay envelopes. Company stores in Willimantic — and several of the mills had them — usually set fair prices competitive with those of other local shops and stores, and the items sold were usually of good quality. But the profits from the sales went back into the mills' coffers, and not into the pockets of local merchants, just as the rents paid by workers for company housing profited the mills, not the local landlords. Moreover, workers had no choice but to settle up each week on payday. And of course, if your boss was also your landlord, and someone to whom you owed a debt, it was that much harder to leave your job or defy your employer by joining a union.



A spinner tends her spinning machine at the American Thread Company in this 1943 photo. From the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.

In truth, company housing – and even company stores – were also necessary. Because the mills were built in previously underpopulated areas like rocky gorges with waterfalls, because the workforce grew quickly, and because private landlords were unable to meet the demand for housing, the owners had little choice but to provide it themselves – and the workers had little

choice but to accept it. The companies deducted the workers' rents – and their credit charges at the company stores – directly from the workers' pay envelopes.

Mills built several different types of company housing: boardinghouses, apartments, row houses, and cottages. The Willimantic Linen Company's Elms boardinghouse was for single workers. A three-story structure, it had a parlor, dining room, two kitchens, and the housekeeper's apartment on the first floor; rooms for women boarders on the second floor; and rooms for male boarders on the third floor. According to the U. S. Census, in 1880, boarders slept two to a room, probably in the same bed. Female boarders were mostly Yankee-born, 12-25 years old, single, and unskilled or semi-skilled. Male boarders were mostly foreign-born (English and Scottish), 20-35 years old, married (but at the moment without their families), and skilled workers like machinists.



Alice LaFerriere tends a carding machine at the American Thread Company in this c. 1950 photo. Until World War II, only men worked on the extremely dangerous cards. But by the mid-1900s, women worked on the machines, too. From the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.

Row houses were mostly double tenements (duplexes) in neighborhoods like Willimantic's Iverton. Most units had six rooms, three downstairs and three upstairs. Originally, they had no indoor plumbing, and the only source of heat was a coal stove in the kitchen. Workers frequently kept their rents down by taking in boarders, or by doubling up with another family. Because as many as 10-12 people shared a unit, the kitchen was frequently the only common room, with the other five rooms used as bedrooms. Kitchens became "everything rooms," used for cooking, dining, bathing children, washing and ironing clothes, socializing, and playing.

The Willimantic Linen Company also built the Oaks, a quiet neighborhood off Windham Road with quaint, six-room Victorian cottages with gingerbread trim. These single-family homes may have housed skilled workers and their families.

Strikes. The relationship between owners and workers grew increasingly strained over time. Determined to resist what they considered condescending treatment, dangerous working conditions, long hours, frequent wage cuts, and exhausting speed-ups, workers formed labor unions and staged strikes. The 1925 American Thread strike was one of the most hard-fought contests in Connecticut labor history. That year, 2,200 of the 2,500 workers at the American Thread Company's giant Willimantic Mills struck in protest of wage cuts. The Company resisted the strike. It set up employment offices in Manchester, New Hampshire, and Lowell, Boston, and Fall River, Massachusetts, and hired hundred of replacement workers. It evicted striking workers from company housing. Some of the evicted strikers set up a temporary tent city on the outskirts of town. Strikers picketed the plant, gathered at local theaters for mass meetings, and hooted at the replacement workers. Anger and resentment smoldered, and some feared it might lead to violence. Women strikers and women replacement workers got into shouting and shoving matches, some replacement workers were beaten up, and a few of the strikers were arrested. Management claimed to have found a bomb in the mill yard. State and municipal police warily patrolled Main Street and Thread Mill Square. Finally, after nine months, the workers lost the strike. Many of the strikers moved away. But decades passed before the animosities generated by the conflict cooled down. Not until the 1950s would union members feel they could be open about their affiliation without fear of reprisal. And, for two generations, the union's charter remained hidden behind a picture in its frame.