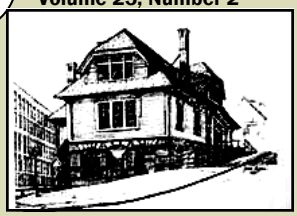
Volume 25, Number 2 Fall 2011



Loom and Spindle

WINDHAM TEXTILE & HISTORY MUSEUM
THE MILL MUSEUM OF CONNECTICUT

COMING EVENTS:

Museum Lyceum: "How to Research the History of Your House." Sun., Sep. 25, 4 PM. $15 / members $10. With Jamie Eves, former title abstractor and Windham Co-Town Historian. At the Museum.

Kids Club Activity: "Willimantic Water Power." Sat., Oct. 8. 1—2:30 PM. With Bev York. At the Museum.

Museum Lyceum "The Methodist Melee on Main Street and Other Episodes of Antislavery Activity in Antebellum Willimantic." Sun., Oct. 16, 4 PM. $15 / members $10. With Jamie Eves, Windham Co-Town Historian. At the Museum.

Walking Tour: "Civil War Willimantic: A Glimpse of the Town in the 1860s." Sat., Oct. 22. 10 AM. Free.

Tea and Scones. Sat., Oct. 22. 3 PM. At the Museum. Featuring a presentation on "The Art of Making Scones."

Event: "Hallowe'en Party at the Mill Museum." Sat., Oct. 29. 7—11 PM. Music and fun hosted by Perilous Cheryl and the Joey Zone. Costumes encouraged. Donations to the Museum's education fund. At the Museum.

Tri-Museum Auction. Fri., Nov. 4. To benefit the Textile Museum, the Connecticut Eastern Railroad Museum, and the Windham Historical Society. Ernie Eldridge's Auction House on South Park St. in Willimantic.

Museum Lyceum: "Children of the Civil War." Sun., Nov. 6. 4 PM. $15 / members $10. Talk by Meg DeAngelis, Civil War reenactor.

Kids Club Activity: Knitting and Dyeing. Sat., Nov. 12. 1-2:30 PM. With Bev York. At the Museum.

Special Holiday Tea. "Holidays from Around the World." Featuring foods from many lands. Sat., Nov. 19. 3 PM. At the Museum.

Gingerbread Holiday. Sat., Dec. 3. 1 PM. At the Museum.

Museum Lyceum

The Windham Textile & History Museum is reviving one of the most popular features of the 19th century: the lyceum.

Lyceums were public lectures and presentations , designed to be both educational and entertaining. In an era before television, the internet, or even radio, lyceums drew large audiences. Popular lyceum speakers included such luminaries as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau.

The Textile Museum's first Museum Lyceum is scheduled for Sunday, September 25, at 4:00 PM. Jamie Eves, the Museum's Executive Director, a former title abstractor, and Windham co-Town Historian will present an illustrated talk entitled "If Only Walls Could Talk: Researching the History of Your House."

Refreshments will be available. There will be a $15 admission, $10 for Museum members.

The second Museum Lyceum will be held on Sunday, October 16, at 4:00 PM. It will also feature an illustrated talk by Eves, "The Methodist Melee on Main Street and Other Episodes of Anti-Slavery Activity in Antebellum Willimantic."

The third Museum Lyceum, scheduled for Sunday, Nov. 6, at 4:00 PM, will be talk by Civil War Reenactor Meg DeAngelis, "Children and the Civil War."

Even more Museum Lyceums are being arranged for 2012.

Thorne family gravestone in the Old Willimantic Cemetery memorializes two Civil War soldiers. Find out more about the Thorne brothers and other local Civil War soldiers at the Museum's exhibit, The Civil War: Connecticut's Cotton Connection.

Windham Textile & History Museum Annual Meeting in October

The Windham Textile & History Museum will hold its annual membership meeting on Thursday, October 13, at 5:30 PM at the Museum.

All members of the Museum are invited to the annual meeting. The annual meeting votes to fill vacancies on the Museum's Board of Directors and among its officers. In addition, the Executive Director will submit an annual report on the Museum's activities during the last 12

Brooke Shannon, 1948-2011

Sadly, Brooke Shannon, the Museum's long-time Executive Director, passed away on July 28, 2011. Brooke was a constant flurry of activity, racing here and there, and moving mountains to preserve the history and culture of eastern Connecticut. She originated the Museum's Victorian teas (continued as the monthly Tea & Scones), vastly improved the Museum's web site, and organized the best fundraising events in the State of Connecticut. Her contribution to the Museum and the community were immense, and she will be greatly missed.

In appreciation of Brooke's many accomplishments, the Windham Textile and History Museum's Board of Directors has gratefully designated the Museum's antique sewing machine exhibit room the Brooke Shannon Exhibit Room. The room was Brooke's creation. She laid the floor, painted the walls and ceiling, selected the rugs, and designed the curtains. It will always be "her room."

Her Journey's Just Begun

Don't think of her as gone away —
Her journey's just begun,
Life holds so many facets —
This earth is only one.

Just think of her as resting
From the sorrows and the tears
In a place of warmth and comfort
Where there are no days or years.

Think how she must be wishing
That we could know today
How nothing but our sadness
Can really pass away.

And think of her as living
In the hearts of those she touched...
For nothing loved is ever lost —
And she was loved so much.

E. Brenneman

Board of Directors & Staff

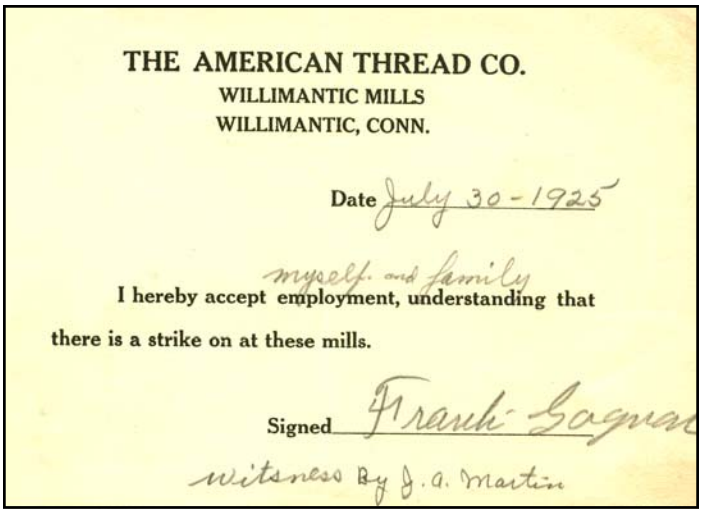
David Moxon's Forgotten Files: The Inside Story One of Connecticut's Biggest Strikes, the American Thread Company Strike of 1925

By Jamie H. Eves

Most of the manila folders crammed in the battered old metal file cabinet were curled and yellowed with age, and the sheets of cheap, pulp paper they held were browned and brittle. Some were bound with rusty paper clips. A rich, pungent aroma – the familiar scent of decaying paper – filled the air. Most of the files turned out to be pretty dull stuff: 1940s and 1950s production records and inter-office memoranda left behind by the American Thread Company (ATCO) when, like so many other manufacturers, it left Connecticut in 1985 for the promise of cheaper labor and lower taxes in North Carolina. But nine of the folders – about six linear inches – turned out to contain a real historical treasure: internal company records from the hard-fought ATCO strike of 1925, one of the bitterest and most divisive labor struggles in Connecticut history. With 2500 workers out on strike, 1700 replacement workers brought in to take their place, and lasting nine months, it was also one of the biggest. And its outcome — a crushing defeat for the strikers — signaled the beginning of the end of the Connecticut textile industry.

The public side of the strike has long been known from stories in the *Hartford Courant*, *Hartford Times, Willimantic Chronicle*, and other newspapers. And in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the workers' experience was well documented in a series of oral histories compiled by the by the Windham Textile and History Museum and the University of Connecticut's Center for Oral History. But much less is known about management's side of the strike. For obvious reasons, ATCO – like most corporations – kept confidential its internal plans, memos, correspondence, and records about the strike, when it had recruited immigrant replacement workers ("scabs") to break the union and implement a 10% pay cut. Now, for the first time, it is possible to examine the responses of both labor *and* management.

In 1989, shortly after the American Thread Company closed its Willimantic plant, a number of people interested in preserving the history of the textile industry in Connecticut founded the Windham Textile and History Museum. Relying mostly on volunteers, the museum began to collect artifacts — books, documents, ledgers, photographs, newspapers, magazines, engineers' plans, blueprints, maps, vintage clothing, sewing machines, mill machines, textile workers' tools, and other objects. Some of the artifacts had belonged to ATCO, were left behind when it moved south, and were donated by the new owners of the mill, who wanted to develop the buildings for nonindustrial uses and were anxious to get rid of what they viewed as annoying clutter.



THE AMERICAN THREAD CO.
WILLIMANTIC MILLS
WILLIMANTIC, CONN.

Date July 30 - 1925

myself and family
I hereby accept employment, understanding that

there is a strike on at these mills.

Signed Frank Gagnon

witness By J. A. Martin

This card was filled out by a replacement worker (strikebreaker, scab) seeking employment at the American Thread Company's Willimantic, CT, plant during the plant's bitter 1925 strike.

Museum Membership Renewal Fall 2011

If you have already renewed your membership, thank you!

Student/Senior, $15 _____ Sustaining, $75 _____

Individual, $25 _____ Patron, $100 _____

Family/Household, $40 _____ Benefactor, above $250 _____

Additional Donation _____

We are a 501(c)3 organization. Your donations are tax deductable.

NAME: _____ E-Mail: _____

ADDRESS: _____

Checks payable to: W. T. H. M.

Windham Textile and History Museum, 411 Main Street, Willimantic, CT 06226

1925 Strike, Cont'd

Among the items the museum acquired were about ten linear feet of ATCO files in manila folders. Among these folders were several files related to the 1925 strike, originally created by (or under the supervision of) David Moxon, a British-born ATCO executive who had been assigned to recruit and find housing for the strikebreakers. Friendly, well liked, able, hard-working, and efficient, Moxon would continue to rise within the company, serving as the agent and general manager of the Willimantic plant in the 1940s. In 1925 Moxon was the superintendant of the plant's manufacturing department.

The Moxon files contained several items. There were his expense accounts as he traveled to Lowell, Massachusetts; Manchester, New Hampshire; and several other New England mill towns searching for replacement workers. There were also signed statements from a number of the replacement workers in which they acknowledged that they were aware that there was a strike in progress in Willimantic; several handwritten letters in English and in French inquiring about possible employment as strikebreakers; memoranda instructing officials at the Willimantic plant to pay the traveling expenses of certain replacement workers who traveled to Willimantic from other towns; and a canvass of available (empty) tenements in Willimantic for the scabs to move into.

Worldwide demand for American-made textiles had soared during World War I (1914-19), leading ATCO (in reality a subsidiary of a larger British corporation) and other American-based textile companies to increase production. In order to attract the additional workers it needed to meet the higher demand, ATCO raised wages by 160%, plant manager Donald H. Curtis later told the *Hartford Courant*. But when the war ended, the demand dropped. ATCO responded to the loss in income not by cutting production, but by cutting wages — 22 ½% in 1920, 12 ½% in 1923, and another 10% on January 12, 1925.

Because most of the 2,500 workers at ATCO's Willimantic plant were paid piece rate, the wage cuts amounted to a speed-up — a situation where workers labor faster in order to keep their take-home pay from plummeting. Because few workers could work fast enough to keep up with the pay cuts, they found themselves working harder than ever for less money, a circumstance that sparked frustration and bitter resentment.

Moreover, because management had responded with a speed-up rather than layoffs, production actually increased even as demand fell. At ATCO's Willimantic plant, production increased by 21% between January 12 and March 10. The result was a vicious cycle: the factory over-produced, prices consequently continued to fall, even more speed-ups occurred, workers became angry and exhausted, and accidents became more frequent.

Hoping to rescind the most recent pay cut, in the United Textile Workers of America (UTWA) opened negotiations with Curtis, the plant's general manager and Moxon's boss. Curtis refused call off the speed up, arguing that ATCO could not afford to pay higher wages than its competitors, which had already made similar cuts.

Events came to a head on March 5, when a mass meeting of ATCO operatives assembled at Willimantic's Gem Theater, only a few blocks from the factory, and unanimously authorized a strike. About 2/3 of the workers at ATCO's Willimantic plant belonged to the UTWA, one of America's largest industrial unions. The union had been founded in 1902 and had established a local branch, number 307, in Willimantic that same year. The union was especially strong in the plant's finishing department, where the majority of the workers were women and wages tended to be low. Most of ATCO's operatives, including the majority in the finishing department, were immigrants; the union's membership therefore included numerous different nationalities – a polyglot of Connecticut Yankees, French Canadians, Poles, Irish, Ukrainians, Italians, and others. The different nationalities did not always get along with each other, but they were united in their support for the strike. The strikers chose Amy Hooker, a worker at the Willimantic plant, as their spokesperson, although several representatives from the union's national headquarters were also on hand, to provide advice and leadership.

It is clear that the UTWA national viewed the strike in Willimantic as a key event. The plant was one of the largest thread mills in the world, and ATCO was an industry leader. Whatever happened in Willimantic would set an example for labor issues throughout the entire textile industry. The union desperately wanted to win.

Four days later, on March 9, approximately 1,800 workers – about half of them from the union's stronghold, the finishing department – walked out. Publically, plant manager Curtis vowed that the factory would continue to operate, but with only a handful of the finishing department's 1,500 hands still on the job, he was privately worried. Things got worse the next morning, when about 400 more workers joined the strike and demonstrations occurred at two of the mill gates.

When the boiler operators told Curtis that they, too, intended to join the strike, he reluctantly closed the plant. Only about 300 workers remained in the mill, nowhere near enough to maintain production, and the loss of the boiler operators meant that there would be no power to run the machines. In a last-minute concession, the union agreed that a skeleton crew would remain in the boiler room, to maintain heat in the mill buildings and in the company-owned tenements where

1925 Strike, Cont'd

many of the workers lived.

Union leaders were confident of victory. Solidarity was virtually complete. According to the *Courant*, none of the workers were crossing the picket lines, union membership was increasing daily, 2,200 of the plant's 2,500 workers had actually walked out, and on March 11, 2,000 of them paraded enthusiastically through downtown Willimantic to the Gem Theater to attend a rally. Although workers at ATCO's other, smaller plants (in Holyoke and Fall River, Massachusetts; Westerly, Rhode Island; and Milo and Willimantic, Maine) declined to join the strike, they were sympathetic, and along with others contributed to the union's strike fund, which soon grew large enough to last for two or three months. The strikers had strong support from their national union. They opened a store on Jackson Street, only a few blocks from the mill, where strikers could purchase donated groceries at discount

prices. They made plans to erect a tent city on the outskirts of the city, in case ATCO decided to evict them from their company-owned tenements. Even some of Willimantic's local political establishment sided with the strikers – mostly Democrats and Main Street merchants who, for business reasons, hoped for a quick resolution (which they knew would happen only if management agreed to rescind the 10% pay cut), and who in any case sometimes resented the mill managers and owners who formed Willimantic's economic and social elite.

However, management had considerable power of its own. Because the demand for textiles was down, there was less pressure actually to be up and running than if it had been a boom period. ATCO was a large corporation, owned by an even larger corporation, and so had plenty of cash reserves and political clout. It could shift some production to its other plants. In truth, it was the company rather than the union that was better situated to sustain a protracted strike. Even as both sides argued their cases in the newspapers, ATCO began to implement a strategy that nine months later defeated the strikers and broke the union. And David Moxon's forgotten files reveal just how they did it.

ATCO's plan was to replace the 2,200 strikers with a new, smaller, non-union workforce of about 1,700. The replacements – "scabs" – would be, the company hoped, more submissive, agree to work for lower wages, and be few enough in number that management could implement speed-ups without greatly increasing production in times of sluggish demand.

The first step was to make sure that any replacement workers that ATCO hired would be safe from retaliation by the strikers. To that end, someone – Moxon was not senior enough to do it, but it was almost certainly an ATCO executive – convinced the Connecticut state police to send a detachment of officers to patrol the neighborhood around the plant. (When questioned by a reporter from the Hartford *Courant*, municipal officials strongly denied that the request had come from them, and the Willimantic city council even went so far as to protest to state authorities about the troopers' presence.) The state police couldn't stop the strikers from picketing the mill and attempting to intimidate the replacements with shouted warnings, and a few fistfights did occur, especially among the women, but for the most part the troopers kept the peace.

The next step was to find replacement workers and convince them to come to Willimantic. ATCO put Moxon in charge of this effort. By early June he had set up employment offices in five other New England textile mill cities – Lowell, Boston, and Fall River in Massachusetts; Providence in Rhode Island; and Manchester in New Hampshire – staffing them with ATCO junior executives. According to Moxon's travel vouchers, in June and July he was on the road more than he was in Willimantic. He spent the bulk of his time in Lowell and Manchester, with occasional jaunts to Boston. The effort in Fall River was smaller, and Moxon turned it over to another executive, with whom he kept in touch by mail. The vast majority of the replacements would come from Lowell and Manchester, where thousands of laid-off textile workers were desperately seeking jobs. By the end of July, ATCO apparently had all the workers it wanted; in August, Moxon was responding to letters looking for work by saying that no vacancies existed.

The Lowell office was located in two rooms in the old city hall on Merrimack Street. Advertisements were placed in local newspapers, both in English and in French, to catch the attention of the city's large population of French Canadian immigrants. Moxon instructed Albert Caulfield, who was in charge of the office, to screen applicants both for job skills and character – which presumably meant submissiveness to management. He was especially interested in hiring whole families, who would be easier to control than single workers. Moxon authorized Caulfield to advance the replacements their moving expenses (train fare and the cost of teamsters to haul their possessions to and from the railroad station), with the sums to be deducted from their wages.

On June 22 Caulfield wrote Moxon a typical report:

"Enclosed please find a list of applications filed today, which is self explanatory. Since talking with you this P. M., the two young women i. e. Deloris Dubois and Jeanette Martin have definitely decided to come to Wlltc Tues. on the train due Wlltc at 1:08 P.M. I am going to buy their R. R. tickets for them, (advancing price of same) to assure their coming. This will make three young women due on this train, (the third being Helen Grourk) who will want to be put up at the Elm's [ATCO's Willimantic boarding house for single workers]. Joseph Leon Godin also will be in to see you and to look over the plant. If he likes the place he would be ready to move at once, paying all of his own expenses. You will find his family listed on to-day's (Mon.) list."

The accompanying list contained information about 30 potential replacements that Caulfield was sending to Willimantic. Eight were members of the Landry family, six were Godins, three were Barons,

1925 Strike, Cont'd

two were Martins, two were Drouins, and the other eight were single young adults. Only four – Helen Grourk, John Heanley, Leo Donnelly, and James Foley – did not have French Canadian surnames. The Godin family included the father Joseph, a 47-year-old iron moulder ("could use as general hand"); the mother Edouilda, a 45-year-old spinner and spooler; a daughter Anna, a 23-year-old spinner and spooler; another daughter Rose, a 20-year-old spinner and spooler; a son Fred, 19; and another son Ernest, 16. Altogether, Moxon's files contained 92 sheets listing the names of replacement workers sent to Willimantic by the various ATCO employment offices. The majority of the surnames on the lists were French Canadian. Most spoke at least some English, although several did not. Moxon's files do not indicate whether he purposely sought out immigrant workers because he thought they would be easier to control, or whether the large number of French Canadians simply reflected the fact that immigrants were more desperate for jobs than native-born Americans, and therefore more likely to apply. Whatever the reason, they were likely to be a more docile work force than the strikers.

Moxon had the replacements sign preprinted forms in which they acknowledged that they knew there was a strike underway at Willimantic.

To entice replacement workers, ATCO initially offered them fairly generous wages, higher than those it had previously paid to the strikers. According to an internal ATCO memo to Moxon from Robert Branch, the superintendant of the Willimantic plant's finishing department, unskilled general hands in the box shop (normally among the lowest paid workers at the plant) would be offered starting wages of $13.70 a week, or about $4.00 a week more than ATCO's lowest paid workers had been paid before the strike. (General hands were paid daily wages rather than the piece rate paid to carders, spinners, twisters, winders, and packers.) Moxon's files are silent about whether or not the higher wages remained in effect once the strike was over, but it is likely that they did not.

ATCO also needed to provide housing for the replacements. To that end, ATCO evicted any of the strikers who were still living in company housing, which included a boarding house for single workers, two villages of row tenements for families, and a number of apartment houses scattered around the city. However, because only a little more than half of ATCO's workforce normally lived in company-owned housing, Moxon also compiled a lengthy list of all the available empty apartments in Willimantic that were owned by private landlords. The files don't say, but it is likely that ATCO pressured some of the landlords to evict tenants who were strikers in order to create vacancies for replacements; it is difficult to believe that so many empty apartments would have existed in Willimantic otherwise.

ATCO's strategy of hiring replacement workers proved successful. The plant reopened on May 11, after having been closed for two months, and continued production throughout the rest of the strike. As the months dragged on, the union's position grew increasingly weak. By the end of September, it was clear that the strikers had lost and that management had won. A few of the strikers returned to work. Others remained in the area, but took new jobs with other companies. But most simply moved away and never came back. The union was broken. It would not be until the 1950s that it again became a major factor at ATCO's Willimantic plant, and by then Connecticut's textile industry was already in sharp decline. There are many reasons why the textile industry ultimately failed in Connecticut, but it is clear that the impact of powerful unions was not one of them – not at ATCO, anyway.

The strike also had a major impact on the city of Willimantic. It divided the community into two camps, those who struck and those who came as replacement workers, those who supported the strike and those who didn't. Resentments between the two sides persisted for decades. In time, local lore would claim that the division was ethnic as well, that the French Canadians had come to Willimantic as scabs, taking the jobs that had once belonged to other ethnic groups. But, while it was true many of the replacements were French Canadians, some of them were not. Moreover, many of the strikers were French Canadians as well. Whatever social realities may have distinguished the replacements from the strikers, if indeed any existed, ethnicity was not one of them.

And there is one final mystery. Most of the old ATCO files at the Windham Textile and History Museum were simple production records from the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. David Moxon's forgotten files were the only files from the 1920s. Who had saved them, and why?

WE'RE ON THE WEB!
WWW.MILLMUSEUM.ORG

THE MILL MUSEUM OF CONNECTICUT

WINDHAM TEXTILE AND HISTORY MUSEUM

Primary Business Address
Your Address Line 2
Your Address Line 3
Phone: (860) 456-2178
Email: themillmuseum@gmail.com

Afternoon Tea at the Mill Museum

Travel back in time to the 1890s and enjoy a relaxing, stress-free light afternoon tea at the Museum's Thread Mill Square living history exhibit.

The Museum is now hosting regular afternoon teas on the third Saturday of each month. Tea is served at 3:00 PM.

The menu consists of loose-leaf teas, scones, jam, sweets, and Devon (or clotted) cream. Tea is served at tables for four, with ceramic tea pots and service.

Each tea is accompanied by a half-hour presentation on the history of tea and teas. Guests may also choose to tour the Museum as part of their visit at no additional charge.

There is a maximum seating of 25, and a minimum seating of 8. The price is $15 per person. Checks and major credit cards are accepted. Reservations are required at least a week in advance.

Afternoon tea was very popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s with the American middle and leisure classes. Anxious to demonstrate that they were just as refined as their British cousins, 19th-century Americans adopted a number of British practices, including taking tea in the afternoon.

In Britain, high tea was served in the late evening, along with dinner. It was called high tea because it was served on high tables. Low tea — or afternoon or light tea — was a snack served usually at 4:00 PM. It was called low tea because it was served on low tables.

In the 1890s, Thread Mill Square was the busy industrial and commercial center of Willimantic, Connecticut's famous Thread City. To the east sprawled the massive granite mill buildings of the Willimantic Linen Company, the largest thread mill in the United States. To the west stretched Main Street, with its rows of Victorian shops and stores. To the south lay Jillson Hill, with its ornate Victorian mansions, the homes of mill owners and managers. Although Thread Mill Square no longer exists, the Mill Museum has recreated it as a living history exhibit — and along with it the afternoon teas that would have been found in the city's several commercial tea shops.

Come and join us for tea on the third Saturday of each month at 3:00. Call 860-456-2178 for reservations.

Dinner table in the Museum's mill manager's home exhibit set for high tea. Afternoon tea — also known as low tea or light tea — was less formal, and usually held in the late afternoon.