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The Ounegan Mill Strike

Richard Davies

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Story: "The Ounegan Mill Strike"

Storyteller: Richard Davies

Town: Old Town, ME

NA 2553 C1656

Collector: Laura Finkel Streett

Date: November 13, 1996

The story told here, "**The Ounegan Mill Strike**," describes a strike that took place at the Ounegan Woolen Mill in Old Town, Maine and explains how students at the University of Maine became involved. The mill was established in 1888 and demolished sometime after it closed in the late 1960s. Named for the falls that were replaced by the Milford Dam, it was the first woolen mill built in Old Town. The Ounegan Mill is easily confused with the former woolen mill that stood next to it (the Old Town Woolen Mill), which is now the Penobscot River House. The mill was built during a time of economic transition for Old Town. Before white settlers began moving into the area in the late 1700s, the region was a center of power for the Penobscots and their ancestors. The city of Old Town was settled in the years after John Marsh established a homestead in 1774 on the island that now bears his name. Early economic activity in the city was mostly sawmills as the Penobscot River provided excellent transportation for raw logs and cut lumber, as well as power for the sawmills. One of the first railroads in the United States was completed between Old Town and Bangor in 1836, providing another logistical advantage. But by 1880, for many reasons including a massive fire that destroyed an entire block of sawmills in 1878, Old Town's economy began to diversify. For instance, Maine's first pulp and paper mill was built in Great Works, a village in Old Town. Other ventures included the opening of Old Town Canoe around 1900, numerous hydroelectric facilities, and, of course, the construction of several woolen mills.

By the time the strike described in this story took place, almost all of the woolen mills in Old Town had closed. Davies' story begins somewhere in the middle of the strike when UMaine students first got involved. In early December 1965, the *Maine Campus* reported that UMaine students took jobs at the Ounegan Woolen Mill in Old Town as replacement workers (less politely known as "scabs") while Local #1485 of the Textile Workers Union of America was on strike. The strike had begun on October 3 and the workers were demanding health insurance, increased paid vacation, and a \$.25/hour raise. At the time, the average worker at Ounegan made \$1.49/hour, which placed him/her just above the poverty line. In other words, many of the mill's employees lived below the poverty level while working full-time. Members of the fledgling Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) at UMaine spoke with members of the union and offered to help. After some discussion, the union asked two students to go undercover in the mill and gather intelligence that could be used to bring the unsafe working conditions to light. The two young men who volunteered took detailed notes and many pictures, which were given to the *Campus* and published as a front page exposé. This article ignited student interest in and support for the strike and on a cold Friday afternoon in March 1966 almost one hundred and fifty students joined the picket line outside the mill. While the SDS helped spur this action, the group only consisted of ten or eleven card-carrying members, meaning the large group of students who supported the strike reached well outside of the stereotype of the radical leftists in SDS. Governor John H. Reed urged negotiation as he hoped to avoid a nasty confrontation between police, protestors, and a threatened counter-protest that never materialized. Despite a large police presence and student turnout - later in his interview Richard Davies described how frightened many of the students were - no violent confrontation occurred. Within days of students joining the picket line, a deal was reached that satisfied most of the workers' demands.

In addition, the Ounegan strike mobilized a student body that had been known as either conservative or plain apolitical. But this strike gave many students a sense of effectiveness and helped pave the way for student involvement in local strikes and other protests, such as the “Great Chicken Crisis” of 1968.

Davies made a relatively minor misstatement in his recollection of these events, but one that should be noted to avoid an apparent contradiction between the story told below and the information printed above. He said it was Governor Curtis that intervened in the strike, but John H. Reed was governor at the time of this strike; Kenneth M. Curtis was elected governor in 1967. A couple spots where Davies veered somewhat off course of the story have been edited out for time. These edits are marked with an ellipsis. In the transcript below, “D” is Dick Davies and “L” is Laura Streett.

Transcript:

D: It was very much – and I suspect it was probably true in most chapters of SDS outside of a few areas like Berkeley and University of Michigan and maybe Columbia or so - it really got driven by local issues as much as anything else. For instance, SDS at Orono probably had, of all the SDS chapters in the country, probably had the strongest ties with organized labor. There were a number of activities that we got involved with, supporting the Ounegan Woolen strike in Old Town, or the Pepsi-Cola bottling strike in Brewer, or the Boot and Shoe Workers efforts in a couple of factories, primarily in the Pittsfield area. So there was a lot more relationship between local working people and students than you normally found in SDS. SDS had a tendency nationally to be kind of elitist, whether they’d admit it or not. And I think that, even though there’s always a tendency with college kids to have a certain element of elitism there, I think there was a conscious effort on the part of SDS to really try and struggle against that and to maintain those kinds of ties with working folks in the area.

L: So what kind of relationship was there with organized labor? I’ve read the thank you notes from the union members, but what sort of interaction did you have? How did they feel about SDS?

D: They, at that point, were usually in situations that were fairly critical and they really didn’t care who it was that was coming out to stand up for them, ‘cause they were up against some pretty strong forces from management. And in many instances the State Police who acted as if they were the left arm of the management.

A good example would be the Ounegan Woolen Mill strike up in Old Town. They had been out on strike for about eighteen weeks, I think, at that point when we really started getting actively involved. We’d had some conversations with some of the local union people, saying, you know, “What can we do?” And they said, “Well, you know, we really need you to do a lot of things.” Finally they settled on the idea of needing more publicity to the strike. They needed to get a lot of visibility beyond the community. So we agreed we would organize students on campus to come down for one day to have a very visible demonstration in support of them. And they were delighted to have us join it but it was really their local union people who were doing this rather than the national union folks who were based in the state...

And it was remarkable the reaction that came out of that one. We had, it was probably a hundred and twenty-five to a hundred and fifty students that came down one afternoon. We walked the line from like two to five. And the TV cameras were all there and the police, the state police just rolled up in droves. They probably had twenty-five or thirty state troopers in full uniform with big billy clubs. Plus, the local police, plus a lot of folks that were kind of running around with their sunglasses and something in their ears so that made us suspect that they were the plain clothes folks, which would suggest that maybe you had as many as fifty or sixty cops there to take care of a hundred and twenty-five college

students, almost all of whom were in dresses or sport coats and ties. This was Middle America, really, up there on the line. These were folks who believed in the American Dream and had been persuaded that there was a really unfair situation in Old Town and could they come out and lend their support. These were not the folks that were depicted as the “radicals,” the folks with the long hair, smoking a joint as they walked the line...

But it was that type of person who was up there on the line. These were kids that were as middle class as they came. And some of them got fairly radicalized just by seeing what happened. But it ended rather rapidly. Within seventy-two hours after the demonstration and all the TV and radio coverage that went along with it, Governor Curtis intervened in the strike and led to some resolution of it. It wasn't a perfect resolution but it did get some of the issues resolved.

Sources: Finkel, Laura. *'This is Maine, Baby, Not Berkeley: Vietnam Era Protest at the University of Maine*. Master of History Thesis. Orono: University of Maine, 1998. Also see [MF 070: Laura Finkel Collection](#) for all of her interviews. For photos of the Ounegan and the Old Town woolen mills, visit www.old-town.me.us/nos/places.htm or check out the Old Town Museum at www.oldtownmuseum.org.