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Charles A. Scontras

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Requiem for an industry

By Charlie Scontras, Special to the Sun Journal

In April, the Lewiston City Council voted to demolish the massive Bates Mill No. 5, the last component of the original textile giant, dating from 1850, that is owned by the city. The decision graphically symbolizes the burial of a textile industry.

When the textile mills arrived in Maine, public officials viewed them as cathedrals of prosperity and progress, while workers welcomed the opportunity to earn a livelihood. Labor reformers, however, often viewed them as corporate entities that regimented life and work, describing them as "tombs for the living," "living hells," and "prison factories." Over the years, labor made sporadic efforts to rescue the "poor devils" who entered the factory gates and "in the name of humanity" called upon all sentient beings to rush to their rescue.

The massive textile structures altered the skylines of communities and formed a seamless mosaic with the people and the communities in which they were anchored. Given the centrality, long-time presence and linkage of the mills to the lives of workers and their communities, the possibility that they might fade from existence, eroding patterns of life and work and causing unparalleled economic dislocations and hardship for workers, their families and the communities themselves, boarded on the unthinkable.

Yet, soon after establishing itself as the state's manufacturing base, industry observers questioned whether it was a permanent, immutable feature of the economic landscape. In 1897, Maine's Bureau of Industrial and Labor Statistics featured a story on "The Industrial Progress Of The South," outlining its industrial advances, including textiles.

Three years later, the Lewiston Evening Journal shouted to its readers: "Is The Cotton Industry Going South?" The paper, located in the state's leading spindle city, noted it was the "great question agitating many of our people at the present time, and upon its solution depends the weal or woe of this section of the country ... the loss of the industry would probably be the death knell of all New England."

Numerous crusades launched by organized labor and other social reformers to benefit the "white slaves" were met with fierce opposition by industry spokespersons, who augmented their ideological arguments of individualism, private property and the free market with unambiguous language. They stated that given the natural competitive advantages of the south, conceding to the demands of labor "would be the death knell of the business." Industry voices had struck a recognizable drumbeat, i.e., the need for "flexibility" to ensure survival.

Textile demands of World War I and World War II provided a respite from pressures of regional competition. The Bates Manufacturing Company, testified to the boost provided by military expenditures, succinctly saying that "... competition seemed a long long way off." Between 1942 and 1948 was a "holiday" in the nomadic drift of spindles out of New England. Employment in textiles reached a high of 23,928 production workers in 1947-48, a figure that would never be reached again.

The 1950s witnessed economic storm-warnings, however. Many marginal plants closed and other nonprofitable mills were liquidated. Federal policies regarding mergers and taxation were viewed as

major villains in the industry's decline. Five thousand mergers occurred during the decade. Large textile firms swallowed smaller concerns, since a firm could offset its own profits by the losses of the merged firm.

According to critics, the larger the losses of a firm, the more appealing the mill was to "tax-dodgers" who used the loss as a credit against taxes he would otherwise have had to pay. Angry voices from organized labor and textile communities argued that federal tax loopholes were incentives for speculators to liquidate mills and made it more profitable to close them instead of continuing to operate them. The "fast buck," they charged, took precedence over job security for workers and the fate of the textile community.

The textile companies were citadels of anti-unionism and historically immune to significant labor organization in Maine. By 1943, however, the giants of the industry in Maine had been organized. The absence of labor organization in the South permitted it greater economic flexibility on labor issues, compelling Northern textile manufacturers to demand labor concessions. Such demands resulted in the last major textile strike in the state in 1955, when 10,000 workers left their workplaces.

Federal trade policies and cotton policies also had an impact. The industry became preoccupied with tariff protection in an early version of "free trade" with low-wage nations and its negative impact on jobs, industries, and communities. Federal cotton policies provided for a two-price system of cotton, which compelled domestic producers to buy cotton at subsidized, artificially high domestic prices, while lower wage-paying foreign competitors could purchase cotton at cheaper prices.

Alarms about the industry's decline were further reflected in demands for raising the federal minimum wage to narrow the advantage of the South over the organized North; in calls for eliminating of the tax exemption for municipal bonds, which enticed communities to lure textile mills to new locations; and in calls for the 35-hour week, emergency relief benefits and redevelopment programs.

Concerns could also be gleaned from proposals for a Federal Textile Development Agency to promote and enhance the industry and in calls for modernization and improved depreciation allowances for textile machinery, 75 percent of which was, in 1958, declared to be obsolete. By 1959, the chemical industry was producing 26 different types of synthetic fibers to take the place of cottons and woolsens and resulted in the decline in the personal and industrial consumption of textile products.

There was no mistaking the pattern of decline. Between 1947 and 1972, Maine lost 16,128 production workers in the textile industry. An embryonic graveyard of Maine's textile titans became increasingly visible. The cataclysmic effects of mill closings were graphically apparent when, in 1959, the Biddeford-Saco-Sanford area reported the highest rate of jobless in the nation - 23.1 percent.

In 1951, Bates, the jewel and epicenter of the textile industry, boasted 6,751 production workers employed in its former complex and proudly announced it was "the largest manufacturing enterprise" in the state, that it manufactured more than 1,600 products and boasted "Every 24 hours, Bates produces enough cloth to make a one-yard-wide strip of fabric that would stretch from our Executive Offices in Lewiston to the offices of Bates Fabrics in New York city."

By the mid-1970s the manufacturing magic of Bates had clearly faded, for it could claim only 950 production workers, a figure painfully reduced to 55 in the early 1990s when the city took possession of Bates for its failure to pay its taxes.

The textile mills appeared to be part of the natural order of things. In the 1950s, for example, Bates, provided tours for schools, colleges and civic organizations. Workers were laced to the company by services and activities provided for them and in-house literature that identified workers as members of the "Bates Family."

The Bates News reached beyond the employees to the stockholders, customers and friends, reinforcing the sense of community. Along with their unions, workers participated in disparate activities that integrated them into community life. Charities used to looking to "blue bloods" for support for humanitarian endeavors were increasingly linked to mill workers and their unions. The web-like interrelations between the workers, communities and the mills carried its own implications when the textile mills declined or vanished. Workers, unions, and communities were left to struggle and adapt to the new realities thrust upon them and seemingly beyond their control.

In 1945, in response to the possible loss of Bates to outside control, William B. Skelton, a Republican, lawyer, former Lewiston mayor and former candidate for Congress, posed the question of moral obligations of the corporation to the community and its citizens:

"Any industry which constitutes an important part of one of these communities is under real moral obligation to the community itself not unnecessarily to permit that industry to be destroyed ... It is a voluntary partner in the community enterprise. It cannot draw out without immediate injury to the community. It is not good public morals, nor conducive to good public relations for its other interests, nor consistent with the preservation of a wholesome public attitude toward private enterprise as a whole to permit such communities to be deserted unless it is obvious that anything else is impossible."

Appeals to a corporation's sense of "moral obligation" to its workers and to the community proved ineffective, however. The relentless march and reach of capitalism and its "creative destruction" continued, and the emerging global economy cast its shadow over Maine.

Charles A. Scontras is a historian and research associate for the Bureau of Labor Education at the University of Maine in Orono.