



Photo courtesy June W. Kennedy

Huge piles of raw wool spill over woven baskets in the sorting room at Abbot Worsted Company in Forge Village at the turn of the century.

Oldtimers spin tales about their early woolen mill days

By June W. Kennedy

Many Westford residents can trace their ancestry to immigrants who found their first jobs in America in the Abbot Worsted mills.

In interviews almost two decades ago, oldtimers recalled their days in the bustling mill in Forge Village:

Billy Kelly remembered: "I was born in 1881 in England. My father was from Ireland; my mother was from Wales.

"I arrived in Forge Village in 1911 and worked as an overseer in the Abbot Worsted Mill for 46 years. I'll tell you a little about the mill days.

"In the first place, they made carpet yarns, a coarse wool from the sheep of England and Scotland and did so 'til 1916, the year before we entered the First World War.

"Then they went on to a finer grade of wool — some was half-blood, some was quarter-blood. Full-blood was a merino sheep

(paired with another kind for half-blood and another after that for quarter-blood). Then they branched out into mohair [goat] from Turkey and Texas.

"They made the yarn for different companies. Ford Motor Company bought all their mohair from Abbot Worsted Company. General Motors Company and Sears Roebuck were big buyers.

"Later, the manufacturing of knitting yarns — mostly quarter-blood — became a huge enterprise of the mill. Actually, at one time, Abbot Worsted Company was the largest manufacturer of sales yarn in the country. Some claim it was the largest saleable yarn in the world.

"You might like to know the operations. Well, first the raw material went to the washroom; then it was dried. Then it went to the sorting room to separate the different qualities of wool.

"From sorting it went down to the carding room. Some wool was carded, some just combed. We weren't a woolen mill [shorter fiber left in]; we were a

worsted mill [shorter fiber taken out].

"The principle of the carding and combing was to draw the different fibers out. From there it was on to the drawing room where the wool was put into different weights. Then it went on to the twisting, winding and spooling rooms.

"Unless someone asked to have the yarns shipped out on spools, we'd just send it out in warps. We didn't make any cloth at all. The warp was sent to some mill to be put in looms and made into cloth.

"As overseer, the pay was good but all the responsibility of the world was on me. Some rooms operated three shifts [preparing, carding and combing]. I was really on call if anything was doin' in the night. The job also involved a lot of paperwork.

"In 1914 the floor help or laborer [doffers] got 10¢ an hour — \$5.95 a week. Girls that were running the frames could make \$9 to \$10 a week.

■ **ABBOT-PAGE 8**

Oldtimers spin yarns about mill years

ABBOT-FROM PAGE 7

"Some children worked in the mill. Fourteen was the age they were supposed to be, but the younger ones were slipped in. When the factory inspector came around the children were hidden under the frame or put in a basket and covered up with the wool."

Veronica Sullivan recalled: "I worked for three years in the Forge Village mill as a doffer for the twistors. First shift began at 6:30 a.m. I worked 'til 11 a.m. on Saturdays. Brought a lunch pail and had three-quarters-of-an-hour for lunch.

"You weren't allowed to stop the frames though; you had to eat on the fly. You'd have to get up if the work run down. You'd have to get up and tie the ends. Twasn't a complete break, not like they have today."

Billy Kelly went on to remember: "Spinning, twisting, warping and spooling were the rooms the women were most apt to work in. And they were pretty adept at tying a knot.

"You couldn't see their fingers going. At first the girls used to take care of 200 spindles (100 on each side). It jumped from 200

to 400 spindles, and finally, when efficiency concerns analyzed and took tests, one girl had to handle 600 spindles.

"The work load became heavier and the girls protested against the efficiency. It was then that a one-day strike was held at the Abbot Worsted Company.

"The strike really hurt Mr. Abbot. He was good to his employees and he never thought his people would go out on strike. Things were never quite the same after that."

June W. Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections," a series of historical articles and photos. 4/27/89