



PHOTOS PROVIDED

In the top photo, courtesy of the Lycoming County Historical Society, Edith and Emma Faulstich are shown. The women worked together as weavers at Stearns Co. silk mill, 1627 Memorial Ave. Edith entered the mill in 1900, followed by Emma in 1904. In the above left photo, also from the historical society, shows a woman at W. R. Hoehn Co. silk mill, 201 Pine St., in 1928. In the above right photo from the Grit collection, Williamsport Sun-Gazette, are R&G Textile Mills workers on strike in October 1937 as part of a strike by silk workers against textile mills throughout the eastern U.S., organized by the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union.

'A Stitch in Time'

The 'mill girls' of Lycoming County

Williamsport Women



by MARY SIEMINSKI

When people think of "mill girls," they often picture the women who worked in the cotton mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Those "mill girls" have been featured in histories, novels and films and at the Lowell National Historic Park. But Lycoming County had its own "mill girls."

Like those in Lowell, many came from family farms outside the city, in this case to work in silk mills. It has been said that "If lumber was king in northcentral Pennsylvania at the turn of the century, silk was queen."

Now, "A Stitch In Time" (www.lycoming.edu/textile), an interactive art project on the Internet, memorializes local textile workers. The site features the individual stories of 12 women who worked in textile mills and garment factories in central Pennsylvania.

Scores of photographs of mill and garment factories and of the workers who toiled in them from the mid-19th century to today, mainly gleaned from the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society, are accompanied by a timeline of events in the textile industry, locally and globally. An area map with pop-ups pinpoints the locations of mills and factories in Williamsport, Montoursville, Montgomery, Hughesville, Muncy, Jersey Shore and Woolrich.

"A Stitch in Time" places the experiences of our own "mill girls" in the context of the broader history of the textile industry. Designed by Lycoming College art professor Lynn Estomin, it is not intended to be a comprehensive history of the textile industry locally or globally; instead, it provides a glimpse into working women's lives at a specific time and place.

Women already had been working in woolen mills and in shoe and rubber factories before silk manufacturers moved their plants into the county. In 1882, at the present site of the Pajama Factory, Lycoming Rubber Co. opened a factory where 175 female workers made galoshes. Three years later, according to an article in the former Williamsport Sun, 112 girls there went on strike when their wages were reduced.

Most of the local mills moved

operations to Williamsport from New York and New Jersey. Their owners were seeking female workers who, eager for jobs, would work for lower wages than the city girls, who were beginning to organize into unions.

In addition to its potential labor force, Williamsport had state-of-the-art technology as a result of the lumbering industry and had exceptional shipping facilities and reasonable freight rates on the railroad lines.

The first of the silk mills was the Stearns Silk Mill. In 1892, John N. Stearns moved to Williamsport from New York City and established a mill at Memorial Avenue and Oliver Street, now the site of the Memorial Homes development under construction.

In 1902, the Stearns Silk Mill was the largest employer in Williamsport, with more than 1,000 workers. The women staffed the looms, creating silk fabric, ribbons and hatbands from raw materials shipped in from China. They worked long hours, standing on their feet all day.

In 1900, there were 50 mills within a 100-mile radius of Williamsport, and the great majority of their workers were women. For a number of the workers, it was their first time living away from home. Many lived in boarding houses owned by company management, in privately owned boarding houses and later at the YWCA.

The YWCA, established in 1893, reached out to "factory girls" with prayer meetings and support services, including places for workers to relax during their noon rest period. Workers might read books from its library or have a cup of cocoa.

YWCA services expanded over the years. In addition to providing housing, the YWCA opened a cafeteria, established the first day-care center in Williamsport and offered women educational and cultural opportunities not found elsewhere in the city. Alberta Kaseman is one of the workers whose story is featured on the site.

In an interview conducted in 1995 by Montoursville Area High School history students, Kaseman recalled working at Shindel's Silk Mill in Hughesville. She was hired in 1929, when she was 14, and was

paid \$10 a week.

When she was 17, her mother had another baby; a few months later, her father died and Alberta became the family breadwinner. Later, after she was married and her son was in school, she sewed in garment factories. She said that it was better than scrubbing floors.

The mills were very successful. By 1900, Pennsylvania led the nation in textile production and was second only to New Jersey in silk production. But by the 1920s, most mill owners had left Pennsylvania for the southern states, in search of cheaper labor and less regulation.

The industry declined not only in Pennsylvania, but in the entire northeast. The Stearns mill closed in 1933. Holmes Silk Co., the longest-running mill (established in 1898), remained in business until 1958.

According to "A Stitch in Time," in the 1920s, garment manufacturers moved into Pennsylvania. With a mindset similar to that of the silk mill owners, garment manufacturers, primarily from New York and New Jersey, moved into the area to take advantage of cheap female labor that was not yet unionized. Garment makers listed in Williamsport city directories beginning in the 1920s include Penn Garment, Vogue, Stein Brothers, West Branch Pants, Wundies, Glamorize and Smith, Harris, Levin.

Weldon's Pajamas, which began operating on a small scale in 1934, gradually expanded and had become the largest pajama factory in the world by the 1950s. It closed in 1979, when it and many other manufacturers left the area for the south and eventually for countries overseas in a continual search for cheaper labor and greater profit.

Weldon worker Glenna Montague's story is another one preserved in "A Stitch in Time." Recruited to leave her family's farm, Montague was hired by Weldon's for 75 cents an hour in 1948. She worked at Weldon's factories in Muncy and Williamsport, first as a pocket setter, then as a floor lady and then as a supervisor. After the Muncy shop closed, she worked in Williamsport until that shop closed in 1979.

There is little manufacturing in the area today, but its history and that of the women who formed the backbone of its operations are preserved in part by "A Stitch in Time."

Sieminski is a retired librarian and manager of the Lycoming County Women's History Collection. Her column is published the second Sunday of each month and she can be reached at lcwhcmanager@gmail.com.