

Mill Memories

Photographs of Mill Workers from the Collections
of the Windham Textile and History Museum

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Volunteer Collections Curator
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Pho-A-0081. Unidentified mill workers, location unknown, c. 1890s. Black and white albumen print. Unknown photographer. In the late 1800s, women mill workers commonly wore long skirts or smocks, which could too easily become entangled in machinery. They pinned up their long hair for safety. Men frequently wore overalls or suspenders. Notice the bell in the background.



Pho-P-0285. Workforce at Hop River Mill, Columbia, CT, 1879. The Museum owns only a copy of this photo. Notice the very young children.



Pho-M-0003. Unidentified weavers, c. 1890. Location unknown. Black and white albumen print. Unknown photographer. Notice the long, flowing skirts and blouses, which could get caught in the machinery. The women's long hair is tied up, probably for safety.



Stereograph. Unidentified workers in the winding room at the Willimantic Linen Company in Willimantic, CT, c. 1880-90. Prescott and White, photographers, Hartford, CT. Notice the long skirts. Also notice the stools – unlike most mill workers, these women apparently were permitted occasionally to sit. They would have worked about 10 hours a day. Notice the noisy leather belts that connect to ceiling-mounted drive shafts. There do not seem to be any electric lights in this mill room, indicating that work shifts still followed the rhythms of natural light. The man in the photo appears to be a foreman or supervisor.



Pho-A-0569. Clothing factory (sweatshop) in Chester, VT, c. 1910.

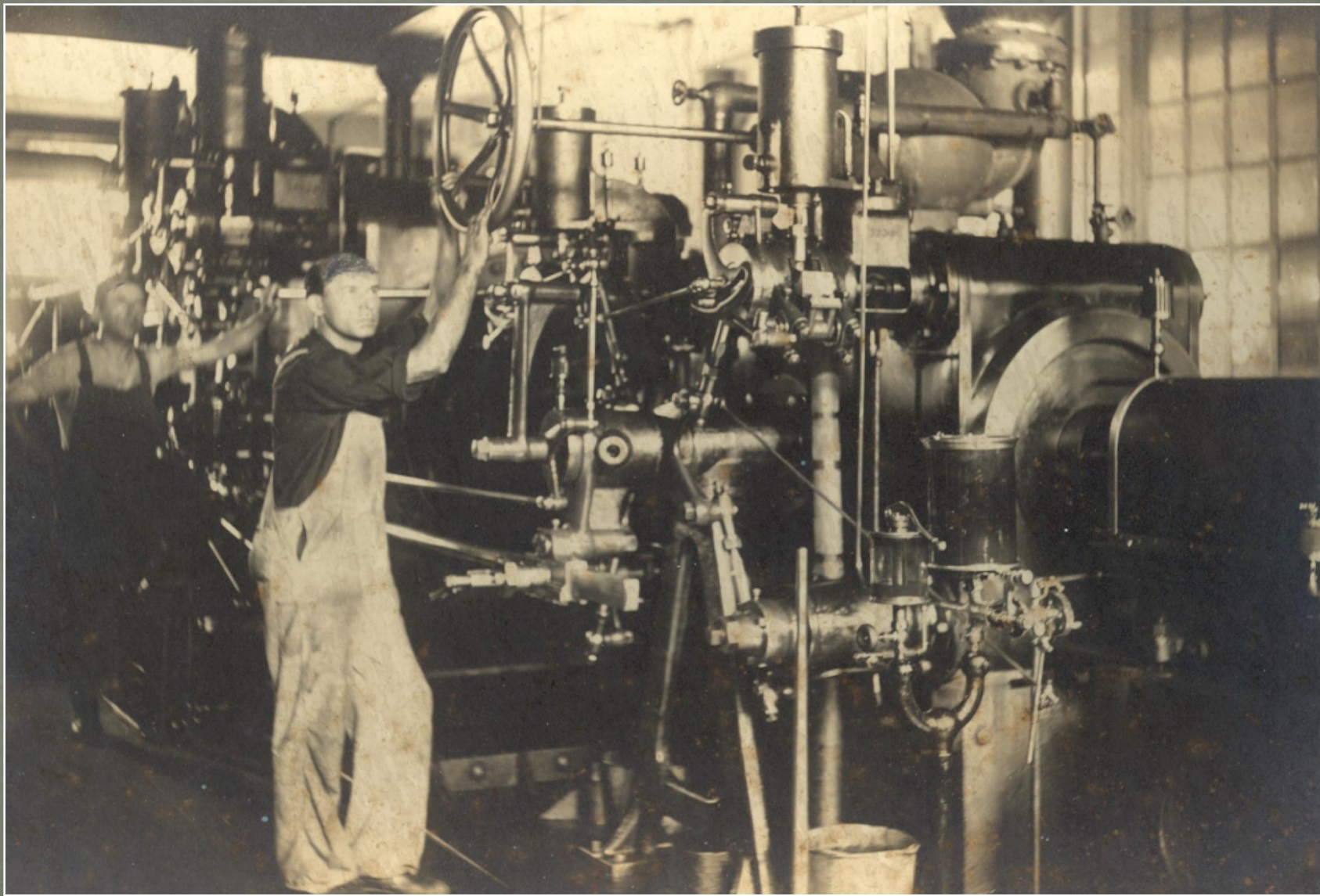


Pho-A-0077. Miss Gertrude B. Crane, stenographer, at Willimantic Linen Company or American Thread Company office in Willimantic, CT, c. 1892-1904. Albumen print pasted onto cardboard. Unknown photographer. Crane appears in the 1892 and 1893 Willimantic Directories as an employee of the Willimantic Linen Company and a boarder at 230 Church Street in Willimantic, in the 1895 and 1896 Directories as an employee of WLC and a boarder at 209 North Street in Willimantic, in the 1897 and 1898 Directories as an employee of the WLC and a resident of Mansfield, CT, and in the 1899-1904 Directories as an employee of ATC and a resident of Mansfield. WLC became ATC in 1898. At least one of the cards on her desk is a trade card. There is a clock on one wall, and perhaps a telephone receiver on another.



Pho-A-0330. Unidentified workers in a textile mill dye house, possibly the American Thread Company in Willimantic, CT, c. 1900. Black and white gelatin print. Unknown photographer.

Pho-A-0083. Unidentified workers with a steam boiler, 1 August 1913, probably at the American Thread Company in Willimantic, CT.



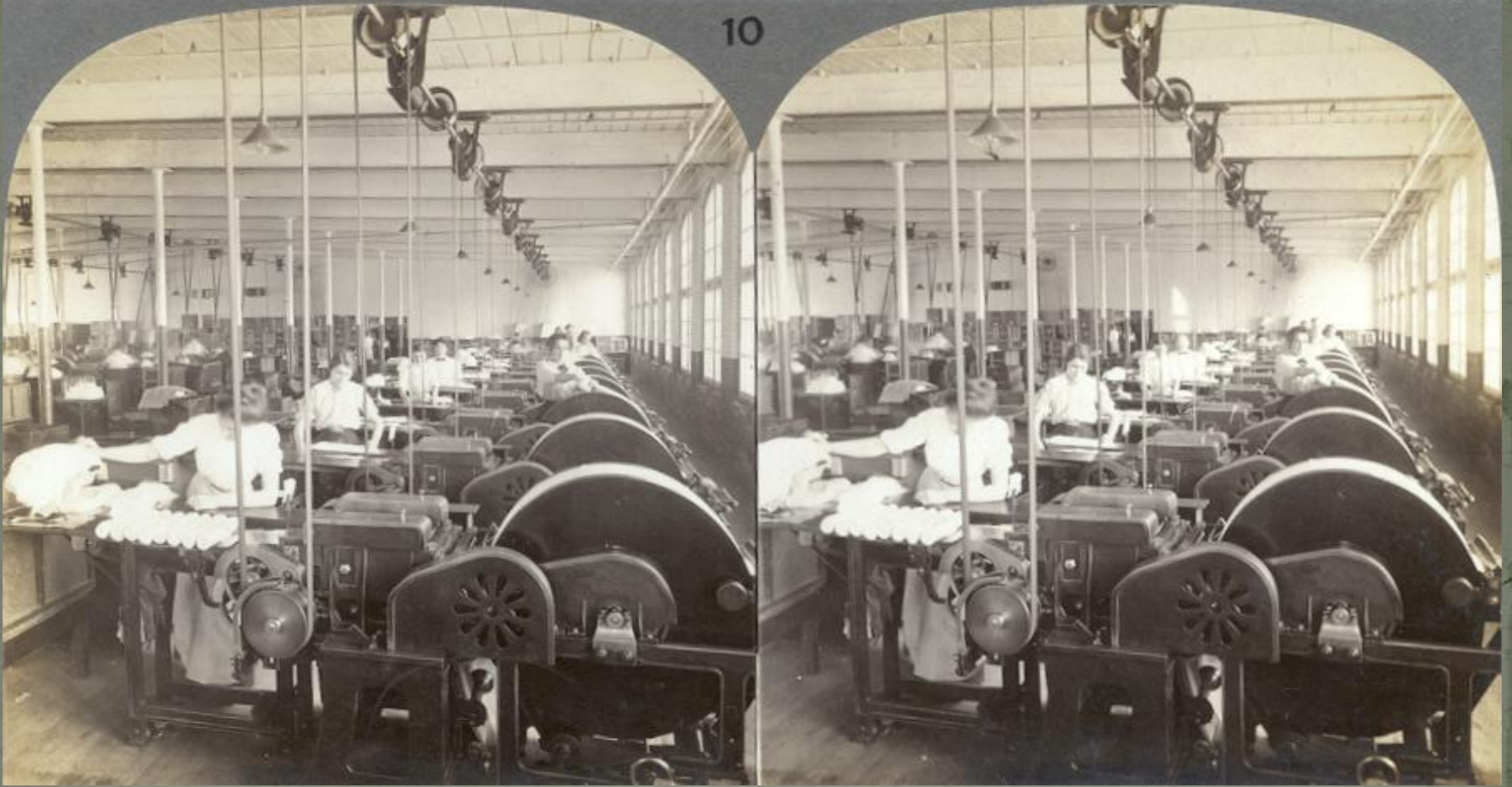


Pho-A-0709. George Washington Snow, landlord of the Elms boarding house (owned by the American Thread Company) sits in the Elms's parlor. Willimantic, CT, c. 1910-18. Black and white gelatin print pasted onto cardboard. Photo by William E. Webber, commercial photographer, Willimantic, CT. George Washington Snow was married to Julia Lamb Snow, the Elms's matron. George W. Snow is listed in the 1910-18 Willimantic Directories as a resident of the Elms. He was a retired painter. William E. Webber is listed in the 1910-18 Willimantic Directories as a clerk for the ATC. He lived at 54 Turner St., Willimantic.



Pho-A-0708. Julia Lamb Snow, matron (landlady) of the Elms boarding house (owned by the American Thread Company) sits in the Elms's parlor. Willimantic, CT, c. 1910-18. Black and white gelatin print pasted onto cardboard. Photo by William E. Webber, commercial photographer, Willimantic, CT. Julia Snow was married to George Washington Snow, who was the Elms's landlord. George W. Snow is listed as a resident of the Elms in the 1910-18 Willimantic Directories. He may have been a retired carriage maker. William E. Webber is listed as in the 1910-18 Willimantic Directories as a clerk for the ATC. He lived at 54 Turner St., Willimantic.

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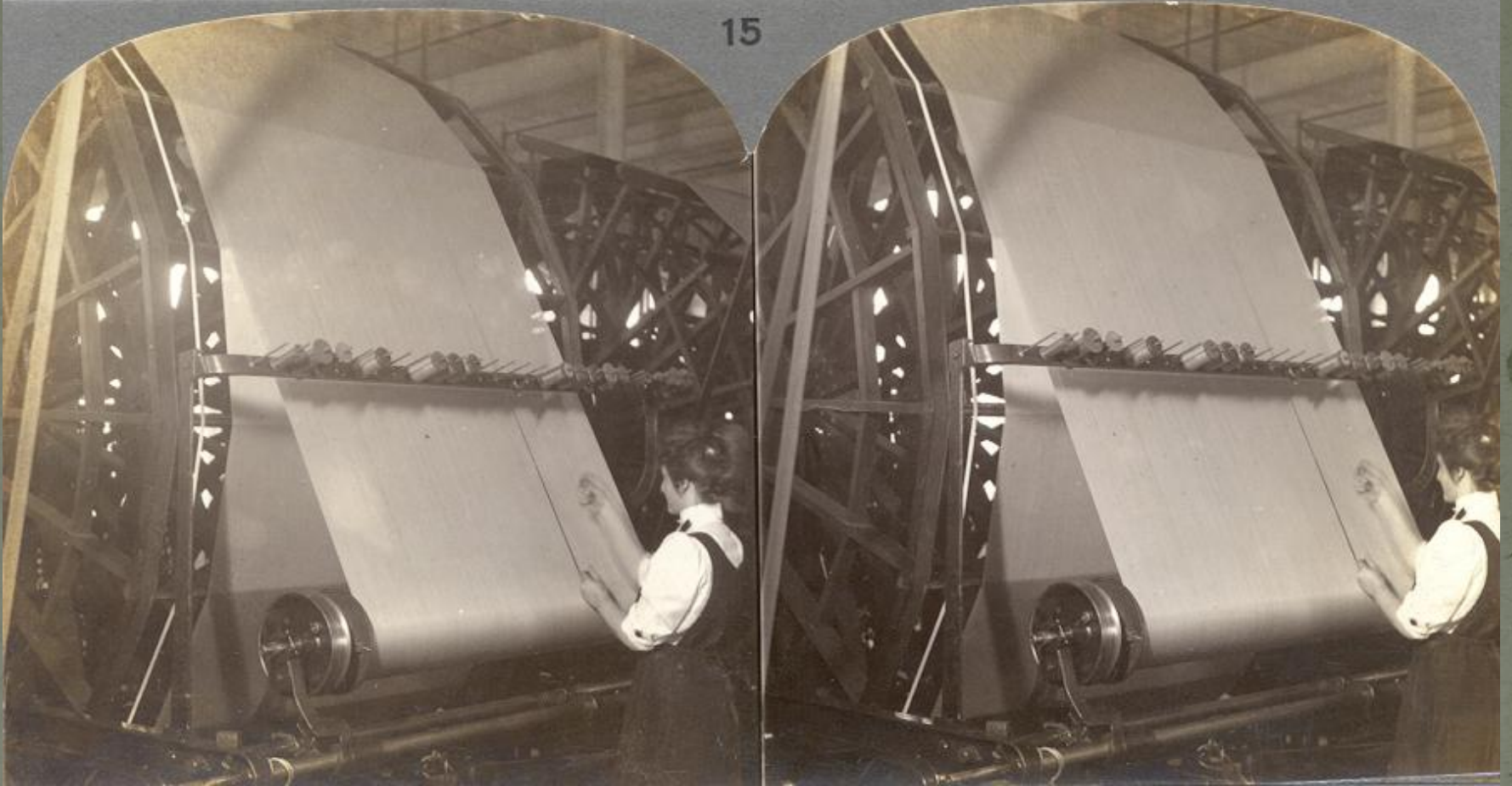
Stereograph. Unidentified workers at Cheney silk mills in South Manchester, CT, 1914. Keystone View Company, Meadville, PA. The workers are operating machines that draw or straighten silk fibers. Notice the long, flowing skirts and blouses, easily caught in machinery. The women have their long hair pinned up for safety. Work rooms were cavernous, filled with noise and machinery. These machines are driven by leather belts connected to ceiling-mounted drive shafts. Notice the electric lights; installed in eastern Connecticut mills after 1880, electric lights allowed mills to operate in shifts.

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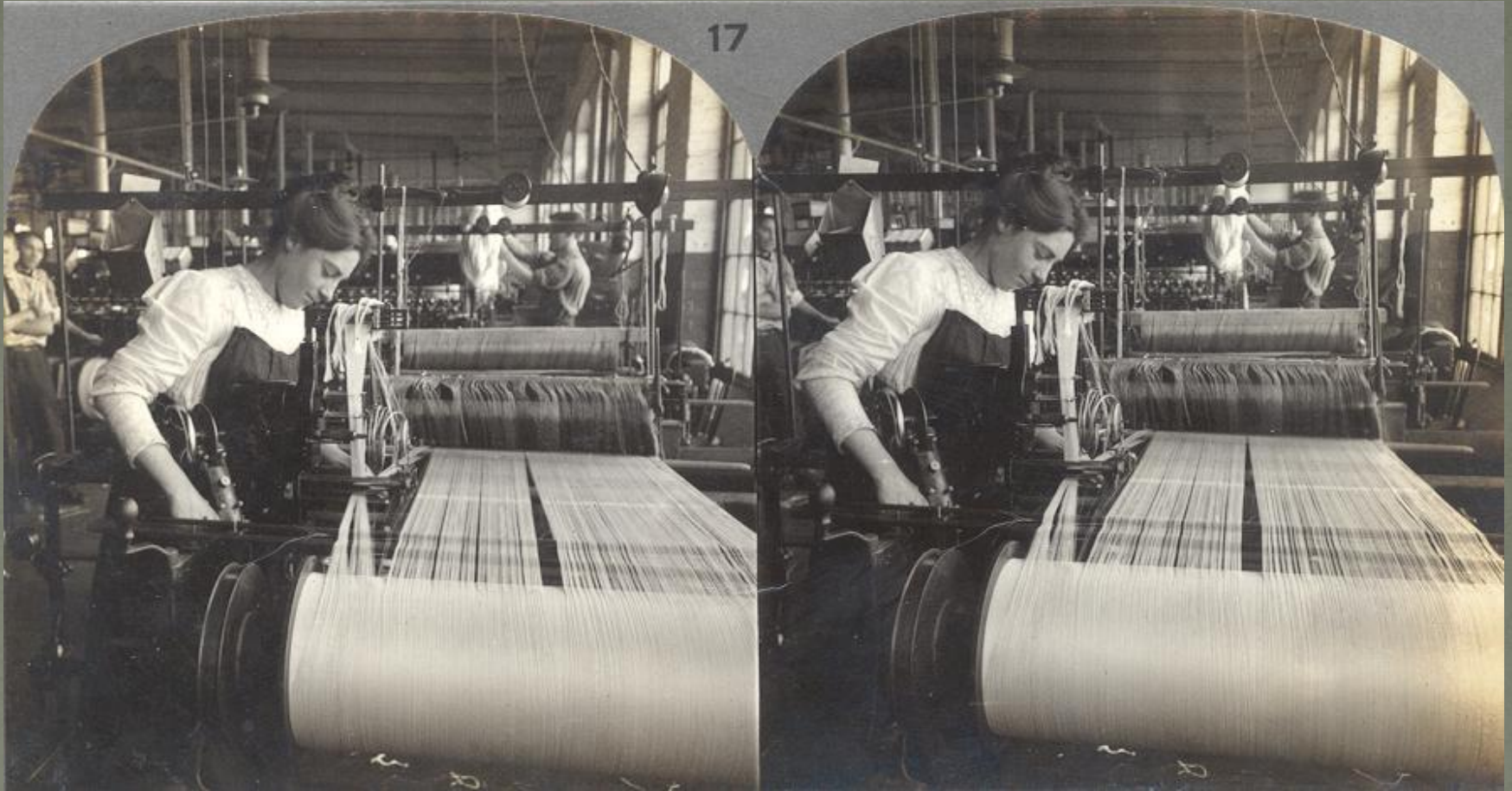
Stereograph. Unidentified workers operating drawing machines at Cheney silk mills in South Manchester, CT, 1914. Keystone View Company, Meadville, PA. The machines were powered by leather belts attached to overhead drive shafts. The drive shafts were connected in turn to waterwheels.

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Stereograph. Unidentified worker beaming off, or winding silk warp from a large reel onto a loom beam, at the Cheney silk mills in South Manchester, CT, in 1914. Obviously, women as well as men operated large machinery. Notice that her long hair is pinned up for safety.

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Stereograph. Unidentified worker operating a mechanical twister at the Cheney silk mills in South Manchester, CT, 1914. Keystone View Company, Meadville, PA.



Pho-P-0294. Recreation Park (on left) and American Thread Company Mill No. 3 (on right). Willimantic, CT, c. 1920. Black and white gelatin print pasted onto cardboard. Mill No. 3 was demolished in 1926.



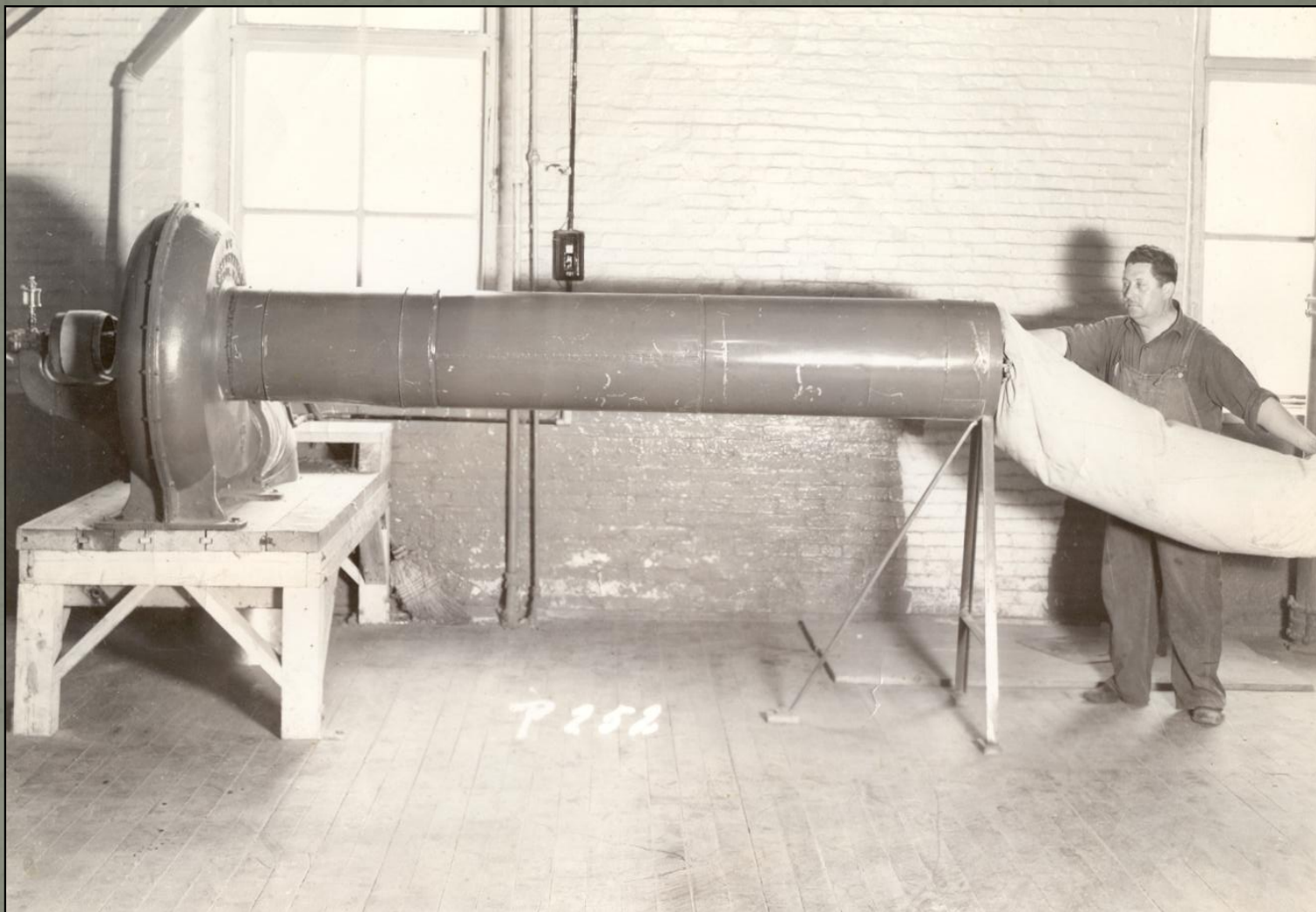
Pho-A-0079. Ice skating at Recreation Park, Willimantic, CT. Black and white albumen print pasted onto to cardboard. Unknown photographer. Willimantic, CT, date unknown, but possibly c. 1910. The American Thread Company built Recreation Park for its workers and other Willimantic residents on the site of the old Windham County Fairgrounds.



Pho-P-0288. Players on American Thread Company's Dye House baseball team, c. 1920. Black and white gelatin print. Unknown photographer. Like many large factories, ATC organized its own athletic league, the ATCO Mill League, and workers from various shops played each other. The "D" on their jerseys stands for "Dye House," and the ATCO stands for "American Thread Company." The worker/players were (1st row) Rod Larvilier, Walt Jones, Adams, Archer Hamel, unknown, Litsi Mac, (2nd row) Walt Johnson, Dugan, Art Nichols, Joe Hamel, Bill Berard, and Cooky Blair. The coach was named Casey.



Pho-P-0295. Baseball game at Recreation Park, Willimantic, CT. Black and white gelatin print pasted onto cardboard and (later?) matted. Unknown photographer. Date unknown, but c. 1910s. The American Thread Company built Recreation Park for its workers and other community members on the site of the old Windham County Fairgrounds.



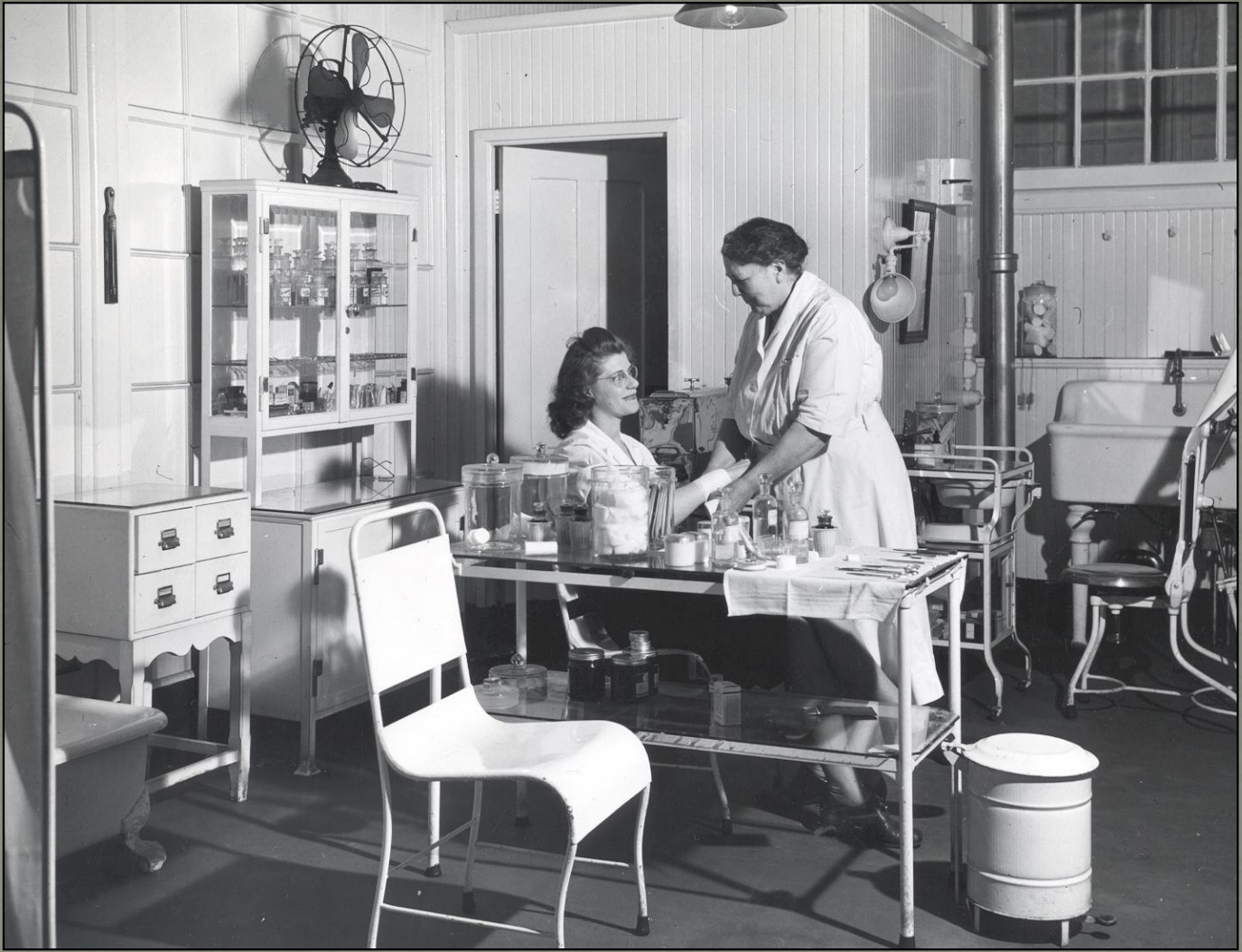
Pho-A-0369. Unidentified worker, probably at the American Thread Company in Willimantic, CT, early 20th century. Black and white gelatin print. Unknown photographer. What is he doing?



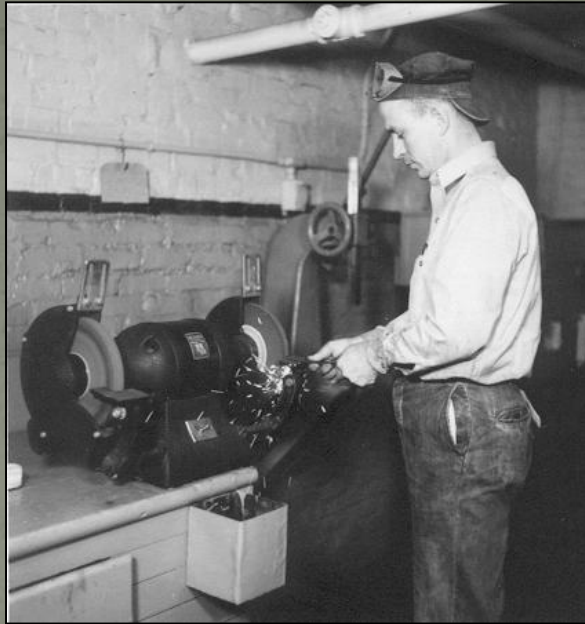
Pho-A-0712. The American Thread Company Employees Benefit Association of Willimantic, CT, held a Roof Garden Follies, probably as a fundraiser. Willimantic, CT, c. 1926-33. Black and white gelatin print on glossy paper pasted into a cardboard mat. Unknown photographer. The event occurred at the Willimantic Armory on Pleasant Street. The 7th man from the right in the front row is "Matty" Matteson, the dance band leader. The 8th man is Delphis Dion. Dion is listed in the 1926-32 Willimantic Directories as a clerk at American Thread, but by 1934 co-owned his own business, Delmar Radio Company, selling and servicing radios, washers, and refrigerators at 31 Church Street in Willimantic. He lived at 93 North Street. The star hanging from the ceiling was the ATC logo. The people sitting in the back appear to be dressed to act out rolls in various skits.



Pho-A-0599. Irene Monroe using a winder, American Thread Company, Willimantic, CT, c. 1940s. Black and white snapshot. Unknown photographer. Monroe was born in 1919, the daughter of a blacksmith. She worked at ATC for 30 years, mostly in the finishing department in Mill Number Six.



Pho-A-0341. Unidentified worker and nurse at the American Thread Company's infirmery in Willimantic, CT, c. 1940s. Black and white gelatin print. Hugelmeier studio, New York, NY. The fact that mills needed infirmaries like this is informative.



Pho-A-659. Unidentified American Thread Company worker demonstrating improper operation of lathe for company safety brochure. 1943. Black and white gelatin print snapshot. Unknown photographer. ATC had its own machine shop, where skilled machinists made replacement parts for mill machinery. Note the production order hanging from the wall above the lathe.

Pho-A-660. Unidentified American Thread Company worker demonstrating proper operation of lathe for company safety brochure. 1943. Black and white gelatin print snapshot. Unknown photographer. What is the difference between these two photos?





Pho-A-0674. An unidentified American Thread Company Worker demonstrates the improper use of a carding machine for a company safety brochure. Willimantic, CT, 1943. Black and white gelatin print snapshot. Unknown photographer. Carding machines were the most dangerous machines in textile mills, and unwary workers could lose fingers, hands, or even arms in industrial mishaps. What is the worker doing wrong in this photo?



Pho-A-0688. An unidentified American Thread Company worker demonstrates the proper use of a spinning machine for a company safety brochure. Willimantic, CT, 1943. Black and white gelatin print snapshot. Unknown photographer. The worker uses a tool, rather than her fingernails, to clean lint from the machine's rollers. Most spinners were women. While few spinners suffered loss of limbs, they did experience hearing loss from the noisy machines and lung disease from inhaling cotton fibers. Later machines had vacuum tubes that sucked away most of the lint, but this machine lacks such a feature. Notice that the worker did not have a safety mask.



Pho-M-0526. Workers rewinding, spooling cable from large tube to shipping size, at the South Street factory of the William Brand Company, Willimantic, CT, 1949. Black and white gelatin print. Unknown photographer. From left, the workers are Bunny Lombardo, Celian Martin, unknown, Bernice Wingertman, unknown, unknown, and unknown.



Pho-M-0530. Ephram Aubin, neoprene preparation of milling machinery, William Brand Company, Willimantic, CT, 1949. Black and white gelatin print. Unknown photographer. Aubin was born in 1903, and he was 46 when this photograph was taken.



Pho-A-0382. Unidentified worker processing sliver, American Thread Company, Willimantic, CT, 1950. Black and white gelatin print. Hugelmeier studio, New York, NY. Charles Dickens once commented that employers sometimes thought of mill workers as only “hands,” and even referred to them as “mill hands” or “factory hands,” as if that was all there was to them – just hands that worked, not people who thought and felt and dreamed. That perspective, perhaps unintentionally, seems to inform this photo.



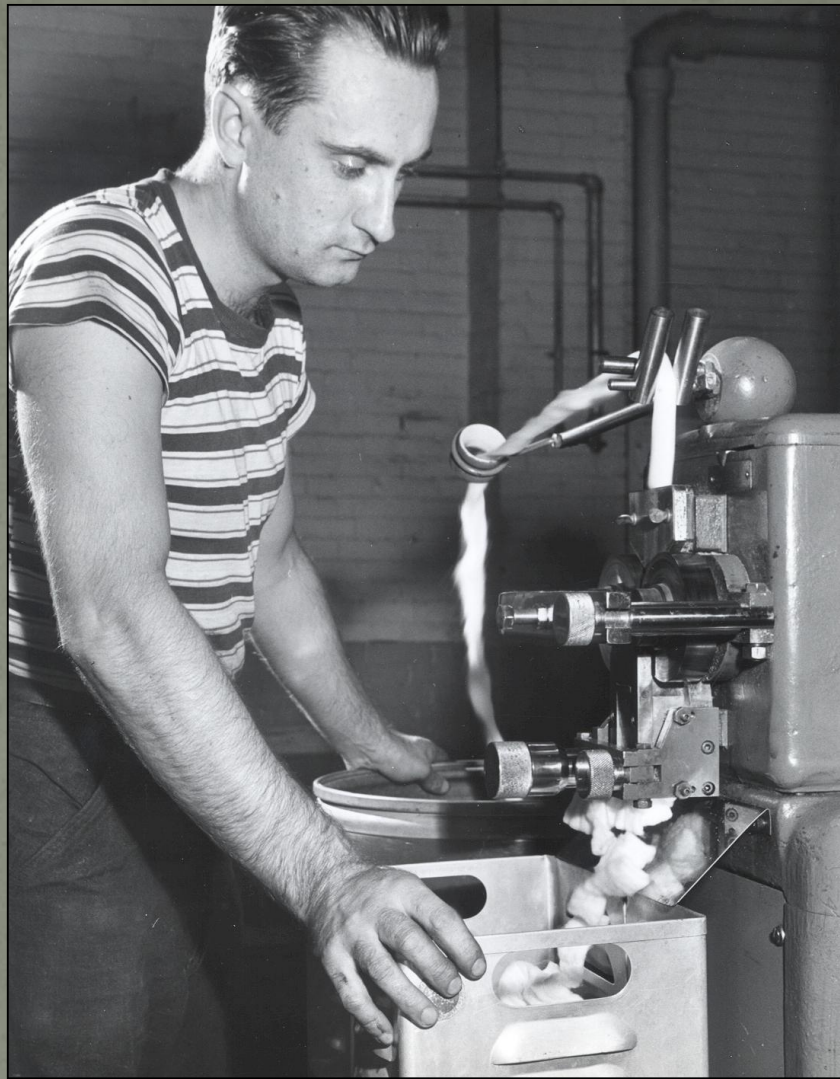
Pho-A-0381. Ignacy Pekarski takes picker lap off a picker at the American Thread Company in Willimantic, CT, c. 1950. Pickers removed unwanted materials from raw cotton and transformed it into a rolled-up sheets that could be fed into carding machines. The rolls of lap were very heavy, and most picker operators were strong men. Black and white gelatin print. Unknown photographer.



Pho-A-0373. Alice LaFerriere, a comber tender in the preparation department at the American Thread Company in Willimantic, CT, tends carding machines in c. 1950, a job she had held for more than two years. Black and white gelatin print. Unknown photographer.



Pho-A-0375. Alice LaFerriere, a comber tender, stands in front of carding (combing) machines at the American Thread Company in Willimantic, CT, c. 1950. Black and white gelatin print. Unknown photographer.



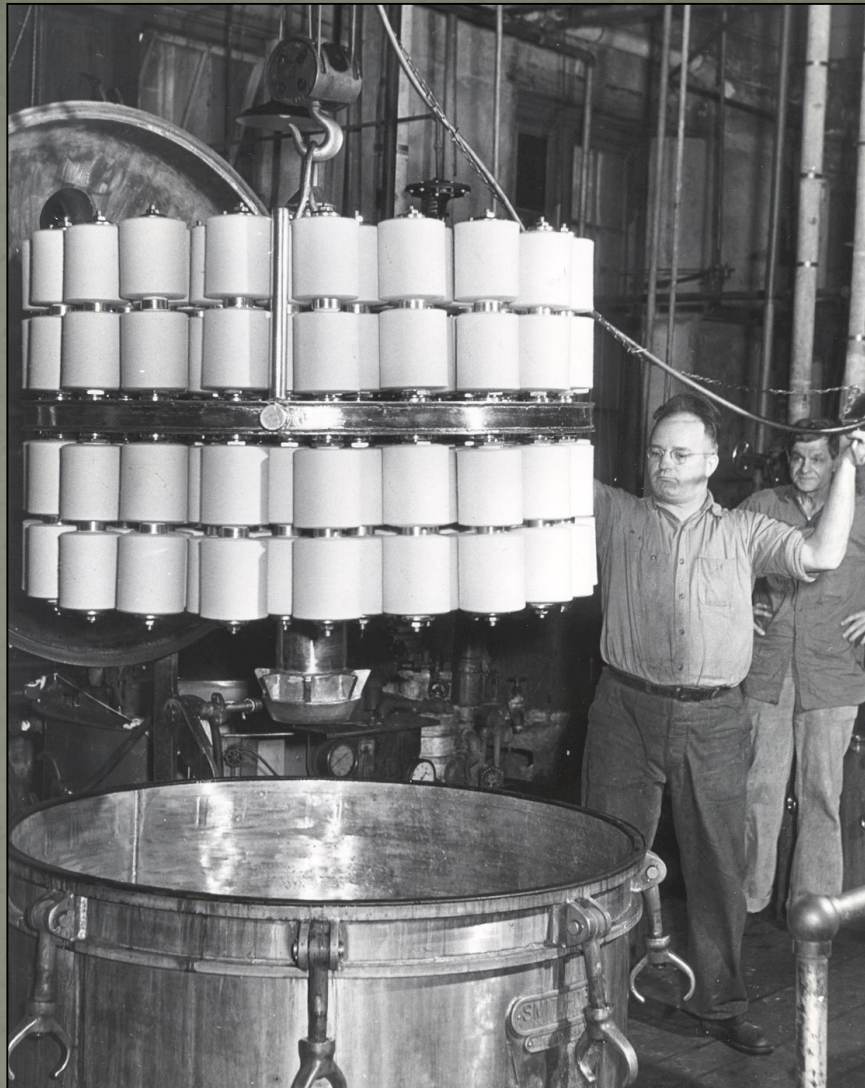
Pho-A-0363. Unidentified worker processes sliver at the American Thread Company, Willimantic, CT, 1950. Black and white gelatin print. Hugelmeier studio, New York, NY. The worker's concentration and strength are evident in this photo – as are the 1950s styles of clothing and hairstyling.



Pho-A-0365. Fred Setterberg processing sliver at the American Thread Company in Willimantic, CT, 1950. Black and white gelatin print. Hugelmeier studio, New York, NY. Setterberg's physical strength is evident in this photo. By the 1950s, male mill workers were frequently wearing T-shirts.



Pho-A-0406. Jean Perry winding at the American Thread Company in Willimantic, CT, 1950. Black and white gelatin print. Hugelmeyer studio, New York, NY. Notice the lipstick, wedding ring, and watch.



Pho-A-0451. Victor Turcotte (foreground) and an unidentified worker lower undyed thread into a dye vat at the American Thread Company in Willimantic, CT, in 1950. Black and white gelatin print, Hugelmeier studio, New York, NY. Pressure dye vats, a 20th-century invention, allowed mills to dye thread already wound onto special steel spools. Leftover dye was dumped into the Willimantic River.



Pho-A-0357. Anita Biron Farrell (foreground) and unidentified worker sort bobbins of thread for sewing machines at the American Thread Company, Willimantic, CT, 1950. Black and white gelatin print. Hugelmeier studio, New York, NY. Farrell was 18 years old and had just gotten married. This was her first job after graduating from high school. When she spoke with us in 2008, she insisted that she and the other women workers at ATC always dressed up for work and wore make up, regardless of their jobs.



Pho-A-0313. From left, Thomas Matassa, Antoinette Macoin, and Emily Fisher pack spools of thread into boxes at the American Thread Company in Willimantic, CT, in 1950. Black and white gelatin print, Hugelmeier studio, New York, NY. Men and women sometimes worked together.



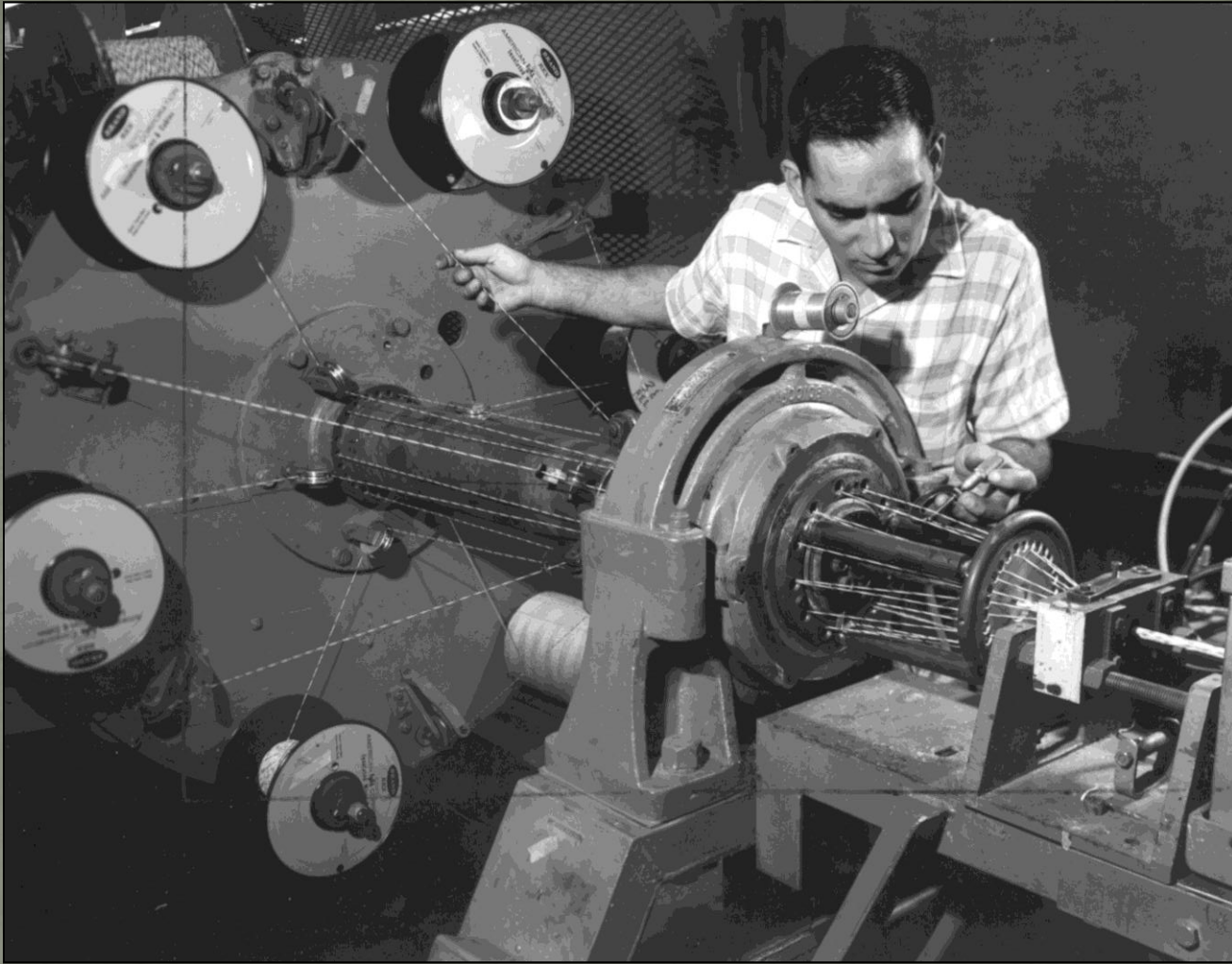
Pho-A-0339. Unidentified worker in print shop of American Thread Company in Willimantic, CT, 1957. Black and white gelatin print. Unknown photographer. How did we identify the correct date for this photo?



Pho-M-0493. Norbert Aubin spark testing at the William Brand Company's North Street factory, Willimantic, CT, c. 1955-60. Black and white gelatin print snapshot. Unknown photographer. In the 1940s and 1950s, male mill and factory workers often wore blue jeans and buttoned shirts.



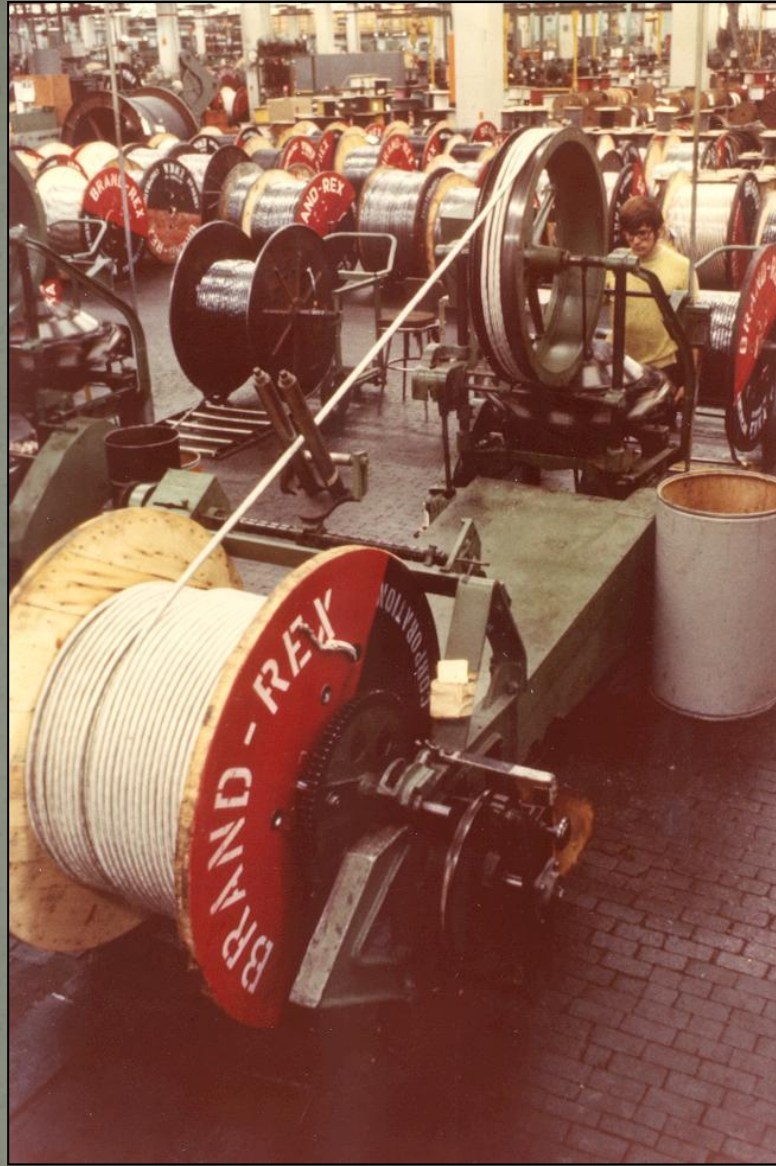
Pho-M-0498. Connecticut Governor Abraham Ribicoff speaks at the grand opening of the William Brand Company's new factory building on North Street in Willimantic, CT, c. 1955-61. Black and white gelatin print. Graphic Photo Service studio, Willimantic, CT. From left: unknown; Judge Joseph Dannahey; Fred Brand (founder of William Brand Co.); Governor Ribicoff (in office 1955-61); unknown: Arthur Coudu.



Pho-M-0502. Unidentified worker twisting color-coded telephone wires at the William Brand Company's North Street factory in Willimantic, CT, c. 1960. Black and white gelatin print. John Keller Photography Studio, New York City.



Pho-M-0533. Unidentified workers spark testing at the William Brand Company in Willimantic, CT, c. 1960. Color print. Dineen Studio, Willimantic, CT. By the 1960s, women worked in laboratories and wore white lab coats.



Pho-M-0492. Unidentified worker winding cable for shaping at the North Street factory of the William Brand Company (now called Brand-Rex), Willimantic, CT, 1971. Kodak color print. Unknown photographer. By the 1970s male mill and factory workers often wore T-shirts.

The End