



World War II changed everything in the millworkers' world. Young Lewistonians fought beside Americans of diverse backgrounds. Tours of duty in Europe and the Pacific were for many their first ventures beyond Maine and Quebec. Oral histories recall both the horrors of war (Emeril Bergeron took part in the liberation of Buchenwald) and the pleasures of new camaraderie. Many servicemen returned home with brides from other regions, faiths, and ethnic communities.

Even on the home front, the effects of the war were everywhere. Patriotic ads for War Bonds filled the pages of *Le Messager* and the *Lewiston Journal*. Lewiston mills wove sheets, blankets, and parachute cloth for the military. War contracts guaranteed steady work and good wages. Yet the draft also made it hard for the mills to meet their hiring needs. More and more women worked at jobs—loom fixers, doffers—that had long been reserved for men. Photographs of the period seem to underscore the loosening of gender divisions: female millworkers display a more playful style, unlike the decorous portraits of earlier years.

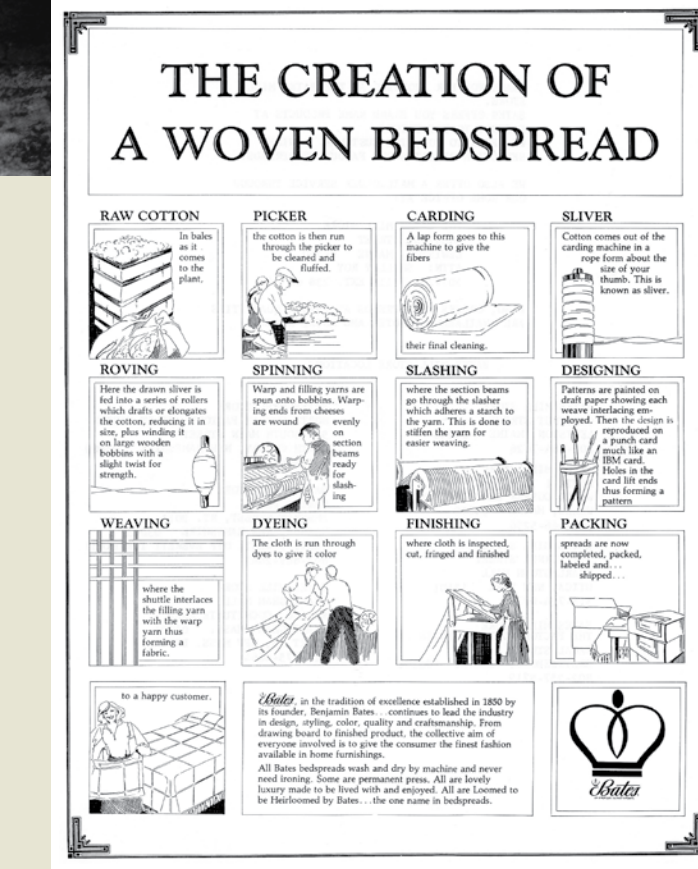
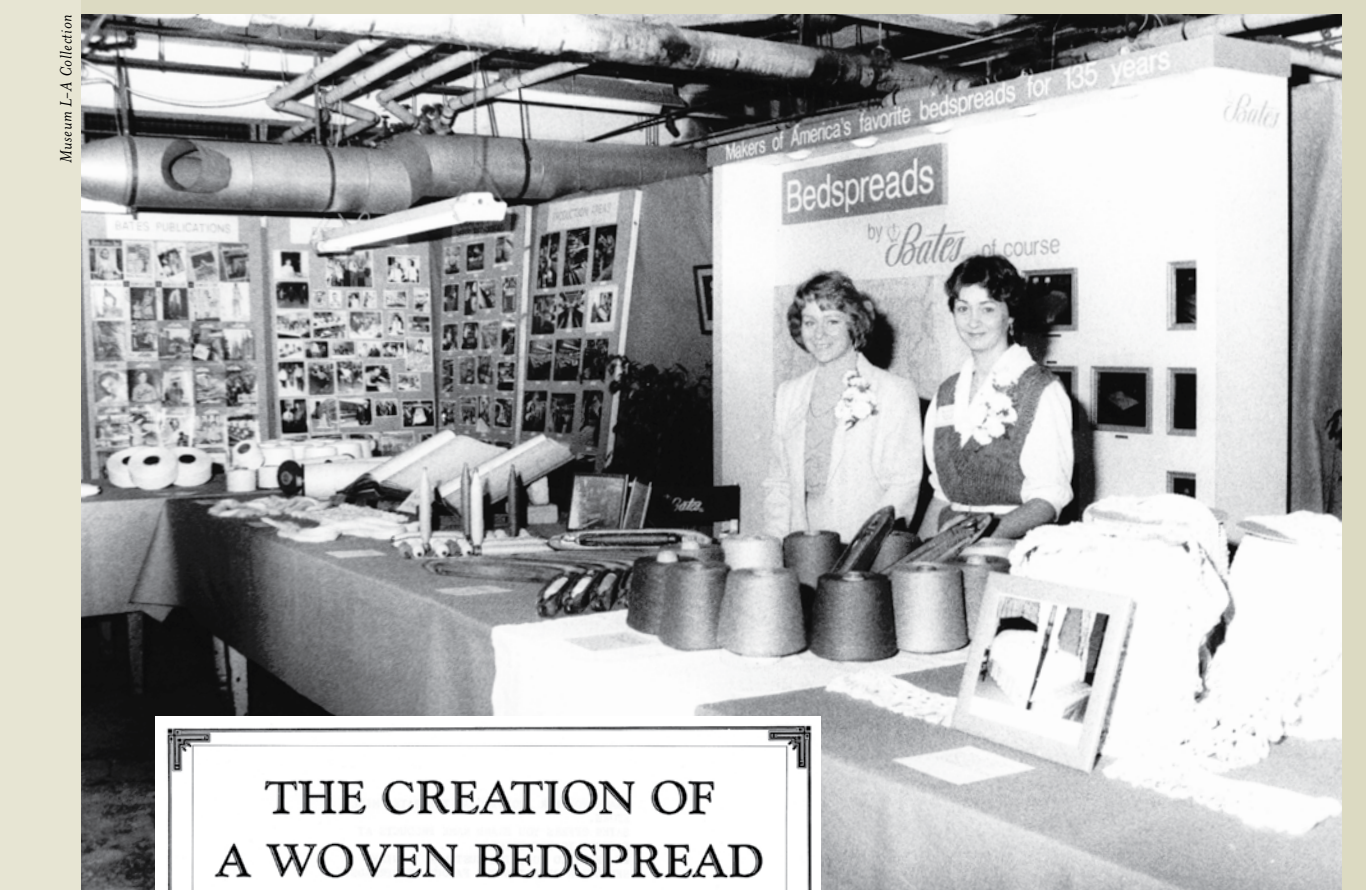
The war, in short, brought cultural revolution. It imbued millworkers with a strong national identity and reshaped their attitudes toward themselves and others. Military service nurtured a cosmopolitan acceptance of American (and human) diversity. For some, it challenged the values of ethnic loyalty and religious tradition that had helped immigrant families through hard times. Even at home, wartime shook up the ways women and men worked and played together.



**“I dressed in regular little dresses [before the war].... Then I came back from the Army and went back to the mill. And at that time I brought back my fatigues and stuff, and I wore pants. Of course, it was the talk of the town, but I didn't care... because of the machines! If you wore a dress and that would get caught in the straps you'd killed yourself.”**  
Cecile Burgoyne



**“If you owned a Bates bedspread, you had one of the best. I mean, it was like owning a pair of Nikes today.”** Marc D'Amour



## Franco-American

In 1940, Bates Mill began to market an elaborate new bedspread featuring raised garlands, flowers, and fringe. A Franco-American weaver, Henry Goulet, had developed the technical innovations that made the intricate design possible. The “George Washington,” as it was called, became a fixture of postwar American bedrooms. In the 1950s and '60s, it was sold in department stores, on wedding registers, or through the New York showroom of the Bates Manufacturing Company—always with a tag that read “Loomed To Be Heirloomed.”

The patriotic bedspreads of the Bates line (there would later be an “Abigail Adams” too) became emblems of a new middle-class prosperity for both the nation and the milltown. But as an American classic produced by immigrants, the “George Washington” also tells another tale: a story about the Americanization of the millworkers' world. In World War II and afterward, millworkers gained a foothold in national life as soldiers, workers, consumers, and citizens.

Lewiston's immigrants had long immersed themselves in American politics and culture. Weavers and shoemakers marched for New Deal programs; francophone families followed the Red Sox in the *pages sportives* of *Le Messager*. Yet war and prosperity brought a deeper connection to national life. French-Canadians, in particular, took on a new identity, bilingual and hyphenate: Franco-Americans.

**“My four years in the service [were] a major education.... I had never...slept away from home overnight once.... So now I'm in [with]...Polacks, Irish, Lithuanians, Italians,...Germans, Russians... all in the same company.**

**Now everybody went to church on Sunday, but you went to your own.... But then I realized,...we're all actually worshipping the same God basically. Only it's in different ways and different names and that's all it means.... this business, you know, being the only way you go to heaven is you have to be a Catholic, that's a lot of hooy.**  
**So that's why I say, I learned more in those four years I went mixing up with all these different guys and everything. And they are good people.”** Lionel Audet



If the war fortified millworkers' sense of being “hyphenate Americans,” so did the good economic times that followed. The decade after World War II (a time of decline for other New England milltowns) was a golden age of Lewiston's textile industry. In 1945, regional investors merged the Bates, Androscoggin, Hill, and other mills into the Bates Manufacturing Company. They invested in modern looms and shifted from water to electric power. They opened a showroom in New York and marketed designs like the “George Washington” in national magazines. By the early 1950s, “Bates bedspreads” were not only a line of goods, but a national brand.

Lewiston's mills were bursting with business; work was steady and the workforce massive. Each day, three shifts, totalling over four thousand employees, teemed through the gates. A new wave of Quebecois immigrants replenished the mills.

Ironically the presence of a strong union helped to stabilize business. The Textile Workers Union (TWU) had organized Lewiston's millworkers in 1941, part of a federal policy of supporting wartime unionization. The TWU was prepared to fight when it had to, leading a city-wide strike in 1951. Yet it mainly worked to negotiate safety improvements, fair work rules, and long-term employment. In effect the union took the place of older family and ethnic bonds as the provider of *surviance*. Like the weave of a bedspread, the fabric of union-management relations strengthened millworkers' trust in the American economy.

**“I remember when I was a kid, the police officer would stop the traffic on Canal Street to let the people out [at the end of the first shift], and they had to stop the traffic for at least ten, fifteen minutes because it would take that long just for the line of people to get from the door out, you know. And they'd be going up Ash Street, and all you would see is from the bottom of the gates all the way up, all you would see is just a mass of people walking up.... There were thousands of people that used to work in these mills.”** Danny Fitzsimmons



**“I did about every job there was to do in the weave room, so they promoted me as an assistant overseer, and then they promoted me to a full overseer. And then of course at that time, like I say, I was in charge of twelve hundred and fifty-eight looms, and I probably had somewhere around three hundred people working under me, on three shifts, round the clock.**

**And it was a good life, we wasn't making that much money but it was a life.”**  
Joseph Foisy

New opportunities for advancement inside and outside the mills deepened millworkers' attachment to American values. For the first time, “French” no longer meant “working-class” in Lewiston-Auburn. Franco-American workers rose to become supervisors on the shop floor. Parents kept their children out of the mills and sent them to college. Rachel Desgrossieillers, the daughter of an unlettered weaver, received a baccalaureate and graduate business degree; Emeril Bergeron worked two jobs to accrue real estate and send three children to college.

*Loomed to be Heirloomed*

