When people think of "mill girl," they often think of the women who worked in the cotton mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, in the early 1800s. These "mill girls" have been featured in countless novels and films, and at the Lowell National Historical Park, there is even a street named after their own "mill girls."

In Williamsport, Pennsylvania, many came from farm families outside the city, in this case to work in silk mills. Their first stop was generally the Silk Mill, which was king in the northeast Pennsylvania at the turn of the century. Silk was Queen.

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

Photographs of mill and garment factories and of the workers who toiled in them from the 1920s through the 1950s, 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-up pins indicates the locations of mills and factories in Williamsport, Montoursville, Montgomery, Hughesville, Muncy, Jersey Shore and Woorich.

A "Stitch in Time" places the experiences of our own "mill girls" in the context of the broader history of the textile industry. It is also a way to provide perspective on the current clothing industry which is so different from the industry that was the backbone of the American economy. In many ways, the fashion world today has a lot in common with the world of the 1920s.

Women already had been working in woolen mills and in shoe and rubber factories before silk manufacturors moved their plants into the county. In 1882, at the present site of the Pajama Factory, Lycoming Rubber Co. opened a factory where 176 female workers made galoshes. Three years later, according to an article in the former Williamsport Sun, 112 girls went on strike when their wages were cut.

Most of the local mills moved operations to Williamsport from New York and New Jersey. Some owners were seeking female workers who, eager for jobs, would work long hours. During this period, girls who were beginning to organize, would begin to demand better wages and working conditions.

In addition to its potential labor force, Williamsport had something that no other city had. It had access to the art technology as a result of the 1820s and 1830s, and had exceptional shipping facilities and reasonable freight rates on the railroad.

The first of the silk mills was the Stearns Silk Mill. In 1857, John N. Stearns moved to Williamsport from New York and established a mill at Memorial Avenue and Olive Street, now the site of the Memorial Homes development under construction.

In 1892, the Stearns Silk Mill was the largest employer in Williamsport, with more than 1,000 workers. The women staffed the homes, creating silk fabric, ribbons and batiste 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 YMCA.

The YMCA, established in 1898, reached out to "factory girls" with practical social and support services, including places for workers to relax during their noon rest period. Workers might read books from the library or have a cup of coffee.

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. Albert Kasemir is one of the workers whose story is featured in "A Stitch in Time.""}

In an interview conducted in 1960 by Montoursville Area High School history students, Kasemir recalled working at Shirey's Silk Mill in Hughesville. He was born in 1915, in 1929, when he was 14, and was paid $10 a week.

Wolfgang's daughter, 17, her mother had another baby; a few months later, her father died and Albera 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 shaving floors.

The mills were very successful, by the 1920s local silk was the best quality and made up a high percentage of national textile production and was sold throughout the world in silk production. But by the 1920s, most mill owners had left Pennsylvania to move to New York and New Jersey, at that time, in search of cheaper labor.

The industry declined not only in Pennsylvania but in the northeast. The Stearns Silk mill closed in 1933. Holmes Silk Co., the longest-running mill established in 1866, remained in business until 1935.

According to "A Stitch in Time," in the 1920s, garment manufacturers moved into Pennsylvania. With a modest amount of 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 as regulated. Garment makers in Williamsport city directory publish in the 1920s include Penn Garment, Vogue, Beas, Brothers, New York, North Branch Panta, Whippleman, Glamore and Smith, Harris, Levy.

Wolodyan's Pajamas, which began operations in the 1930s, had gradually expanded and had become the largest pajama factory in the world by the 1950s. It closed in 1978, 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 profits.

Wolodyan's worker Gromay's story is another one preserved in "A Stitch in Time." She was 25 when she was hired and, recruited to leave her family's farm, Woldyan was hired by the company for a 3-month trial period in 1949. She worked at Wolodyan's for 29 years, starting as a secretary. She then worked for another 29 years as a secretary until she closed shop in 1979.

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