Central New York, where I grew up, is well known for the group of lakes that sit like the spines of a fan across its countryside. These are the Finger Lakes. Skaneateles Lake is one of the smaller lakes in this configuration. It is the deepest and, fed by underground springs, it has the coldest water. But unlike its fellow lakes, Skaneateles has one enticing advantage. It has a substantial outlet that runs straight for 12 to 15 miles due north. In the late 1800s, mill owners looking for reliable sources of water power to run their mills found this outlet most attractive and soon all kinds of mills sprang up along the outlet. In its hey day the outlet was home to grain and feed mills, a small boat factory, the Mottville Chair Factory, a woolen mill and several others. Now many of these smaller mills have closed or been reconfigured to accommodate a different industry. New and bigger ones include a chemical factory, one that makes surgical instruments and another that manufactures paper and cloth filters of all kinds.

As the mills grew and brought more and more jobs the need for housing, food stores, a post office, a one or two room school and a church also grew – soon six towns grew up – The town of Skaneateles around the nearest end the lake itself and the town of Jordon at the other end of the outlet. These two are the biggest and can qualify for small city status. In between these two are four other villages – no where near a city size designation. Together the six of them – Skaneateles, Willow Glen, Mottville, Skaneateles Falls, Elbridge and Jordon are strung out like graduated beads on the string of the outlet.

My family lived in Mottville and we had our roots in the woolen mill – the Waterbury Felt Company. But to begin with, my grandmother was a single mother raising her two children in her father’s house. For some years while her children were very small she caned chairs for the Mottville Chair Co. This was piece work. The Chair Co. dropped off the chair frames and the canes and left her to it. The faster she could cane the more chairs she could finish and the more money she earned. The pay was very low so no matter how many chairs she caned it never could be stretched far enough to take care of all her living expenses that included numerous doctor’s visits and heavy metal braces for her son who had suffered from polio when he was 2. To add to her money resources, she also took in borders – she only had room for two at a time but she supplied them with two meals a day, a room and bed to sleep in and did their laundry as well.

Winter and summer she did the chair caning in a shed at the back of the house – a shed that was heated only with a tiny kerosene heater in winter and was miserably hot in summer. She taught her children how to soak and bend the canes ready for her to use so that she could get more done and done faster. Two of her caned chairs sit in my living room to this day.

When the chance came to work in the woolen mill, Grandma was more than glad to take it. The pay was better, the work was steadier and it didn’t involve having to have her hands constantly in water.

She immediately learned what the rules for the workers were: a worker’s pay was docked if he/she was late or was sick enough to stay home, (grandma was healthy as a horse and seldom missed a single day.) There was one week of vacation each year and it was always the second week in July. Everyone had to take it then since that was when the machines were shut down, thoroughly cleaned and repaired. Friday night was pay night. Workers were paid in cash that was handed to them in long narrow, buff colored envelopes with their name, number of hours worked that week and the amount they were paid, all listed on the front. We had no
car so every Friday night my mother walked down the hill to meet my father at the grocery store and the meat market to buy most of the week’s groceries. Then they lugged them up the hill in 4 big brown paper bags. When my grandmother came home on Friday night she spread her money out on her bed, then sorted it into small glass, screw top jars: one for groceries, one for coal, one for US Saving Bonds stamps, one for house repairs and the last for savings. She kept those jars in her middle dresser drawer and it was worth our life if any of us touched them.

When the depression hit in 1929 my parents and small brother managed to stay in their tiny place in Syracuse for a year until there was no more work to be found. Then they moved in with grandma – a necessity but one resented by all of them. It took another year before my father finally got a job at the woolen mill too.

Once they were both working at the mill my father and grandmother soon formed a morning routine that seldom varied. My father got up at 4:30, got dressed, and went to the cellar to shake down the ashes in the coal burning furnace and add enough coal to last through the day. Then he collected the morning paper from the paper box by the road and fixed his breakfast – coffee and a poached egg on toast for himself and another poached egg for the dog. Finally he could read and eat in peace and silence. Grandma got up at 6:00 and took over the bathroom for half an hour (it took awhile to lace up the body corset she wore). Once dressed for work she made her breakfast – usually tea and toast.

For work in the mill Grandma wore a clean, starched and ironed housedress and apron every other day. Her shoes were black with a lacy design across the top. They had 2-inch block heels and laced up the front. When one pair got too worn out for work, she threw the laces away and used the shoes for bedroom slippers. It wasn’t long before she couldn’t wear any other kind of shoes because she had shortened the tendons in her heels.

My father wore heavy work pants – jeans and dark blue work shirts that always smelled of machine oil and the oil from the raw wool. His heavy work shoes were always black with oil from the machines.

Grandma and my father didn’t have much to say to each other in the mornings. Since they could never agree on much of anything and they certainly weren’t compatible in the same car, they rode to work with different drivers. Other workers at the mill who owned cars and drove right by our house every day offered them rides to and from work for 50 cents a week. Dad’s ride picked him up at 6:30 and Grandma’s picked her up at 7:30. My mother stayed in bed reading and smoking until they had left in order to avoid the inevitable argument that happened when the 3 of them were in the same room.

At five o’clock every week day evening the mill whistle blew – that was the signal that the workers would be home in a few minutes and it was time for kids to head home for supper, supper was already on the table.

Grandma worked in the mill for over 50 years. She refused any suggestions that she should retire until the company instituted a ‘have to retire by 70’ rule and made her retire. She was 76. Retirement didn’t agree with her and within 6 months she had a debilitating stroke and died in a nursing home a few years later.

Dad went into the carding room and worked there until the day he died 45 years later. He ran and cleaned the machines, standing on his feet all day. He worked his usual 8 hour day and took all the overtime he could get – often working up to 50 or sixty hours a week. The overtime paid a few bills and for his hunting and fishing habits.
This mill made woolen felts used by paper making mills to run off various kinds of paper – from thin tissue paper to the sturdy paper used to print money. The mill was divided into rooms, each devoted to one part of the felt making process.

The carding room (men only) was the first stop. Here the raw wool was cleaned and carded – pulled through machines with toothed rollers that cleaned, untangled and combed the wool into flexible, flat strands. From here the wool went into the spinning room where workers (mostly women) spun the wool strands into thread, then it went on to the weaving room (mostly women again) and was woven into long, flat, closely woven felts. The weavers left long threads on either end of the felts. Joiners (again only women) then took the felts and wove the strands in and out to make the felts circular. The final room was the perch ing room (again only women). The felts were hung on large, high rollers and the perchers slowly pulled them down a foot at a time. They worked over every inch of that felt, taking out stray threads, tightening loose threads, smoothing out the knots. From the perchers, the felts were folded and shipped off to the paper maker.

Grandma was a percher for all the years she worked there. She stood on her feet 8 hours a day (with a one hour lunch break but no mid morning or mid afternoon breaks) hauling the felts down one foot at a time, stopping only to arrange the folds that fell on the floor at her feet as she worked. She wore corrective eyeglasses since in this job she needed excellent eyesight in order not to miss any of the weaving or joining problems.

In the early fifties the mill was swamped with work and they needed more joiners. They couldn’t fit any more of the big joining tables into their designated room and so decided they would advertise for workers who could work at home. Only women applied for these ‘home’ jobs and they were paid on a piecework basis. My mother applied and was hired immediately.

So off to the mill went my mother to be trained for six weeks by experienced joiners and then she was ready for working at home.

On a Monday morning the mill’s big truck pulled up out front and 2 men unloaded a long wooden table with collapsible metal legs. They set it up in our dining room, plopped a felt on top of it and left. The 7 foot long table about filled half of our dining room. It took my mother time to get it settled across the window side of the room and still leave enough room to get in and out of the front door and through the room into the kitchen.

The top of the table was adjustable up and down in order to accommodate the joiner’s height and arm reach. It was 3 feet wide and 2 inches thick. At the top and bottom of the 2 inch sides there were strips of small, heavy tacks with the sharp ends pointed outward.

Once my mother got the table settled and its height adjusted to suit her she could start to work. The folds of the felt lay on the floor, at the back of the table. First she arranged one end of the felt over the top until it sat halfway down the table, then she pulled the other end from under the table and up over the lower half of the table to meet the top piece. As she worked she had to keep several very important things in mind. First and for most she had to make sure that the felt itself wasn’t twisted in any way. Then she had to be sure the felt maintained a certain tautness, so threads didn’t loosen as she worked – this is what those sharp tacks were for. When she got to the final part of the process she had to be very careful not to cut the felt itself as she trimmed the threads. If any of these things happened the felt was useless for the paper makers. However, the damaged felt wasn’t a total loss to the mill. The nap on it could be raised, dyed pale blue, pink or green, cut into blankets of various sizes, bound and sold to their workers - the blankets were heavy and warm and made wonderful wedding and new birth gifts. Of course, the basic price of the ruined felt was deducted from the workers pay – a big loss to them and an incentive to do correct and careful work.
Mom worked from right to left, joining the long threads left by the weavers. She had to know just how high to take each thread – the bottom ones up and the top ones down – they needed to be at various heights in order to make the felt tight. She left the long threads loose until she had joined a whole table full. Then she went back and with a small but very sharp pair of scissors she trimmed the threads back to about 10 inches each. Then she used a small tool called a looper. It had a small pointed tip that opened like the catch on a necklace. With the looper mom worked these 10-inch threads back and forth until they were only 6 or so inches long. Finally, using the scissors she again trimmed the threads to about 1 inch. Back at the mill the perchers would work these short threads into the felt so they couldn’t be seen. Next mom would move the finished piece off the table and to one side, arrange another table full and begin all over again. When the whole felt was finished, she called the mill to send the truck to pick it up and bring her another one.

My mother did excellent work; she was fast and accurate. Depending on the weave of the felt – loose for toilet paper, tight for tissue paper – and the length of the felt, mom could complete 3-5 felts in a week's time. She spent 5 years working bent over this table for hours at a time.

This job had appealing advantages (if you can call them advantages) for women who wanted to stay home with young children. They could work weekends or late at night if they chose. And, of course, they could still work at their “full” time jobs – cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, shopping and caring for their families.

My mother found another use for the table as well. When we were having big Sunday or holiday meals and more family members were there, mom would carefully fold up the felt and lay it on grandma’s bed. Then she covered the table with tablecloths and set out the dishes and stainless steel ware. The table could seat 12 easily but we all had to be careful of those nasty sharp and prickly edges.

I also found a use for the felts. In the winter our house was heated with coal and it was never very warm. With the table top raised there was a cave-like place underneath – perfect for me to curl up in, warm and cozy, to read and to listen to the gossip and stories when family and friends came in for coffee and talk. Mom continued to work while the others sat around her.

When the home joining work ran out, my mother went to work cleaning motel rooms and I joined her for 3 summers. I used my money for clothes and books.

This was our family work life. The work was steady – at least for my grandmother and my father. The hours were often longer than the required 8. The pay was poor, with only a few minor raises now and then. We never could afford to own or maintain a car, my parents could never afford to get a place of their own, we never went to a restaurant. New clothes for my brother and I only appeared at the beginning of the school year and at Easter. I loved the hand me downs from my older cousins, but my mother hated taking hand me downs from her sister-in-law. Of course, she wasn’t fond of that sister-in-law to begin with.

With all three of them working, we had a house to live in, enough food and we were always clothed and shod. Extras were seriously considered before any money was spent for them. Like many other families of mill workers we “made do” with what we had.

I was the first in my family to attend college. I earned a doctorate – as a single mother of two teenagers – and moved to Central PA to teach education at Lycoming College in Williamsport, PA.

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