

Bloomsburg Mills

Bloomsburg Mills Inc. as told to Patchwork by Mark Breisch

Interviewed by Cade Bidleman & Andrew Breisch in the spring of 2003

Bloomsburg Mills has been a provider of employment to Columbia County ever since it opened in 1889. It has been a valuable part of the local economy and businesses that demand textiles from manufacturers such as Bloomsburg Mills. Over 100 years, Bloomsburg Mills has gone from one three-story building, into a vast enterprise that has brought job opportunities, economic stability, and growth to the people of Columbia County.

Mark Breisch has been working at Bloomsburg Mills for more than 25 years. He started in November of 1976 and has worked in the weaving room for about 23 years. He is the first generation of his family to work there and is accompanied by relatives. He has helped newcomers of the plant learn the trades and manage the work to keep the production steady.

PATCHWORK: When and by whom was Bloomsburg Mills founded?

BREISCH: It was first started by Joseph Ratti. There's even a machine that he developed for the textile industry that was named after him. It was originally founded in 1888, but officially it was incorporated in 1889.

PATCHWORK: How has the industry of Bloomsburg Mills affected the economical stature of Bloomsburg?

BREISCH: Just basically providing employment for residents.

PATCHWORK: What was a normal day of work like for most employees when it first opened?

BREISCH: I tried to find that out when I was asked to do this interview. I couldn't really find out much about what a day was like when they first opened the plant. There's no one left alive.

PATCHWORK: Do you know how a day was like compared to today?

BREISCH: Back then....did you ever see a show where they use a spinning wheel to make yarn? That basically what they did when they first opened. They spun yarn and they didn't really start manufacturing materials until I think approximately fifteen to twenty years later.

PATCHWORK: Has Bloomsburg Mills always been on 6th Street or has it been relocated before?

BREISCH: When you look at the plant, the center building (the brick structure) is the original plant. The rear was added on approximately about 1950. And the part on Market Street was added in the early seventies or late sixties. I'm not aware of when the warehouses on Railroad Street were built.

(Editor's Note: When told of the "brick structure," it was meant that the 3-story structure was the original plant.)

PATCHWORK: What did the mill workers think of their bosses back then?

BREISCH: Back then, and I know from experience from my father and my grandfather, the relationship between the employees and the bosses were a lot better than they are today.

PATCHWORK: What do the mill workers think of them now?

BREISCH: I'm not really sure I would dare say some of the true feelings. But as far as the overall opinion is that it's congenial. To me it's "Tell me what you want me to do then stay out of my road."

PATCHWORK: What's your personal opinion? How well do you get along with your bosses and fellow workers?

BREISCH: It depends on what kind of a day we're having. If everyone has a bad day then the slightest thing can make you snap at somebody that you wouldn't normally snap at. Most people that work at the mill know that I actually work for my uncle, he's my immediate boss and even we have had some go-arounds from time to time.

PATCHWORK: Has Bloomsburg Mills always made the same materials, or was there a time when different things were produced then that are produced today?

BREISCH: When the plant was first opened it was all silk. They made silk umbrellas and parachutes. Parachutes weren't made until the war era. Then the war brought on the synthetic fabrics. That pretty well killed the silk part of it. Then we got the polyesters and the cottons after World War II.

PATCHWORK: How has the advancement of technology affected the business?

BREISCH: Everything is getting computerized. You got access cards to change settings. There's one machine that I run has 200 entries for the last 200 starts and stops or other things with the amount of time. It depends on what type of material we're making.

PATCHWORK: Has there been a time when some new technology came in and changed the plant or changed how you worked?

BREISCH: That almost goes back to the last question. Computerization of the machine made getting the machines ready a lot faster.

PATCHWORK: Do the computerized machines that come in need special training to be used?

BREISCH: Not really. That would only come in for the software part of it but the manufacturer would take care of that. It just the matter of having an access card to put in the terminal and knowing what buttons to push to bring up what you need to know.

PATCHWORK: How has the mill changed since it opened? How about the number of employees?

BREISCH: It started as the brick building and it expanded to what you see down there now. Everything that isn't red brick was added on after the original plan was started. At peak production, there were about 500 to 750 employees.

PATCHWORK: What was the town like when it (the mill) first opened?

BREISCH: Horse and buggies. They had a trolley that ran up Main St. and down Market St. I think that the trolley ran between Bloom and Danville. I'm not sure though.

PATCHWORK: When the mill first opened, was there any companies competing against it or was it top, like everybody worked there?

BREISCH: I actually think that Bloom Mills was actually the first major employer Bloomsburg. I'm not positive about that. I'm pretty sure that it went Bloom Mills, Magee, and then Milco that came into the town.

PATCHWORK: Is Bloomsburg Mills still getting the same kind of production, such as it is still making as a lot money like it did back then? Is it still in peak production?

BREISCH: Not by any means. I think that at one point we were at 1 million yards per week. We're down to approximately 300,000 yards per week right now.

(Editor's Note: The reason behind the decrease in production is further explained later in the interview.)

PATCHWORK: When it first opened, about how many employees did Bloom Mills hire?

BREISCH: I'm glad I had a chance to do some research but I couldn't find anything on that at all for you.

PATCHWORK: About how many productions plants are there in Bloomsburg Mills completely, not just including here?

BREISCH: Approximately 25 or 30 years ago, they did have a weaving plant in I think Loch Haven, but that doesn't sound right. I know we had a second weaving plant but I'm not sure if it was Loch Haven or not. During the first recession, they consolidated all their weaving into Bloomsburg Mills in the seventies. They have a finishing plant in Monroe, North Carolina. They do all the dying but they don't do any of the sewing.

PATCHWORK: Does Bloom Mills ever sell overseas or is it basically in the Northeast or throughout the United States?

BREISCH: I'm not positive but I believe we had a few reasons to. I think we had a few foreign orders for some specialty fabrics. We're mostly importing most of our raw

goods. We get most of our spun yarns from Canada. As far as orders that we get to make materials for outside the country is pretty sparse.

PATCHWORK: How many owners have there been of Bloomsburg Mills over the years?

BREISCH: Joseph Ratti started it until the early 1900's. The Yorks family took over for two generations, from father to son up until the early forties. Then it was Jacques Weber. I just remembered that they have a scholarship foundation set up for employee's kids can apply for scholarships. After Jacques Weber left, he was actually one of the owners who didn't die before someone took over; he retired in the mid sixties. The current owners are J.P Marion and his third generation grandson. He took over from the grandfather. I'm pretty sure he was the third and the last one was a first because I don't remember a second anywhere in between there. But there has to be one, just that he had nothing to do with the plant.

PATCHWORK: Has the main office always been in New York City or has it been somewhere else?

BREISCH: That I'm not sure. It seems to me that in the early days, I'd think that they'd keep their operations where their production was. Whether it was a smart move to move their sales to New York or not...well, I guess it that would be a smart move to get it closer to all the apparel manufacturers. That's where all the fashion designers are at, so they are going to want to have their samples close to them. They don't to go to Bloomsburg to see the samples, they want to have them there. Now that I think about it, it was a smart move to move the office to New York but whether they always were there, I'm not sure. There wasn't a Wall St. forever so... I guess their offices are on 43rd or 44th St. and I don't think that's anywhere near Wall St.

PATCHWORK: Was production affected during the Great Depression and the wars or did it stay up?

BREISCH: I'm not sure whether the work was great but I was told that they worked steady straight through the depression.

PATCHWORK: Who else worked in your family before you?

BREISCH: I'm the first and only, I hope. That I will say.

PATCHWORK: What do you think the future of Bloomsburg Mills looks like?

BREISCH: That is really scary. Like I said earlier, we went from 1 million yards a week to about 300,000 yards a week now because we had to cut down to keep inventory from going crazy. Last time I heard, we had 6 million yards of gray goods in the warehouse and there was no more room so we even shut down recently for a week so that they could sell some of it so there wouldn't be so much left of it. Rumors have been going around that we are getting some big orders but it didn't come from anyone official.

PATCHWORK: Do you think that the mill is in any danger of having any massive layoffs?

BREISCH: We've had what I would call massive layoffs in the last couple of years. We were working 7 days in a split shift. We would work 12 hours for 3 days one week and 12 hours for 4 days the next week and it was split up between four different shifts. We had A, B, C, and D. When A and B worked, C and B were off. I liked the days off, but I didn't like the hours. I'm glad we went back to 8 hour days again. Between eight hours and twelve hours on concrete floors, everybody would say, "That's no good," everybody I work with. I would like to see those days come back but not the twelve hours.

PATCHWORK: Going back to the scholarship you were talking about, why was that made for the children of the parents that worked there and why it started?

BREISCH: The scholarship was dedicated in memory of the third owner, Jacques Weber in place of a foundation. It was originally only for children of parents that were going into the textile manufacturing industry schooling and then they figured that the textile industry was 'going to pot', they opened it to anyone that was going to school. Of course, your grades have to be good to get any kind of a scholarship.

PATCHWORK: Do you need to know how to weave to work at the mill or can you teach them when they come or do they have to have some knowledge before they come to work?

BREISCH: Unless they came from another plant that did the same kind of production then they have to be trained from the word 'Go.' But, if you're willing to learn, and have someone with the patience to teach, which I don't have anymore. You can always pick up things 1, 2,

3 but there's always one person that you try to train and it's like "I've told you this part of the job 100 times," and they drive you crazy.

PATCHWORK: So is it confusing for them?

BREISCH: Well, evidently. To me I've been doing the same job down there for 23 years and I am still learning. Some things still catching you off guard that you never had before after 23 years of doing the same job.

PATCHWORK: You worked at the mill for 25 years and worked in the same job for 23 years. What did you do for your first two years?

BREISCH: The first year I was what was called the throwing department. Basically machines put the twist in the yarn and the machine operators put it on racks. I was basically a yarn weightier. I took the yarn, weighed it and got it ready for warping, which then got ready for slashing, which is too involved for me to explain from warping to slashing to weaving. That would take at least an hour to really explain it right so you would understand it.