

# WATER AND WOOL

## THE NORTH MONTPELIER WOOLEN MILL

Ralph Nading Hill says in *The Winooski, Heart way of Vermont* the Kingsbury Branch (one of 7 main tributaries feeding the Winooski River) drains the country up around Calais and Woodbury. A pioneer named Kingsbury fished in it a great deal and always referred to it as “his branch.” His neighbors agreed.

Esther Munroe Swift in *Vermont Place Names* disagrees. She cites the fact that New York issued a patent in 1770 for a town to be called Kingsborough in the area that is now Calais, East Montpelier, and Plainfield. The Kingsborough jurisdiction contained no people at that time, but the river retained the name.

In 1792, Samuel Rich of Sutton, Massachusetts dammed the Kingsbury in what is now North Montpelier and built a sawmill. Three years later he added a gristmill, as well as a carding and fulling operation between 1795 and 1800. A carding machine cleaned and straightened wool fibers for local people who then took the wool home for spinning and weaving. They brought the cloth back to the mill for fulling, which pounded and shrank the cloth.

By 1831, Nathaniel Davis owned both operations, and he decided to erect a new building to house the advances in wool processing. By 1838 the new mill was complete, accommodating all facets of wool cloth production. But alas, the wool market declined, and Nathaniel and his son Nathaniel, Jr. sold out in 1841.



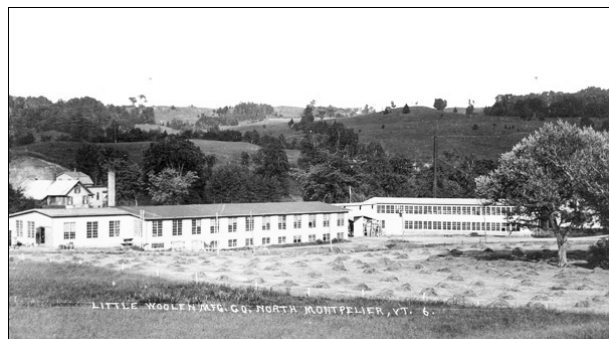
In May 1853, Walter Little purchased the mill, bringing 30 years' experience in the woolen Business. He had come from Haverhill, Massachusetts to Northfield, Vermont in 1820, and worked in Paine's wool factory there. Later he developed his own saw, grist, cloth, and starch factories. He moved to Barre in 1847 and to North Montpelier in 1849.

Walter Little probably purchased some locally produced wool, but because there was not a large wool production in the surrounding towns, he purchased wool from “away” shipped by rail.

After Walter died in 1859, his 3 children, Hazen, Sarah, and Walter S. Little conducted the business.

Financial difficulties and several changes in ownership led to the sale of the mill to George Sibley in 1878. Sibley revitalized the business, producing white flannel for the Boston market. After his death in 1904, the mill was re-named the Little Woolen Company by Sibley's 3 nephews, Walter H., Fred, and Charles Little. The business suffered more calamities, including a fire in 1912, washout of the dams in April 1914, and another fire later in 1914.

The Littles reconstructed the mill in 1916, building a new concrete dam with a penstock and water wheels.



Harry Daniels, who financed the project, built a new building across the road for carding, dyeing and spinning. The main building, housing the weaving and finishing rooms, was connected by a walkway over Vermont Route 14. On the site of the former gristmill,

Daniels built a bobbin mill, which operated until 1930 when it burned.

During the next 40 years, the mill operated with varying degrees of success, changing ownership and management many times. Erlene Leonard of East Calais recalls the mill's producing civil defense blankets and California prison blankets in the 1950's. Later the mill produced yard goods for clothing manufacturers. Competition from southern and foreign mills proved too great, and the mill ceased operation in 1969.

Over the years North Montpelier has been home to a blacksmith shop, shoemaker's shop, a distillery, brickyard, the Rich Tavern, three stores, a post office, a creamery and cheese factory, a church, the Nye organ factory and the Driftwind Press, as well as a self-sufficient and lively community.

And the Kingsbury is still at work; the dams that once powered businesses and industry now produce electricity.

Source: *Across The Onion A History of East Montpelier. Vermont 1781 to 1981.* by Ellen C. Hill and Marilyn S. Blackwell

## NORTH MONTPELIER WOOLEN MILL

### VERMONT TEXTILES

By Erlene Leonard, East Calais, VT

In the early fifties, my parents, Gordon and Rowena Leonard, moved to North Montpelier. My father worked in the woolen mill, which was the center of the town's existence. They lived in the boarding house on Factory Street, a big old building with about nine apartments. The mill owned this and most of the houses on the street, charging rent often dollars a month. I also worked in the mill for twelve years. The mill consisted of three buildings, a boiler room and power plant next to the river.

The dye house, picker room card room and the spinning rooms were in a two-story building running parallel to the road. The weave room, finishing room and office were across the road. This building faced Factory Street. An overpass once connected these two buildings, until one day a circus truck demolished it, and it was never replaced.

The whole process of making woolen cloth was done here.

Trucks brought large bales of raw wool and the first step was dyeing, a process consisting of wool being put into large vats full of hot water, acids and dyes. After the wool had been thoroughly soaked, it was dried. Each lot of wool was then picked, this process placed layers of wool one on the other in a square deep room, that reminded me of a silo. When a lot of this was ready it would be blown into the carding machines, which got all of the foreign materials out of it. These machines consisted of a huge roller full of fine wires that meshed together. The wool was run through three sets of these and then fed into and between four sets of rubber aprons, which vibrated back and forth causing the wool to become strands that wound around a large spool. There were four of these on each carding machine.

These spools were filled until they weighed about forty pounds. They were four feet long. There were five of these spools on a spinning frame. Each spool had twenty-four ends, twelve on one side, and twelve on the other. Every end had to go down through a

### History Expo 2008 Wool and Water



The North Montpelier Woolen Mills were the feature of the Society's exhibit at the Vermont History Expo at the Tunbridge Fair Grounds in 2008.

Nancy Bisson created the background for the exhibit with a graphic of both of the mills.

Erlene Leonard of Calais and others provided personal information on what it was like to work in the mill when it was in operation.

The exhibit was later displayed at Rally Day in September.

tube and into a bobbin spinning on a spindle. When these ends broke they had to be twisted back together by grabbing the spinning bobbin, finding the end, putting it back on the spindle, and twisting the two ends back together. We ran a lot of different weights of yarn and much of it ran very badly, especially some that was used to wind the inside of a baseball. The finer the yarn the better it ran.

We also ran a machine called a twister. This used large spools of yarn that came off the spinning frames, two ends twisted together and glued. This was used to make carpets. When the large bobbins were taken off the frame, they were put on a re-winder and the yarn was transferred to small loom bobbins. The yarn was taken from the bottom bobbins and run up through a series of eyelets onto a small bobbin that would fit the shuttle of the loom. The empty loom bobbins were in a bin on top of the machine and fed into the slots automatically. This machine was the worst thing to run. The empty bobbins would stick in the chute, and I lost a fingernail once trying to unplug it. The ends broke a lot, and you really had to work hard and fast to keep it running.

The filled loom bobbins were put in a cart and taken to the weave room. The small loom bobbins were placed into a magazine on the end of the loom. It held four rows of twelve. The bobbin was fed into one of two shuttles that flew back and forth. Keeping the colors straight was a job, as one misplaced bobbin could mess up the pattern on the cloth. If someone put a bobbin in the wrong end, they would smash together and fly out of the loom. Quite a few people got hit and some were really hurt. One person ran four looms, and one person was needed just to fill magazines.

The large bobbins of yarn that were brought to the weave room were put on a machine called a spooler; there were sixty bobbins, each on a peg, set on a frame. The yarn ends were run through eyelets and overhead onto a warp spool. There was a special pattern for each warp of cloth. You had to make sure every thread was where it should be. These warp spools were about a yard long and weighed 75 or 100 lbs. when full. It took about five or six spools to make a warp. They were put on a rack on a machine called a dresser. All the ends were run through eyelets and wound around a beam about five feet long that fit on a loom. The pattern for the warp set up this way.

After the beam was put onto the loom, every strand of yarn had to be pulled through eyelets that were on wooden frames called harnesses. The ends were all tied to another beam on the other side of the loom. Every strand of yarn had a flat piece of metal called a drop wire placed on it. When a thread broke, this wire would drop down onto a wire rail and shut off the loom. Sometimes the wire didn't work and the broken thread would wind around the others and take hours to straighten out. There were twenty four looms in the weave room. It was a very noisy place.

When the cloth came off the loom, the beam was placed on a rack so it could turn, and the cloth was pulled up over a roll and down to the floor. A small pair of shears was used to snip out any flaws in the cloth, and, if they were too bad, the threads were removed and new ones sewn back in. This was painstaking work and few people could do it well. The roll of cloth then went down a chute to be washed in a big vat and dried by steam. It was then put through a napper, which made it soft and pliable. The last process was pressing on a big mangle. Then the cloth was wrapped in paper and was ready to be shipped.

When I first worked at the mill in the 50's, they were making Civil Defense blankets and California prison blankets. The last five years we were mostly making yard goods, a lot of plaids along with solid colors. Most of the cloth was made on order from manufacturers. In the early 50's, the mill had its own store and sold woolen jackets, pants and shirts. The woolen industry in the 60's was really in trouble from foreign imports.

In 1969 the mill closed its doors forever, ending the manufacturing era in North Montpelier. The people who worked there drifted out of town, leaving the village a shell of what it used to be. One of the buildings has been torn down, while the other is slowly giving in to time and elements.

(Editor's note: since this was written, all the buildings have been removed except the powerhouse)