

REVIEW ESSAY

Nineteenth-century Industrializing Maine: The Way Life Really Was (review of Paul E. Rivard, *Made in Maine: From Home and Workshop to Mill and Factory*. [Charleston, SC: History Press, 2007. Paper. \$21.99.])

BY HOWARD P. SEGAL

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PAUL RIVARD is a well-known and highly respected historian and museum director. From 1977 until 1991 he directed the Maine State Museum (MSM) in Augusta and put it on the map, so to speak, as a major New England museum—and the region's only state museum. Rivard's efforts were hurt, but not stopped, by budget cuts that eventually removed one-third of his staff.¹ Rivard's largest and most impressive MSM project, "Made in Maine," opened in 1985 and remains intact as the institution's foremost exhibit. As I learned years ago from bringing several University of Maine classes to the MSM, those who visited as schoolchildren after its 1971 opening now barely recognized the place, given this exhibit and other changes under Rivard's direction.²

"Made in Maine" is about nineteenth-century manufacturing in a state usually associated with forests, potatoes, seacoasts, and tourists. The exhibit provocatively challenges the conventional wisdom about what Maine was like in the years slightly before and mostly after statehood in 1820. Not only does the exhibit explode romantic and simplistic stereotypes of the "good old days," but, more deeply, it also constitutes a

superb case study of the so-called “Invention of Tradition,” as illuminated in the book by that title edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Any visitor to the state notices the blue-and-white signs at various entry points welcoming all to “Maine: The Way Life Should Be.” Tourist promotions like these project an image of Maine that hardly resembles the way most Mainers live, or ever lived. Why so much of the rest of Maine is left out of the picture is easy to explain in terms of attracting visitors seeking escape from their own fast-paced, urbanized, industrialized, and anxiety-ridden daily existence. But there is a price paid for ignoring reality.

Rivard understands not just artifacts themselves but also the need to place them in historical context. Artifacts do not speak for themselves. As he put it in a modest but enormously useful visitor’s guide to the exhibit, “Maine in Maine” was designed to illustrate “social integration in a complex nineteenth-century story about technology, work, and urban life.”³ “Made in Maine” consists of displays illuminating four work environments: home, shop, mill and furnace, and factory. These vague, if not outdated, categories derive from Victor Clark’s classic *History of Manufactures in the United States* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution/McGraw-Hill, 1929). Most visitors ignore the categories and concentrate on the discrete displays themselves.⁴

Rivard’s book complements the exhibit but is separate from it. Extremely sensitive to visitor responses, Rivard knew that too much information would turn off most museum visitors. He therefore resolved to compile his research into a book, and he worked on this for several years. In the course of moving from Maine, however, he lost his manuscript and, in the absence of a duplicate, gave up the project until 2003, when he learned that Neil Rolde, author of several fine books on Maine history, had a copy. Rivard could at last complete his book.

The book adopts the four categories used in the exhibit. Rivard concedes that, as with the exhibit, these categories oversimplify the huge number of examples he studied, yet they remain the most practical means of organizing those examples. This approach hardly means a lack of appreciation for Maine’s hugely diverse and complex economy: far from it. Rivard notes that “all levels of manufacturing”—large and small—coexisted in Maine. Yet “regardless of how they might have started out, most manufactures ended up as factories” (p. 9) of some kind, despite the fact that, as with shoemakers, many employees had already worked at home or had done custom jobs on an irregular basis.

To his credit, Rivard refuses to make easy generalizations when he knows there are exceptions. His approach sometimes makes for slower

reading, and those who think that *Made in Maine* is intended for casual browsing will be dismayed. But the book is worth the extra effort.

To take an example, Rivard notes that sailing, shipbuilding, and related activities *did* create thousands of jobs, thereby prompting one to ask whether the stereotype of Mainers as seafarers and lobstermen was in fact true. Rivard writes that in 1850 Maine employed “over 3,000 sawyers and over 2,200 ship carpenters, as compared to a total of only 178 in Vermont and 156 in New Hampshire” (p. 13). To be sure, the sheer size of Maine’s coastline and its accessibility would account for those differences, but notwithstanding that, Rivard goes on to say that even these workers and their families “probably shared baked beans more often than lobster bisque” (p. 13). Like farmers, these shipbuilders and sailors had very hard lives, contrary to romanticized stereotypes. No less important, they were eventually outnumbered by workers in homes, shops, mills, furnaces, and factories. Thanks to Maine’s abundant water-power, mills in the nineteenth century became the state’s leading “industrial concern.” (p. 83.) Rivard thus illuminates the complexity of the situation in the process of reinforcing his basic point about the neglected number and role of those ordinary workers. Recognizing complexity is the mark of a first-rate historian.

Another example is the branding of products, which gradually became a critical marketing tool, but only when there were enough different manufacturers to matter. The prevailing assumption for Maine, as presumably for other states, would be that branding was fairly universal. I recall reading this generalization about the entire United States long ago in David Potter’s pioneering *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954) and repeating it to many students. But Rivard’s research provides interesting exceptions for Maine. If, on the one hand, branding was initially “infrequent” because most manufacturers were not “bold enough to be individualistic,” on the other hand, a few “makers” exploited “prominent names or countries of origin.” Eager to capitalize on English or French items, they provided tags which falsely claimed that those items had been made abroad and so warranted much higher prices. Rivard finds an example of this—for New Hampshire quality linens—as early as the 1720s. Branding did become more common in mid-nineteenth-century Maine, and in products ranging from carding and sewing machines to spinning wheels, and from looms to plows and sleighs. Yet branding remained “unequal” (p. 15).

A further example of this complexity is the role of work sites inside

homes and factories. Rivard reminds us that through the late nineteenth century, the home was as frequently the focus of work as an escape from it. The image of the home in more urbanized areas as a literal sanctuary from the competitive, crowded, crime-ridden outside world—the very world that rising industrialists and financiers were creating—did not take root as much in less urbanized Maine. Some family members worked at home, but others worked outside it. Often extended families worked at the home of someone else in the family, while unrelated hired hands did so at either the same or another home.

Textile production was the principal work in the home and was frequently called “domestic manufacture” (p. 27). Moreover, homemade products did not quickly disappear when factories appeared. Home-based “labor-intensive piecework” (p. 16) continued despite the common absence of specialized talents and tools. True, what tools there were in the home were usually “tolerated intrusions” (p. 20), but the transition from home-made to factory-made textiles was slow and, once again, complex. Inside the home “the world of machinery was redefined continuously to form an ever-changing jigsaw of supporting parts” (p. 27).

Rivard notes that home-based hand spinning and weaving may have survived for so long because they were designated as women’s work, and these women generally stayed home to attend to their numerous (other) domestic chores. The sewing machine was by far the most significant home machine. By 1860, nine years after Isaac Singer had patented the first “practical” (p. 49) one, home-based sewing machines were being manufactured in such large numbers in Maine that they nearly equaled all textile machines being produced for factories. While the sewing machine increased productivity, it did not lessen the labor required.

Moreover, Rivard rightly distinguishes between this often “boring drudgery” (p. 38) done in poorer families with the creative work enjoyed by more affluent women—and often wrongly confused with commercial sewing: needlework, quilting, and rug hooking (p. 38). Ironically, “no sooner had spinning and weaving ceased to be common needs of communities” than the work itself “became a romantic memory of simpler times.” The drudgery was forgotten, papered over by false nostalgia “for a past that had never really existed” (p. 50). Once again, Rivard corrects historical misinterpretation that has been passed on to students and the general public.

Going further, Rivard qualifies the common assumption that sewing machines in particular transformed the operation of physically decen-

tralized “local workshops into centralized factories” and “artisans into machine operatives” (p. 77). When Mainers made bonnets, hats, clothes, and shoes, their workshops nevertheless retained the “look and feel” of traditional work sites (pp. 77, 79).

Mills and furnaces played a limited role in the production of consumer goods. Again, Rivard rejects the conventional wisdom. Mills and furnaces did not interfere with artisan trades or “compete with domestic goods.” Gristmills, for instance, made cornmeal, not bread, and sawmills never competed with cabinetmakers, despite transforming the work of hand sawyers. The mill and the furnace “assist[ed]” but did not “supplant” consumer-goods manufacturers (p. 83).

Innovation also contributed to the persistence of domestic textile production. Rivard found a Westbrook shopkeeper, for instance, who “cut paper patterns and sent them out to be pasted into bags in households” (p. 17). Once again, the process was uneven and is not reducible to easy generalizations.⁵

Yet another example of this complexity is the case of farmers, increasingly few of whom could maintain self-sufficiency without working in shops, mills, and, yes, factories. So much for the romanticized full-time farmer. Lest one fall into the trap of picturing these “farmer-artisans” as enjoying the best of both worlds—as happy practitioners of “Yankee ingenuity”—Rivard notes that most of them helped to produce distinctly unromantic “shingles, clapboards, and barrel staves” (p. 20). Furthermore, farmers and craftsmen and craftswomen might have been rural, but they were “rarely isolated” (p. 16). Thanks to Maine’s proximity to both the ocean and rivers, commerce and information about the outside world were far more available than might be suspected. The assumption that Mainers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had to rely on the equivalent of Sears mail order catalogues that later proved so vital to Midwestern and Western pioneers does not hold up.

After all of these deviations along the path from home, workshop, and mill, we do finally come to the factory. Even here, however, matters are never so clear. The very definition of “factory” changed. In the eighteenth century—and, I would add, through the mid-nineteenth century—“manufactory” was the term used to categorize “an enterprise making goods by hand.” After the mid-nineteenth century, by contrast, “factory” was increasingly used instead and now meant the opposite: “an enterprise dominated by machinery” (p. 115). This is not an original point, and Rivard does not claim it to be. Analogously, the original “computers” were men and women who used blueprints, sliderules, and, some-

times, early calculators. Only in World War II, with the development of non-human “computers,” did the definition change.

Many manufactories retained the original names of mills and shops assigned them before they grew into the large-scale, centralized, and specialized enterprises that Rivard terms genuine factories. Examples can be found among the four products that dominated the Maine industrial landscape: cotton and woolen mills and machine and shoe shops. Textile factories came to Maine largely because of abundant waterpower. By contrast, shoe manufacturing was generated by comparatively inexpensive labor.

Although both linen and wool preceded cotton manufacture in Maine, only the last gave rise to factory production. Here Saco/Biddeford took the lead. Originally a town of fishermen and lumbermen, in the 1820s and 1830s it became the state’s first manufacturing city. Brick factories, offices, and boardinghouses transformed the landscape. Cotton production was “regimented, standardized, and mechanical before it was actually mechanized” (p. 116)—still another instance of complex development that Rivard illuminates. Rural Lewiston eventually superseded Saco/Biddeford with cotton factories that ranked among New England’s biggest and most modern. By contrast, Maine’s woolen mills remained small and home-based. Modest-sized Dexter and Sanford were the state’s sole woolen cities—contrary to the general pattern elsewhere in America of ever larger and more centralized growth. Still, Maine’s woolen industry was not “inconsequential” in terms of quantity and quality (p. 128).

Early in his book Rivard provides a particularly telling example of the persistent and widespread ignorance about the way life really was for most Mainers. Few contemporary visitors to lovely mid-coast Camden—with its beautiful harbor, picturesque boats, appealing restaurants and gift shops, and renovated white clapboard homes—notice, much less inquire about, the nearby Knox Woolen Mills, the last of which closed in 1988. True, Camden was a shipbuilding town before it became a textile town, but the mills—for decades the town’s largest employer—were heavily responsible for Camden’s growth. If, as Rivard laments, “analysis of Maine’s nineteenth-century industrial manufactures can be hopelessly complicated” (p. 139), *Made in Maine*, like the Maine State Museum exhibit that generated it, goes a long way toward addressing that lamentation.

NOTES

1. After leaving the Maine State Museum Paul Rivard became Director of the American Textile History Museum in Lowell, Massachusetts, from 1991 until 1999. For the next two years he served as the Museum's Curator of Technology.
2. See Howard P. Segal, "On Technological Museums: A Professor's Perspective," in Segal, *Future Imperfect: The Mixed Blessings of Technology in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), ch. 6.
3. Rivard, *Made in Maine: An Historical Overview* (Augusta: Maine State Museum, 1985), iii. As I noted in my essay cited above (p. 71), several students ironically felt that this story was inadequately told. Only in the final pages of text, 145, 148-149, of Rivard's new book does he discuss "Social Changes."
4. For specifics, see Rivard, *Made in Maine*, p. 64. Changes in the exhibit since the opening include the addition of sections on "Maine Patents and Inventions" and on "Maine Earthenware and Stoneware." Another addition has been a horizontal steam engine made in 1878 by the Portland Company that has an eight-foot flywheel and a cast-iron boiler front. Some artifacts have been replaced by others, like a 1904-1905 gasoline powered car in place of a steam powered car.
5. For a revisionist analysis of the English Industrial Revolution with some parallels to Rivard's complex story, see Maxine Berg, *The Age of Manufactures: Industry, Innovation, and Work in Britain, 1700-1820* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).