

What I Learned Working in the Leather Mills

by William A. Warner, guest author

The mill worker theme in the [most recent issue](#) of American Ancestors magazine sparked quite a bit of interest. NEHGS member William Warner of Thompson, Connecticut, submitted the following reflection on his work in two leather mills in Peabody, Massachusetts. — Editor.

I graduated from Lynn [Mass.] Vocational Technical High School in 1973, just as the recession hit. Finding a job in my field of electronics was very difficult. Many of my relatives worked for General Electric in Lynn or the leather mills in Peabody. When I couldn't find a job, I looked to the employers of my relatives. After filling out more job applications than I care to remember, I finally got a call from A.C. Lawrence Leathers, where my grandmother worked. They had an opening at their Pulaski Street plant where they manufactured patent leather.

My job at the mill was to fill in wherever a body was needed. The workers that stretched the leather hides onto the frames worked in teams of two or four, and it was difficult work. If there was an odd number of workers, then I would be called, otherwise I would supply the required hides to the stretchers. Once enough hides were stretched, they would start up the "Daub" machine, which added the colored finish. A team of two workers loaded the frames onto the conveyor while I wiped the leather down with tacky cheesecloth on the end of a pole to remove any dirt on the leather before it was coated.

The extraordinary amount of teamwork in a physically challenging environment is especially amazing when you consider that most of my coworkers were first generation immigrants. They were from Italy, Greece, Turkey, Portugal, the Dominican Republic, and many other countries. They were here for a better future, and all they wanted was a chance to work hard and earn enough to support their families. Quite a few of them could not speak English and a lot of communication was done via sign language.

One of my coworkers, Kari, was from Turkey. He immigrated with his mother, wife, and two daughters. I would visit his house after work and help his mother study for the citizenship test. It was her dream to become an American citizen. Her granddaughters and I would also help her practice her English. One of the first American traditions they embraced was Thanksgiving. I still remember having Thanksgiving at their home, with turkey and all the fixings, and their gratitude at being in America.

After about a year, A.C. Lawrence Leathers closed their patent leather business. I was fortunate to be transferred to their Webster Street plant where various kinds of leather were manufactured. It also gave me a chance to work with my grandmother, who had been there for over twenty-five years. Even though I was 6' 2", I became "Fran's little grandson." At this facility, most of my coworkers were again first and second generation immigrants, with the notable exception of my grandmother, an eighth generation immigrant — a direct descendant of Pilgrim Henry Sampson.

My job at this mill was also to fill in where I was needed. One week I would be on first shift, the next week on third shift. I also worked in almost every department, from finishing coat leather to embossing leather so it resembled alligator hide. In most assignments I was part of a team, and as with the Pulaski Street plant, there was considerable teamwork. I even had the opportunity to operate the same machinery as my grandmother; she steam-pressed the leather, not an easy job. But then, most jobs at the mill were not easy; it was hard work in difficult conditions and no one complained.

I worked there until the recession finally claimed A.C. Lawrence Leathers as one of its victims. My grandmother retired, and I went into electronics. My time at A.C. Lawrence Leathers was much more than just a job to pay the bills — I learned the value of hard work and also got to know my grandmother better. Most importantly, I learned to appreciate America, from the perspective of my coworkers who worked hard, without complaint, for the privilege of being here.

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