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The Evolution of the Marshall Street Mill Complex in North Adams¹

Robert Paul Gabrielsky

An examination of the transformation of the work process in industrial communities during the period from 1920 to 1980 draws attention to the notion of the so-called "Massachusetts miracle," which holds that the Massachusetts economy is adapting well to plant closings in its traditional industries. Critics and adversaries of that point of view, such as Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, point to the development of an hourglass economy and the loss of many well-paying industrial jobs, with no equivalent alternatives in the service sector as a consequence of "deindustrialization."²

North Adams is especially well-suited to examine these contrasting views, as it is the home of a twenty-eight building, thirteen and one-half acre mill complex on Marshall Street which went through three major transformations in the period under consideration. First it served as the Arnold Print Works from the Civil War until 1942, which was for a time the largest textile dyeing facility in the world. From 1943 to 1985, it was a major manufacturing facility and later world headquarters of an electronics component firm, the Sprague Corporation, anticipating by several decades later developments in high tech employment in eastern Massachusetts. Most recently, the complex has been promoted as the potential home of the Massachusetts Museum of

1. This essay was written as part of the Shifting Gears project, a humanities project sponsored by the Massachusetts Foundation for Humanities and Public Policy, which placed scholars at six Heritage Parks throughout Massachusetts during 1988 and 1989 to study the issue of "the changing meaning of work" during the period from 1920 to 1980 in the industrial communities where the parks are located.

2. Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry (New York, 1982).

Contemporary Art, projected to be the largest museum of contemporary art in the world. This new venture is touted by its supporters as a great boon to the community, a project which will bring the town recognition, tourism, and new jobs. Thusfar, the museum is still in the planning stages, and its success, especially given the state's current budget crisis, remains problematic. This provides the opportunity to examine the changing utilization of the mill complex in its three different incarnations, as an industrial mill, a high tech plant, and finally, a post-high tech facility. It also affords an opportunity to examine the changing character of work as the function of a single work space changes, as well as the attitudes of working people about those changes.

North Adams is located in northern Berkshire County, a valley roughly five to eight miles east to west and fifteen miles north to south. This valley is bordered on the east by the Hoosac Range, on the west by the Taconic Range, and on the north by the Green Mountains. These low steep hills surround the region and serve to isolate the region; perhaps the best geographical metaphor is that of an island surrounded by mountains rather than water. The principal towns of the region are Adams, North Adams, and Williamstown.

North Adams was originally part of the town of Adams, which itself was first surveyed and laid out in 1749. By 1878 the town of Adams formed two distinct villages, and North Adams seceded to form an independent political entity. North Adams took full advantage of the water power supplied by the two branches of the Hoosac River to become a well-established manufacturing center by 1846, with cotton mills dominating industrial life and the boot and shoe industries beginning to appear. As early as 1819 various plans for canal building and railroad tunneling were advanced in an effort to overcome the region's commercial isolation. Gradually, railroad routes were built, yet it was not until 1875 that the Hoosac Tunnel was completed, which provided North Adams with a direct rail link to Boston.³

3. Storch Associates, in association with Michael Seif, Research Documentarian, Historic Documentation Report for Western Gateway Heritage State Park (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Department of Environmental Management, 1981), pp. 45-75, 128-132.

As elsewhere in America, North Adams' industrial growth was fueled by a labor force made up of ever-increasing waves of immigrants. The first sizable immigrant group was the Irish, who began to arrive in significant numbers in the 1830s. Then came the Welsh during the 1860s, in relatively small numbers. During the same decade, a French-Canadian community was established, and finally, towards the end of the century, came the Italians. By and large, relations between various immigrant groups were remarkably peaceful, due in part to the geography of the town in which steep hills set limits on neighborhood expansion and forced newcomers to settle in other, newly-developed parts of the city. By 1900, assimilation between the various ethnic groups was proceeding at a rapid pace, owing to the influence of schools, children who played together, and intermarriage.⁴

Given the industrial nature of the city, it is surprising that, with certain notable exceptions, such as the strikes at the Sampson Shoe Factory in the late 1860s and the Blackinton mills during the same period, labor relations in North Adams during the nineteenth century appear to have been unusually smooth.⁵ Meanwhile, the combined effects of orders stimulated by the Civil War, the completion of a rail link between North Adams and Troy, New York, and the acceleration of work on the Hoosac Tunnel produced a boom period for the region that lasted roughly from 1860 to 1900. The population of North Adams grew steadily in this period, until it peaked in 1900 at 24,200. In many respects, by 1920 North Adams was already a declining mill town.⁶

The Marshall Street complex began in 1861, when Harvey and John Arnold first organized what became the predecessor of the Arnold Print Works. The Arnolds were entrepreneurs who had emigrated to North Adams from Natick, Rhode Island, in 1830,

4. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

5. Elizabeth A. Baker, "Blackinton, Massachusetts: A Case Study of Industrialization, 1856-1876," Thesis, Manhattanville College, Purchase, N.Y., April 18, 1980; Elizabeth A. Baker, "Blackinton: A Case Study of Industrialization," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, IX (January 1981): 15-26; Frederick Rudolph, "Chinamen in Yankeeedom: Anti-Unionism in Massachusetts in 1870," *American Historical Review* (October, 1947); *Storch Associates*, pp. 98-105.

6. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, United States Census of Population: 1900; *Storch Associates*, pp. 57-62.

getting in on the ground floor of the region's then burgeoning industrial growth. After successfully leasing a mill for the printing of calicos, the Arnolds purchased land on what is today Marshall Street, gradually developing the physical plant there until by 1883 the Marshall Street complex was the largest textile dyeing plant in the world. Throughout the late nineteenth century, the Arnolds increased their industrial holdings well beyond the Marshall Street facility, eventually acquiring a series of feeder mills. A major financial reversal in 1907, however, forced a retrenchment and the selling off of most of its holdings, other than the Marshall Street mill.⁷

In spite of such reversals, the Arnold Works operated in North Adams through the 1930s, even during the depths of the Great Depression, and many North Adams residents agree with Anthony Talarico's assessment. Talarico worked as a machine tender in the finishing room of the Arnold Works during his youth in the early 1930s, and he holds that North Adams was saved from the worst aspects of the Depression because the Arnold Print Works operated there throughout the period.⁸ Nevertheless, the Arnold Print Works was eventually forced to file for bankruptcy in 1935. It was able to reorganize, however, and by 1941 it was again paying dividends on its stock. By then most of the cotton looms in the nation were being kept busy with government contracts, as the American economy went increasingly on a war footing. However, with no supplies of cloth available for what was deemed "luxury" textile printing, and unable to attract a government contract, the Arnold Print Works liquidated its North Adams facilities in 1942.⁹

It was at this point that the mill on Marshall Street entered a new phase, this time as part of the Sprague operation, an electronics parts manufacturer founded by R. C. Sprague, who had come to North Adams in 1930, having been invited by a group of

7. Arnold L. Bossi, "The Traditions and Spirit of the Arnold Print Works," The Arnold Print (January 1919), in Special Collection, North Adams Public Library; "Arnold Print Directors to Propose Liquidation; Cloth Supplies Cut Off," North Adams Transcript, March 3, 1942, p. 3.

8. Oral history interview with Anthony R. Talarico, February 6, 1989.

9. "Arnold Print Directors to Propose Liquidation," North Adams Transcript, March 3, 1942, p. 3.

North Adams businessmen to relocate there from Quincy. One by one, Sprague took over mills in North Adams from dying textile firms, first at Beaver Street in 1930, then at Brown Street in 1937. As defense production increased in the pre-war years, Sprague obtained a major government contract for the production of gas masks. According to Mark Markarian, a chemist who worked first at Marshall Street for the Arnold Print Works, and later for Sprague, by the time the United States entered World War II, Sprague's earlier plants at Beaver Street and Brown Street were working at capacity, and in 1942 Sprague took over abandoned mill space on Union Street, for storage. Finally, in 1943 Sprague acquired the Marshall Street complex from the defunct Arnold Print Works, initially for gas mask production.¹⁰

From the post-war period through the 1950s, industry and commerce in North Adams faced particularly difficult times. Between 1947 and 1957, eight industrial plants closed in the region, resulting in the loss of 3,150 jobs. In the process the Sprague Corporation became the largest single employer in North Adams. Powered by Korean War military orders, an expanding aerospace market, and the developing electronics industry, it displaced the textile mills and shoe factories which had dominated the region's industrial base.¹¹

By 1966, Sprague's work force in North Adams numbered 4,137, half of all manufacturing jobs and one-third of all jobs in northern Berkshire County at the time. Thus, in that period, virtually everyone in North Adams either worked for Sprague or had a friend or relative who did. Sprague then launched a vast array of social services for its employees and the community, much like the "welfare capitalism" practiced by General Electric and other "enlightened" employers in earlier decades, providing an

10. North Adams Transcript, October 3, 1929, February 4, 1937, July 12, 1940, April 13, 1942, February 12 and April 3, 1943; oral history interview with Mark Markarian, April 24, 1989.

11. Maynard Seider, "Northern Berkshire Labor and the Current Industrial Crisis," unpublished manuscript presented at the Berkshire forum, Stephentown, New York, 1985, p. 11; Storch Associates, p. 80.

astonishing range of services both for its employees and for the community of North Adams from the 1930s until the 1970s.¹²

One of the earliest services which Sprague provided for its employees was an in-plant closed-circuit broadcast station. Employees were provided with music, news, sports scores, and company announcements while they worked. Like many other manufacturing corporations, Sprague had its own research library. It also organized its own vocational school. Eventually the company even maintained a fleet of small aircraft for executive use.

Sprague fostered a variety of off-the-job activities for its employees. These included professional societies for engineers, scientists, and managers; "clubs" for foremen and long-term employees; award ceremonies for years of service or for efficient work; an annual minstrel show; a local company-sponsored broadcast radio show, "The Sprague Log of the Air;" and a company-sponsored Civil Air Patrol unit. For a brief period during and after World War II, the Sprague Corporation sponsored a day-care center and a community symphony orchestra, which specialized in light classical music. It also lent space to its production employees' independent union during that same period, for a cooperative grocery store.¹³

Finally, as was typical of many other corporations, Sprague sponsored a wide variety of sporting activities for its employees. In addition to baseball teams and a bowling league, the corporation sponsored both men's and women's basketball, golf, and even a fishing tournament. Perhaps the most unusual sporting activity which the company sponsored was a gun club, complete with a shooting range on company premises. All the services, recreation, and sporting activities sponsored by Sprague were held together by the company newspaper, *The Sprague Log*. Established as a monthly in 1938, during the 1940s and 1950s the

12. Stuart D. Brandes, American Welfare Capitalism: 1880-1940, (Chicago, 1976); "The Rise and Decline of Welfare Capitalism," in David Brody, Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle (New York, 1980).

13. Oral history interview with William Stackpole, February 21, 1989.

Log was published twice a month and it was the corporation's major vehicle for communicating with its employees.¹⁴

Many former employees retained fond memories of the many services which Sprague provided for them, and saw most such activities as worker-inspired enterprises which were simply sponsored and fostered by the company. Even though nearly everyone acknowledged the paternalistic character of Sprague's top management, most agreed that the services and activities which Sprague employees enjoyed would have been impossible without the support of the company. Scholars have documented the development of autonomous ethnic cultures elsewhere in America, however, which were first undermined in the 1920s, initially by homogenizing middle-class interests and later by welfare capitalism. Then, in some communities dominated by powerful industrial unions, an independent working-class culture did emerge during the 1930s. In North Adams, there is some evidence that autonomous ethnic cultures did exist around the turn of the century, particularly among the Italians and French-Canadians.¹⁵ Thus, in spite of popular sympathy for the company's corporate welfarism, in all probability Sprague inhibited the development of a genuinely autonomous working-class culture in North Adams.

Many former employees have remarked that Sprague was "like a family," that there was a good deal of talking, fraternizing,

14. Nearly all Sprague workers have strong and positive memories of the clubs, award dinners, parties, sporting groups, and the *Log* itself. In some notable instances, such as the Sprague orchestra, employees had no recollection of particular activities, but they were all extensively reported in the *Log*.
15. On welfare capitalism, see the works by Brody and Brandes previously cited. Studies of autonomous ethnic cultures include most of the work of John Bodnar, especially *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900-1960* (Urbana, Illinois, 1982); Ewa Morawska, "For Bread and Butter: Life Worlds of Peasant Immigrants from East Central Europe," *Journal of Social History*, XVII (Spring 1984); David Hogan, "Education and the Making of the Chicago Working Class," *History of Education Quarterly*, XVIII (Fall, 1978). For North Adams, see Baker and Rudolph, previously cited; Janet E. Roberts, "A History of the French Canadians in North Adams," Honors Thesis, Williams College (April, 1975); *North Adams Old Home Week Souvenir Program* (1909); Richard Tavelli and John Hauck, "The Italians in North Adams," paper for Williams College, 1972. Also, a local resident, James Modena, provided the author with photographic evidence of Italian culture in North Adams at the turn of the century.

and camaraderie on the job.¹⁶ Without question, however, the memories of former Sprague employees are rather selective on this issue. A recent tour of the Brown Street plant, now operated by Commonwealth Sprague, revealed that many of the capacitor rolling machines originally used by Sprague are still in operation. It is difficult to be heard above the din of such machinery, without shouting. Further, photographic evidence of Sprague production lines reveals row upon row of women in intense concentration on their repetitive tasks. In addition to the noise and the pressures of productivity, workers had only two ten minute breaks and a twenty minute lunch break during an eight-hour shift, hardly enough time for extensive fraternization. Finally, in the oral testimonies in which workers characterized their work experience as "like a family," quite often this was largely at the prompting of interviewers who thus quite literally put words in the mouths of the narrators.

Thus, the family metaphor appears extremely problematic. Family might have been taken to mean the kind of paternalistic overlordship practiced by Robert C. Sprague and other welfare Capitalists,¹⁷ or it might have meant the kind of simple solidarity expressed when unions refer to their members as brothers or sisters. It might also have meant the rich culture developed among those "families on-the-job," primary (informal) work groups, that is that group of ten to twenty-five fellow workers in daily immediate contact with each other. This type of group was small enough to be coherent and accessible, yet large enough to have developed its own organic leadership. The management of nearly all work places fosters the imagery of the work place as a family, but Sprague workers and other industrial workers seem to use it in both ways, often simultaneously: for them it was the paternalism of R. C. Sprague as well as their primary work group.

Clearly, the Sprague Corporation used its vast array of social services, as did earlier welfare capitalists, as the undeclared central

16. This formulation was the central thesis of my predecessor's work on the North Adams project. Stewart Burns, "Like a Family': Women Workers at Sprague Electric, 1930-1980," unpublished report for Shifting Gears, a project of the Massachusetts Foundation for Humanities and Public Policy.

17. Oral history interview with Robert Diodati, former union leader at Sprague and later Industrial Relations Manager there, February 23, 1989.

feature of its labor relations policy. Most of the social services provided were in fact administered though the company's Industrial Relations Department. Several of the subjects interviewed during the course of the project held leadership positions in Sprague's Industrial Relations Department and attested to the central role which administering Sprague's social services played in their daily activities.¹⁸ Sprague's paternalism included such personal touches as R. C. Sprague himself making an annual tour of the North Adams plants and greeting many of the older production workers on a first name basis (a thrilling ritual recounted with great pride by those on the receiving end). Clearly, such ritual friendliness did frequently alleviate or blunt much industrial conflict at Sprague, and the gratitude for such friendliness often went to rather extreme lengths, as when returning strikers used old cardboard coffee cups stuck in the plant's chain-link fence to spell out "Thanks RC."¹⁹ Nevertheless, while in comparison to many other corporations, labor relations were for the most part smooth and uneventful at Sprague, there was a darker side to all this familial good fellowship. There were, for example, several major strikes in the company's history, including stoppages in 1941 and 1945, and the largest walk-out in Sprague's history, in 1970.

From the late 1930s, Sprague workers in North Adams had union representation. While Sprague workers were clearly caught up in the pro-union sentiment which swept through American industry in the mid-1930s, for a variety of reasons they chose not to affiliate with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which was the dominant expression of that sentiment. Instead they opted to form independent, unaffiliated unions. The history of unionism at Sprague has been documented by Raymond Bliss, in a 1976 honors thesis at Williams College.²⁰

18. Oral history interviews with Gabriella M. Bond, February 27, 1989, Robert Diodati, February 23, 1989, Marion Manion, May 23, 1988, and Walter Wood, June 9, 1988 and March 7, 1989.

19. North Adams Transcript file photograph.

20. Raymond C. Bliss, "A Study of Union History at the Sprague Electric Company in North Adams, Massachusetts, 1929-1970," unpublished honors thesis, Williams College, Williamstown, Mass., 1976.

Union representation at Sprague apparently began after a strike in 1936. At that time, Sprague employees organized the Independent Condenser Workers Union, Local #1. Sometime between 1937 and 1941, it changed from Local #1 to Local #2. There is little memory and virtually no documentation of the history of Independent Condenser Workers Union Local #1, or the reason for the name change. William Stackpole, longtime grievance chairman of Independent Condenser Workers Union Local #2, speculated in a 1975 interview that the change may have either been organizational or perhaps due to a challenge from a CIO affiliate.²¹ Mabel Lewitt was instrumental in organizing Independent Condenser Workers Union Local #1, and remembers what working conditions were like in 1934 when she first went to work for Sprague, and the union's effect on them:

That was a bad time. This is before we had a union. I helped form the union. When we first came in we couldn't get work. I had to walk two miles to work and I couldn't punch in until the work came down the line. Sometimes I wouldn't even work at all and they'd send me back home. Then, I would no more than get back home and they would send for me and I had to go back again. And I had to pay a girl three dollars a week [to take care of my children]. It ain't much but I was only getting \$9.80 a week. And the foremen's wives were working with them, their aunts, their uncles, their brothers, you name it. So we formed Independent Condenser Workers Union #1. The first thing we did was to stop foremen from having members of their family working for them any more. Next, we got four hours of guaranteed work if we reported to work, which was no more than right. And we got rid of "gravy" jobs. Work had to be divided equally, good and bad.²²

21. Ibid., p. 17.

22. Oral history interview with Mabel Lewitt, June 7, 1988.

From the 1940s, when more extensive documentation becomes available about union activity at Sprague, the Independent Condenser Workers Union Local #2 was already in place, and during the same period Sprague office workers formed the Independent Office Workers Union. After a strike in March of 1941, the Independent Condenser Workers Union won a one year agreement which included a five percent wage increase plus a cost of living adjustment, restored lunch-room privileges, seniority rights, and restoration of wages lost during the strike, all of which were originally demanded.

Allegations in the community that the Independent Condenser Workers Union was a company union formed to counter efforts to organize a CIO affiliate at Sprague are difficult to verify and probably owe their origin to the fact that the CIO union with which Sprague workers would most likely have affiliated during the 1940s was the United Electrical Workers, which withdrew from the CIO in 1949 amid charges of Communist domination. Leaders of the Independent Condenser Workers Union were well aware of the United Electrical Workers' reputation as a Communist-dominated union and were themselves staunch anti-Communists.²³

Yet, Sprague workers demonstrated a militancy typical of the times. For example, on September 15, 1941, the *North Adams Transcript* reported on what was apparently an unauthorized strike by production and maintenance workers:

the walk-out was not ordered by the union but was called independently of it after a delegation said to have included one representative of each department had presented the wage increase demand and received an unsatisfactory answer.²⁴

Then, in 1945, the Independent Condenser Workers Union led an extremely militant strike.²⁵ In addition, transcripts of meetings between the Grievance Board of the Independent

23. Oral history interview with William Stackpole, February 21, 1989.

24. *North Adams Transcript*, September 15, 1941, p. 3.

25. *Ibid.*, November 1, 28, and 29, 1945, December 10, 13, and 17, 1945.

Condenser Workers Union and Sprague management contain many heated debates.²⁶ And throughout the 1950s, the Independent Condenser Workers Union pursued a brand of unionism which bore a closer relationship to the early days of the CIO than to the business unionism toward which the CIO was then evolving — for example, the Independent Condenser Workers Union's general approach included one-year contracts, policing of the contract at the point of production, and seeking help from the National Labor Relations Board and state mediation services when deemed necessary.

The 1950s, however, was also a period when the Sprague Corporation expanded in all directions, while the institutional backbone of the Independent Condenser Workers Union remained a Grievance Board made up of six full-time production workers who found it increasingly difficult to effectively challenge what was becoming a truly multinational corporation, based exclusively on their own resources. Large international unions began to eat away at the Independent Condenser Workers Union's membership. In 1949, Sprague machinists broke away from the Independent Condenser Workers Union and affiliated with the International Association of Machinists, then an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor.²⁷

In 1966, Walter Wood was elected president of the Independent Condenser Workers Union. Previously the office of Independent Condenser Workers Union president had been functionally subordinate to that of the Grievance Board Chairman. Wood transformed the office of president and became a key player in guiding the membership of the Independent Condenser Workers Union toward affiliation with the International Union of Electrical Workers, the CIO union for electrical workers. Wood was not attracted to the International Union of Electrical Workers for reasons of its militancy. Rather, in his view what was needed was "modernization." With this in mind he set up an education

26. Independent Condenser Workers Union Recording Secretary Laddie Meranti, who was trained in stenography but who had no model for keeping edited minutes, kept and maintained meticulous verbatim minutes of all meetings she attended. As a result, with little editing, these records could form the basis of a compelling play script on labor relations.

27. North Adams Transcript, July 26, 1949, p. 3.

committee in the union, and sought the assistance of the University of Massachusetts Labor Center to institute labor education programs for Independent Condenser Workers Union members and representatives on labor relations, grievances, automation, union administration, and labor law.²⁸ In a letter to Joseph Cass, then assistant director of the University of Massachusetts Labor Relations and Research Center, Wood wrote:

We [the education committee] feel that initially this [general labor education program] would be the most beneficial and informative type of program for our group. This type of program, we feel, is our most pressing need, due to our lack of any formal educational program in the past few years, and the resultant lack of interest and labor activity in the area, which has resulted in our falling behind the progressive gains that other unions have been making, due to their awareness and effective use of modern techniques of Union Labor relations.²⁹

A short time later, Wood argued that Sprague had "a staff of specialists," which was "necessary in today's business world to insure a specialized service." While the union was at a disadvantage because "It's pretty hard to expect a group of men who are working all day to go in with these people and face them on such jobs as job evaluation, time study, etc., in which these are the fields we don't have the training."³⁰ Wood simultaneously attempted to wrest control of the union from the Grievance Committee, which then dominated the union. In the summer of 1966, for health reasons, William Stackpole had to step down as the chairman of the Grievance Committee, eventually leaving the Board altogether, thus ending a twenty year reign during which he

28. Minutes, Independent Condenser Workers Union membership meeting, April 19, 1966.

29. Walter Wood to Joseph Cass, April 21, 1966.

30. Independent Condenser Workers Union membership meeting, November 15, 1966.

had been the union's chief spokesman.³¹ Meanwhile, Wood had joined forces with those in the union who sought affiliation with the International Union of Electrical Workers, and with Stackpole out of the picture, according to Wood, "the membership really started snowballing down the hill toward the IUE [International Union of Electrical Workers]."³² And after narrowly winning a representation election, the International Union of Electrical Workers signed its first contract with Sprague in 1967. While Sprague employees were initially encouraged to affiliate with the AFL-CIO in an effort to modernize labor relations with a healthy, growing company, in short order union efforts took a different turn — to save jobs in an apparently dying company. While employment at Sprague peaked in 1966 at over four thousand, by 1970 it was down to less than seventy-five percent of that figure. According to Wood, this downturn was due in part to off-shore competition and in part because of company efforts to transfer work to its other, non-unionized facilities. Finally, the company made an effort to organize a "work factor" scheme in North Adams, in an effort to completely re-evaluate the previous job-rate system and to reorganize the work process there.

A few months earlier, the International Union of Electrical Workers, in alliance with several other unions, successfully challenged "Boulwarism" at General Electric. This strategy, named for the industrial relations chief at General Electric, who first developed it, was based on the company making a single offer on a "take it or leave it" basis, and then standing pat. There was a major GE manufacturing facility a few miles away from North Adams, in Pittsfield, and the recent successful efforts of the International Union of Electrical Workers local there undoubtedly inspired the unions at Sprague. Thus, in an effort to counter outsourcing and the work-factor scheme, the three unions representing Sprague employees in North Adams struck the company on March 1, 1970. These included the American Federation of Technical Employees, representing white-collar workers, the International Association of Machinists, representing

31. Independent Condenser Workers Union Grievance Board Meeting, August 12, 1966; oral history interview with William Stackpole, February 21, 1989.

32. Oral history interview with Walter Wood, March 7, 1989.

the machinists, and the International Union of Electrical Workers, representing production employees.

The strike lasted for ten weeks, until May 8, and it was marked by considerable militancy and occasional violence. As a consequence of the strike, union members won an average six percent pay increase, cost of living adjustments, union security, and binding arbitration. Unfortunately, a national economic downturn in the 1970s and management decisions fostered continued lay-offs, so that many former Sprague employees derived little benefit from the new union agreement. The economic downturn began before the strike, and the strike itself was in many respects a response to that downturn rather than a cause of it. Ironically, many former Sprague employees, including some who were union activists, saw the strike as the primary factor in the decision of Sprague management to curtail its activities in North Adams. As for Sprague itself, people had feelings of considerable ambivalence. It is generally held that Sprague contributed much to the community, saving an otherwise dying industrial town, only to turn around and later "stab it in the back."

On January 24, 1984, Sprague management called a news conference at its Marshall Street offices, to announce that it was moving its corporate headquarters out of North Adams.³³ This decision marked the beginning of the end of an era for Sprague, and for the Marshall Street plant. In addition, over five hundred other industrial jobs were lost elsewhere in the area in 1984.³⁴ From 1979 to 1982, even before the 1984 crisis, manufacturing employment in north Berkshire fell by 1,100, while service jobs increased by 250.³⁵ And the better-paying service jobs were in units which were not expanding, such as at Williams College, the North Adams Regional Hospital, and North Adams State College.

In an effort to offset the unemployment crisis, Sprague's union of production workers, International Union of Electrical Workers Local #200, announced a union advertising campaign with the slogan: "We're a Massachusetts endangered species — An

33. Seider, "Northern Berkshire Labor and the Current Industrial Crisis," p. 14.

34. Berkshire Eagle, October 8, 1984.

35. Seider, "Northern Berkshire Labor and the Current Industrial Crisis," p. 20.

available work force."³⁶ The ad campaign achieved national attention, and was seen as an innovative effort by a labor union. Nevertheless, in 1985 Sprague terminated its operations on Marshall Street.³⁷ A year later, plans were announced to convert the twenty-eight building mill complex into the world's largest museum of contemporary art — the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.³⁸

Today, many North Adams residents are cautiously optimistic about the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, and about the economic benefits which that project will bring to the community. A few are openly hostile to the project, holding that it will bring far fewer jobs into the community than an alternative industrial plan might have done. Most, including many ardent supporters of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, are skeptical about the possibilities for its success. It should also be noted that in terms of a job-producing mechanism, officials of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art see their project as producing only sixty jobs in the old plant itself, which formerly employed over four thousand, and the most optimistic projections are for the creation of a mere six hundred jobs in services ancillary to the new museum.

This study focused on the changing utilization of building space at the Marshall Street complex between 1920 and the present. People who worked at Marshall Street for Arnold Print Works, Sprague, and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art were interviewed for the project. In several instances, respondents had worked for two of the three firms which occupied the complex in that period. Often, while those interviewed went to considerable lengths to describe social relations on the job and the various social services which the Sprague corporation provided, they discussed the work process itself with considerable reticence. Perhaps this is because, as essayist Harvey Swados once commented, factory work is essentially "mindless, endless, stupefying, sweaty, filthy, noisy,

36. Berkshire Eagle, October 8, 1984.

37. Advocate, March 23, 1988.

38. Jennifer Trainer, "Master Museum Maker," in Berkshire Week, July 10, 1987.

exhausting . . . insecure in its prospects and practically without hope of advancement."³⁹

The work process at Marshall Street changed from heavy industrial work to light, highly technical industrial work, and now, to the world of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, which at this point involves almost exclusively office and managerial skills. For each of the three periods involved, as the work became physically lighter and more intellectual in character, workers seemed more willing and able to discuss in detail the exact nature of their own work and what they did on a day-to-day basis.

Tony Talarico, who worked as a finishing tender at the Arnold Print Works in the 1930s, discussed the arduous character of the work there, which required the lifting and moving of large rolls of material.⁴⁰ His own job was straightening out the material as it was wound on giant rollers. A woman who worked as a pentagraph operator at the Arnold Works claimed to "thoroughly enjoy" her work there, but her description of it was rather terse. On the other hand, a woman who was a clerk in the open stock department at Arnold's was much more descriptive about her work.⁴¹

When Sprague first came to North Adams, the *North Adams Transcript* reported that "The operatives employed are mostly women and girls, who, without previous experience can, it is said, be trained to operate the special machinery used, in about a month's time."⁴²

This brief note highlights two features of work at Sprague: the importance of women in the corporation, and the tedium of the production process. From the beginning, women constituted a major part of the workforce at Sprague, and they held jobs not only in production and office work, but also in engineering and management. When World War II came, an even higher proportion of women took jobs at Sprague. Two thousand women were

39. Harvey Swados, "The Myth of the Happy Worker," *Nation*, August 17, 1957.

40. Oral history interview with Tony Talarico, February 6, 1989.

41. Berkshire County Historical Society Oral History Project.

42. *North Adams Transcript*, October 10, 1929, p. 1.

hired, as one-fifth of the male workforce left the company for the armed services. After the war, employment of women at Sprague remained high. Most respondents reported that morale was high during the war years, and the point of view of the *Sprague Log* in that period reflects such a perspective. On the other hand, this may involve some selective memory, since work was nine or ten hours a day, often a six day week, there was no overtime pay, and the *North Adams Transcript* reported occasional labor disputes in that period, particularly at the beginning and the end of the war.

When encouraged to do so, most respondents discussed in some detail the process of rolling capacitors, and some spoke with pride at being able to meet or exceed previously-set production quotas, though several narrators spoke of arrangements in which workers in certain departments disciplined each other to come in under the set production rate.⁴³ This constitutes one of the clearest pieces of evidence that primary work groups at Sprague were active in the restriction of output. Catherine O'Neill spoke with considerable frustration about the coordination and speed needed to roll capacitors. Though she did the work for some time, in a word, she "hated it."⁴⁴

While it may be argued that, especially since the 1950s, production workers have looked for meaning in work outside of the work process itself, in high wages and benefits, it is improbable that high wages contributed to fostering a meaningful work experience at Sprague, as it was universally agreed by former employees that Sprague was "never too generous" with wages. Virtually all the respondents felt that there was a crisis in the work ethic and that, themselves excepted, people are more lazy today than they were in the past. One former Sprague executive did observe that the pace of modern life made it difficult for modern workers to be as conscientious or as thorough as those in the past.⁴⁵ Two respondents, Ray Bass and Thurman Hulse, both college-educated hourly-rate employees who came of age in the 1960s, felt that there was no modern crisis in the work

43. Oral history interviews with Phyllis Blazewski, May 16, 1988, and Emma Gould, May 25, 1988.

44. Oral history interview with Catherine O'Neill, May 26, 1988.

45. Oral history interview with Wally Birk, April 4, 1989.

ethic. Bass argued that the work ethic was a matter of emotional maturity, and also of feeling trapped in a particular position with nowhere to go. Younger workers of all generations feel freer and less tied to their jobs, according to Bass.⁴⁶

Almost universally, when respondents were asked to recount the most amusing experience that ever happened to them at work, they described an incident concerning the embarrassment of or even physical danger to a foreman, supervisor, manager, or some other authority figure.⁴⁷ Bass, for example, remembered how a foreman slipped on scrap that Bass had inadvertently left on the floor.⁴⁸ Another respondent recalled when a supervisor was electrocuted. Some respondents were clearly embarrassed when such anecdotes were the first to come to mind when they were asked to recount a humorous incident, and often interviewers chose not to pursue the question, either to avoid embarrassing the respondent, or because such incidents did not seem particularly humorous to them either. This suggests that deep resentments exist toward work in hierarchical situations, which become tolerable when they are interpreted as humorous. This is perhaps the most important finding of the project in North Adams.

46. Oral history interview with Ray Bass, January 31, 1989.

47. The suggestion for asking this question was provided by Stan Weir, a lifelong trade unionist and radical, and publisher of Singlejack Books. Singlejack is dedicated to publishing works of fiction and nonfiction by working people about the world of work. The author would like to acknowledge that for the formulations about primary (informal) work groups, he is indebted to Stan Weir, with whom he had extensive conversations and correspondence, as well as to several unpublished and published articles by Weir.

48. Oral history interview with Ray Bass, January 31, 1989.