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The Silk Industry In Northampton

by Ronald Savoie

Although lightly regarded nationally as an industrial center, at one time Northampton was a center of the silk industry and the home of both Corticelle silk and Belding Brothers silk. The city identified itself with Corticelli, which was locally owned. Area residents justifiably promoted and supported the company and its familiar trademark-a kitten playing with a spool of thread Northamptonites were very protective of their feline, which had become one of

The other firm, Belding Brothers, was part of a national organization controlled by outside businessmen; it therefore did not command nearly as much respect and admiration as did the local company. Indeed, the "Robber Barous" were regarded as outsiders from the "big city," while the "Florence Group" supp posedly operated in the interest of the town of Northampton.²

Even though the two factories were viewed from different angles, they both contributed substantially to the social, physical, and economic growth of Northampton. One must understand that the town's industry was not limited to silk; but silk was by far its leading product.

In the mid 1830's, a wild speculative craze for mulberry trees swept across the Eastern states, as Americans attempted to weaken their dependency upon foreign silk products. Farsighted businessmen sought to inaugurate a program for domestic silk culture, rather than continue to be at the mercy of foreigners.

In September of 1835, an enthusiastic Samuel Whitmarsh, a prominent local businessman, purchased a ninety acre farm, a saw mill, an oil mill, and Florence's water privilege from Esquire Thompson for \$7,500. Soon after, he purchased an additional 300 fertile acres in Broughton's Meadow, Gaius Burt's 100 acre farm for \$6,000, and 95 acres from William Clark.³ Advertising throughout New England, he successfully solicited financial backers in New York, Boston, and Connecticut. The "get rich quick" scheme was in high gear as the future directors of the Northampton Silk Company applied for a corporate charter at the ensuing session of the legislature. The petition provided that the company would have "a capital adequate to an extensive prosecution of the business in all its branches."4

The silk fever, spurred by Whitmarsh's fervor, reached epid proportions very quickly. The governor of Massachusetts declared that "There is good mounds for the opinion that the manufacture of silk will become one of the predest interests in Massachusetts—silk will become the staple product of the muntry . . . second to no other branch of industry or source of wealth."⁵ The silk Fraze led to a state subsidy of one dollar "for every ten pounds weight of cocoons of silk", "one dollar for every pound of silk reeled and thrown from cocoons", "and fifty cents for every pound reeled without being thrown."⁶ The Greenfield Mercury stated that "one acre of mulberry trees would, in three or four years, vield an enormous profit."7

By May of 1836, the Northampton Company had acquired all the land between Park Street and the Mill River, plus fifteen acres in Ross Meadow. In essence, the entire hillside south of Pine Street was covered with mulberry trees.⁸ June brought a further increase in production as Whitmarsh bought both imported and domestic sewing machines for the manufacture of sewing silk. In the Iall, a Congressional Committee headed by Daniel Webster, a firm advocate of protection of American industry, visited the plantation and later returned to Washington with impressive specimens of plain and figured satin for the promoter of the American System, Henry Clay.⁹

By the Autumn of 1837 the silk estate encompassed the entire southern and western portions of Florence.¹⁰ The Hampshire Gazette adequately appraised the situation: "The company is manufacturing at the rate of \$200 worth per day, and yet cannot supply the demand."¹¹ In mid-1839, however, the bubble began to burst. Although the company claimed a capital of \$100,000, with liberty to extend to \$150,000, only \$60,000 had been subscribed.¹² A June meeting of the directors "determined . . . to raise immediately \$30,000 in addition to the large capital already invested in order to enlarge their sphere of operations."¹³ This expansion was poorly-timed however, as many New England farmers who had absolutely no knowledge of silk culture had recently converted their fields to mulberry orchards. Competition sent costs soaring as the price of trees rose from around thirty cents to one, two, or three dollars. Hothouses were hurriedly constructed to assist Mother Nature. But disaster soon appeared as prices dropped sharply because of the large mulberry surplus.¹⁴

A final blow to the Northampton establishment was the severe winter of 1839 which destroyed 95% of the mulberry trees. Being \$48,494.18 in debt, the firm was sold by the stockholders to the trustees in April 1841, for \$22,250,15 a considerable loss from the original investment of \$100,000.¹⁶ The area's silk culture was doomed, but silk production had only begun.

Op Ceptember 14, 1841, the establishment was again sold, the purchasers ing Northampton Association of Education and Industry, more commonly referred to as the Florence Cooperative. Having raised the necessary \$20,000, this western Massachusetts equivalent of Brook Farm decided to form a stock company "by obtaining a subscription of \$100,000 with shares to be sold for \$100 at 6% interest payable after four years."¹⁸ The *Hampshire Gazette* reported that "ordinary partnership rules are in effect except that they go farther and emproportion of the common stock—each has a particular department of labor and each shares in the profits according to the capital stock and labor which he furnishes. We understand that the plan works well thus far, and the association bids fair to flourish."¹⁹ Silk production it was believed, would help support the cooperative.

The future of the Association appeared bright as the New England Silk Convention met in Northampton in late September of 1842. The representatives resolved that as "the mulberry tree is found in the native forests, it is a manifest indication of Divine Providence, that this country, as well as China, was designed to be a great silk growing country." The delegates adopted a resolution that they rejoiced "in the liberal protection given to the silk business in the new tariff."²⁰ Finally, they petitioned the various state legislatures to enact or extend laws granting bounties on cocoons and reeled silk.²¹

However, by June of 1843 the company had realized a total silk profit of only \$105.82 for the previous six months.²² Although the cooperative had received a first prize for its silk products at the local Three County Fair, the award could not pay bills. Increasing debt and disillusionment pervaded the Association, and eventually forced its sale to Samuel L. Hill in early 1846. At that time only \$20,-000 of the original \$100,000 capitalization had been subscribed.²³

From 1846 to 1866, Northampton's future as a silk center was severely tested when Hill's plans for expansion were thwarted due to his brother's business failures. As endorser of his brother's notes, Hill was thus forced to re-evaluate his own situation and be content with a slower growth than originally planned.²⁴ Luckily he was able to entice Samuel Hinckley, a wealthy Northampton resident, into forming a partnership which eventually proved beneficial for both men. In 1866 these men, plus other local businessmen (the Florence Group) who had joined the firm of Hill and Hinckley in 1855, formed the Nonotuck Silk Company. Its capitalization was set at \$75,000.²⁵ Production centered on dental floss, surgeon's silk, filo silk, Roman and Persian floss, skein sewing silk, and spooled machine twist, a Nonotuck specialty designed for I.M. Singer.²⁶ The firm employed 137 operators in Florence, and another 87 in Leeds.²⁷ The amount of silk goods produced was approximately 250 pounds per week, and 5,000 pounds per year.²⁸ In 1876 Belding Brothers, the largest silk manufacturer i e world, established a plant on Hawley Street in Northampton. A low plant capacity had funced the closing of their Rockville, Connecticut plant, and prominent Northampton businessmen offered to pay the remaining \$15,000 on a \$25,000 mortgage, if the plant's new site would be in the city.²⁹ The agreement was signand, and now Northampton had two silk mills.

The financial status of both corporations was considerably better than one would anticipate. Nonotuck stock rose from \$62.50 in 1870 to \$75.00 per share in 1880, while suffering only a slight drop during the Panic of 1873.³⁰ In fact, between 1881 and 1893, stockholders were receiving from ten to twenty percent dividends on each share.³¹ By 1916 capitalization had increased to \$3,700,000 from \$75,000 in 1866 and \$1,000,000 in 1900.³² The value of silk products annually produced increased from \$303,000 in 1866, to \$1,100,000 in 1875, and then to \$4,250,000 in 1900.³³ Ira Dimock, the corporation's director, reported in 1901 that the plants were producing 6,000 pounds of silk each week and employing 750 workers.³⁴ By maintaining wholesale distribution outlets in America's eight largest cities, the Nonotuck Silk Company slowly achieved national prominence. The firm's accomplishments resulted in receipt of forty awards (an American record).³⁵

Belding Brothers' Northampton branch, the largest of five national plants, ³⁶ was capitalized at \$666,000 in 1886;³⁷ by 1916 the factory was valued at \$5,000,000.³⁸ In the late 1880's the company employed 525 workers, and produced 18,000 yards of silk and satin per month, 1500 dozens of 100 yard spooled thread per day, plus four times that amount of unspooled thread .³⁹ Sales were so outstanding that the factory converted from gas to electrical power. Previous

winter gas bills had been \$400 per month; an expected savings of 33% was anticipated by the switch.⁴⁰ By 1909, 750 operatives worked in the Hawley Street factory. "The constant enlargement of the world's market and the increasing demand for silk manufactured goods" indicated a profitable future for the firm.⁴¹ Silk was Northampton's main industry, as 1509 out of 2461 wage earners were employed by the two companies.⁴²

From 1919 to 1929, the city's silk companies remained relatively successful, although in general their national counterparts were struggling. Big business and national over-production caused by the formation of an additional 400 silk factories during the war years created considerable hardships.⁴³ Small local plants, low capacity factories of national concerns, and small national firms were forced to either close or consolidate with other establishments. The Nonotuck Company absorbed the Brainerd and Armstrong works, which led to a change in the firm's name—to Corticelli.⁴⁴ In 1926 Belding Brothers, whose main plant was no longer in Northampton, formed the Belding-Hemingway Company.

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Throughout the early to mid 1920s, Corticelli prospered. Its products we feat the a large hosiery display at an international silk show in New You when tope Hampton and Martha Mansfield, movie stars, modeled Corticelli material.⁴⁵ "So dense were the throngs at the display that passing through the aisles surrounding the Corticelli booths was almost an impossibility."⁴⁶ In 1926 the American Institute of New York presented the concern with an award of fellowship for continued improvements in its field.⁴⁷

The success of the local silk industries allowed the owners to share their successes with their employees. Wages were substantial for their day. In 1880, silk dyers at Nonotuck ranged for \$7.50 to \$9.00 per week, weavers ranged from \$6.00 to \$7.50, while women averaged about \$5.50. In 1890 dyers were in the vicinity of \$12, weavers \$10, and women \$7.50.⁴⁸ By 1920 dyers fluctuated between \$25 and \$45, and weavers averaged about \$30., and women made between \$20. and \$24.⁴⁹

In 1886 Belding's employed 525 workers and paid approximately \$12,000 in wages each month. Novices received \$3 per week, some eventually reached \$10, while most of the women were paid between \$5 and \$7. "Any employee who is hard-up, and needs money before pay-day always gets it; as much as \$15 is advanced some months to needy hands."⁵⁰ Figures on later salaries for both men and women were not obtainable, but they averaged \$2 and \$4 higher than Corticelli's."⁵¹

Working for the local mills, especially the Nonotuck firm, was not solely induced by good wages; an individual's pride in his work, in his employer, and in himself also contributed. The opportunity provided him with a sense of dignity, as evidenced by Corticelli's quality material, with a fatherly friend, his employer; and with an honor by association with a nationally reputable establishment.⁵² His was not the impersonalization of the modern day factory system (this statement was much more valid in regards to Corticelli than to Belding's).⁵³ One is therefore not surprised by the following Corticelli report in regards to long-time employees.⁵⁴

Over 20 years - 34 Over 25 years - 22 Over 30 years - 34	Over 35 years - 25 Over 40 years - 10
In 1915, Belding's p Over 20 years - 187 Over 25 years - 97 Over 30 years - 59	oublished similar statistices. ³⁵ Over 35 years - 25 Over 40 years - 20

I articelli's management appreciated the employee's loyalty a. _____ievotion; ocs rationally these feelings were parternally reciprocated. "They are ladies and seattemen, everyone. The ladies are so fine that 30 of them were married in 20 months. They just picked up the men as they wanted them."⁵⁶ Whenever possible, the owners would attempt to alleviate some of the operatives' sufferings during difficult periods by finding them various odd jobs around town or in the faclarity, such as shoveling snow or cutting a lawn.⁵⁷

Helloving that a happy worker was a good worker, the corporation annually provided its employees with a field day at the Mt. Tom Mountain House. The first outing was held in September of 1902. The plants were shut down early in the day, as the workers were allowed a full hour for dinner. Ten trolley cars passed through Haydenville, Leeds, and Florence picking up en route 68, 257, and 553 workers respectively. In the last car the Second Regiment Band from Apringfield amused the picnickers as they travelled to Holyoke.⁵⁸

The establishment of a service department was another example of company appreciation for their employees. Its purpose was to settle grievances between the firm and its workers, "those problems which are not important enough to complain about, yet which mar the harmony of perfect labor agreement between them."³⁹ The corporation also constructed two club houses and a cafeteria, provided moving pictures, dances, and inclusive hospital service for emergencies and the general health of workers and their families.⁶⁰

Corticelli's last executive, Homer Bliss, besides being respected by his employees, evoked in them an unmatched sense of pride in their work. As one stockholder said, "these women came to work better dressed than my wife on Sunday."⁶¹ "He knew all the families, their problems, which ones needed a little help in their pay envelope, which families were trying to put a youngster through college, and which ones were lying down on the job, and not pulling their weight."⁶² On one occasion, he sent a special telegram to a pregnant employee, informing her that he was increasing her pay by \$2.00 per week.⁶³ Another time he fired a worker in clear, precise terms, for loafing and calling his foreman a liar.⁶⁴

Belding's, which was controlled by out-of-state businessmen, did not evoke similar worker enthusiasm. Although its financial reports were continually more impressive than Corticelli's, Florence workers attributed it to aggressiveness. To them, Belding's was a symbol of "Big Business," while Corticelli was more concerned with product quality and with the needs of its workers.⁶⁵ Ui), collective bargaining, and strikers were somewhat more successive than one would expect in a provincial community like Northampton. Of the four reported Belding strikes, two were successful. In April of 1895, the girls in the winding mill, followed by the spinners (70 men and women), struck for high wages. The firm had reduced wages by 10% in 1894, because of economic problems stemming from the Depression of 1893.⁶⁶ Seventy more winders (most ly girls) struck a few days later, claiming that it was impossible to earn more than \$5.00 a week.⁶⁷ A 5% raise was granted, as the Knights of Labor assisted in the final settlement.⁶⁸

In July of 1921; 75 weavers went on strike "to enforce the rulings of their un ion, and also to establish a closed shop." Three employees had refused to pay union dues, resulting in a labor ultimatum to the management—unless workers were forced to comply with the directive, a walk-out would ensue.⁶⁹ By the end of the month 110 operatives were out of work. Violence erupted with egg-throwing and pipe-tossing incidents, as numerous cries of "scabs" filled the air when employees crossed the picket lines.⁷⁰ The final settlement terms were not publicized, but the plant remained an open-shop.⁷¹

In early April of 1923 a strike warning was issued by Leonard Frisina, local union leader for the Amalgamated Textile Workers of America. Criticizing the continuation of a 15% wage cut, he remarked about Belding's plant executive "He is all smiles and honey to you now, because you are organized—Don't let him fool you with promises of a heaven that was never yours."² A compromise proposal for a 12½% raise was soon accepted, and as a result of his efforts, Frisina became Western Massachusetts general organizer for the ATWA."

The longest strike in the history of Belding's Northampton plant began in late March of 1924. Disenchanted with the introduction of a three-loom system, a four-day week, and wage cuts, a general strike was scheduled for 10:00 a.m. on March 31. However at eight, all plant power was shut off by the owners—a lockout had begun. Attempting to weed out the "troublemakers," the managers announced that each striker who was interested in remaining employed must reapply individually, and not en masse.⁷⁴

Denouncing both strikes and lock-outs as public calamities, Mayor Edward Woodhouse offered to act as arbitrator, but his offer was rejected by the executive vice-president of Belding Brothers.⁷⁵ "It rests entirely with the workers themselves whether or not they are willing to accept the conditions and return to work. The terms and conditions under which the mill will be operated are not subject to compromise."76

The employees now appealed to their last resort—the public; intervention by the State Board of Conciliation and Arbitration, a Commissioner from the Department of Labor, and Mayor Woodhouse all had failed. Declaring that the sumpany had achieved a 100% dividend in 1922, and had acquired a \$3,000,000 profit, a striker declared: "Who decided that so much should go to the company as its share, to be divided among its few stockholders, while we several hundreds of workers in the factory probably did not receive wages equal to that amount in 15 or 20 years? We helped to earn that capital!"⁷⁷

On July 7, several weavers returned to work.⁷⁸ Obviously the workers were suffering from the extended lay-off. By late August the factory resumed full-time operations, but no mention was made of any settlement.⁷⁹

The Nonotuck Company's first strike occurred in January of 1902, when 125 spoolers left their jobs as the result of an announced extension of the 1901 wage out of 20%. The *Hampshire Gazette* resented the management's obstinacy, and felt that the strike could have been averted if the plant's officers had used their common sense. "No manufacturing firm in this nation has better help than the Nonotuck Company. Most of the girls look upon the officials as fathers and friends."⁸⁰ Not a citizen has been found, but who hopes the girls will be successful. For the interest of everyone, the company should settle this affair."⁸¹ An amicable agreement was soon reached however as President Ira Dimock proposed "a silk engine speed-up from 120 to 150 revolutions per minute."⁸² "The girls were successful, because their causes were just ones. . .Let everyone concerned profit from this affair."⁸³ The newspaper also added the belief that strikes should be the workers' last weapon, otherwise "the company would lose and the city would lose!"⁸⁴

Fifty men in both the filling and dressing departments of the Leeds mill went on strike in May of 1923. They demanded restoration of the piece-work rates which had been reduced the previous year by 20 to 25%,⁸⁵ and also the right to join the ATWA. Within a few days, the corporation treasurer, S.W. Lee, consented to both demands, but the pay hike would not be as substantial as requested.⁸⁶

Presently 90% of the factory's employees became members of the ATWA, whereupon they immediately issued notice that unless those workers earning less

than \$1 a week be given a 15% raise, and those earning more be given a 10% hike, the plant would go on strike.⁸⁷ By early June, workers in both Haydenville and Leeds had struck; over 400 operatives, mostly women, were affected.⁸⁸ Deploring the workers' spirit of distrust, S.W. Lee proposed a 10% wage increase which was rejected by the 31 member strike committee.⁸⁹ "We'll all go back together when wages are increased for everybody. We want no paltry increases for a few," stated Russell Palmer, General Secretary for the ATWA.⁹⁰ Again, as with one of the Belding strikes, the *Gazette* failed to report on a settlement.

But as the Depression approached, competition and the manufacture of celanese, cotton, and rayon fabrics forced Corticelli to curtail the production of its many silk products.⁹¹ Specialization was forced upon the firm, and it responded with excellent varieties of silk hosiery,⁹² insulation for electrical fix-tures, and fishing lines.⁹³ No one, however, anticipated the stock market crash of October 1929.

Soon after the "Crash," Corticelli restructured its organization. Both the executive and accounting offices were transfered to New York City.⁹⁴ The Leeds mill was sold to the Champlain Silk Company of New York; 400 workers were unemployed. To their credit, Corticelli's officials seriously attempted to provide work for the elderly and veteran employees of the Leeds plant.⁹⁵ In September of 1930, the Corticelli dye house in Florence was indefinitely closed; the New London branch would assume all future coloring responsibilities.⁹⁶

It was announced in June of 1932 that Belding-Hemingway had purchased the remaining Corticelli factories, and that "in all probability, the new owners will terminate all Northampton silk operations."⁹⁷ The corporation was sold "for \$32 in cash and 3/4 of a share of Belding-Hemingway stock for each share of preferred Corticelli stock, and 3/4 of a share for each share of its common stock." Corticelli had at the time 400 stockholders with \$1,500,000 of preferred stock and 50,000 shares of common stock outstanding. The new firm was capitalized at \$4,000,000 with common stock selling for \$50 per share.⁹⁸ The plants were expected to be reopened within six months; but they never were as Belding-Hemingway transfered all of Corticelli's equipment to a new plant in Putnam, Connecticut.⁹⁹

Area residents were stunned by the consolidation. An accountant in the firm's shipping and receiving department stated that to his knowledge, the company was financially sound.¹⁰⁰ No one seemed to know why the plants were sold, because the transaction has never been adequately explained. The company simply indicated that it was done "to improve still further the quality of the products we now sell through larger production," "to eliminate wastes in dis-

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(ribution caused by almost complete duplication of selling effortation, "to render better service to our customers, by having more adequate stocks, "id "to comhine the promotion of the two companies so that an even more effective job can be done."¹⁰¹ The Corticelli Silk Company was a victim of the economic difficulties that swept the nation in the early 1930's.

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- Interview with Austin King, Florence, Massachusetts, July, 1973.
- 3. Charles Sheffield, History of Florence, Massachusetts (Florence, 1895), p. 57.
- 4. Daily Hampshire Gazette, October 14, 1835, p. 3.
- 5. Ibid., January 20, 1836. p. 2.
- 6. *Ibid.*, May 4, 1836, p. 3 "Throwing" is the name for a series of strengthening and reinforcing processes which raw silk undergoes from the time it leaves the skein and spools until it is woven into one strong thread by a throwing frame.
 - "Reeling" describes the process whereby the thread ends of several cocoons are twisted together and wound on reels.
- 7. Ibid., July 22, 1835, p. 3.
- 8. Sheffield, History of Florence, p. 58.
- 9. Ibid., p. 59.
- 10. Ibid., p. 60.
- 11. Hampshire Gazette, June 14, 1837, p. 3.
- 12. Sheffield, History of Florence, p. 60.
- 13. Springfield Republican, August 4, 1838, p. 3.
- 14. Sheffield, History of Florence, p. 60.
- 15. Ibid., p. 61.
- 16. Republican, April 24, 1841, p. 2.
- 17. Sheffield, History of Florence, p. 68.
- 18. Ibid., p. 69.
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- 21. Ibid., p. 2.
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- 36. Hampshire Gazette, December 20, 1900, p. 3.

37. Ibid., March 16, 1886, p. 2. 38 Iding Brothers, p. 17. 3<u>\$</u> mpshire Gazette, March 16, 1886, p. 2. 40. Ibid., February 9, 1886, p. 2. 41. Ibid., September 9, 1909, p. 3. 42. Agnes Hannay, A Chronicle of Industry on the Mill River (Northampton, 1936), p. 109 43. Ibid., p. 111. 44. Hampshire Gazette, November 21, 1921, p. 4. 45. Ibid., February 5, 1923, p. 6. 46. Ibid., February 5, 1923, p. 6. 47. Ibid., November 2, 1926, p. 3. 48. Ruth Houghton, Silk Industry in Northampton, (Northampton, 1929), p. 62. 49. Ibid., p. 63. 50. Hampshire Gazette, March 16, 1886, p. 2. 51. Austin King interview 52. Ibid. 53. Ibid. 54. Corticelli, Origin, p. 2 (I was unable to ascertain the total number of workers employed by the 55. Belding Brothers, p. 20 (These figures include all Belding plants). 56. Hampshire Gazette, May 23, 1901, p. 3. 57. Austin King interview 58. Hampshire Gazette, September 19, 1902, p. 1. 59. Ibid., October 17, 1919, p. 7. 60. Ibid., October 17, 1919, p. 7. 61. Austin King interview 62. Ibid. 63. Interview with Bunny King, Florence, Massachusetts, July, 1973. 64. Austin King interview. 65. Ibid. 66. Hampshire Gazette, April 3, 1895, p. 2. 67. Ibid., April 6, 1895, p. 3. 68. Ibid., April 8, 1895, p. 2. 69. Ibid., July 6, 1921, p. 4. 70. Ibid., July 28, 1921, p. 6. 71. Ibid., July 30, 1921, p. 3. 72. Ibid., April 5, 1923, p. 5. 73. Ibid., April 12, 1923, p. 7. 74. Ibid., March 31, 1924, p. 3. 75. Ibid., May 8, 1924, p. 1. 76. Ibid., May 16, 1924, p. 2. 77. Ibid., May 19, 1924, p. 4. 78. Ibid., July 7, 1924, p. 1. 79. Ibid., August 22, 1924, p. 1. 80. Ibid., January 21, 1902, p. 2. 81. Ibid., January 22, 1902, p. 2 82. Ibid., January 23, 1902, p. 1. 83. Ibid., January 23, 1902, p. 1. 84. Ibid., January 21, 1902, p. 2. 85. Ibid., May 3, 1923, p. 4. 86. Ibid., May 11, 1923, p. 4. 87. Ibid., May 19, 1923, p. 1. 88. Ibid., June 5, 1923, p. 1. 89. Ibid., June 13, 1923, p. 3. 90. Ibid., July 23, 1923, p. 4.

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