



Making The Best of The Worst of Times

Story by Rob Korobkin // Photography by Cheryl Rau

As an early April drizzle came down outside the Knights of Columbus hall in Jay, Maine, Chris Moreau sat at the end of a long folding table reviewing the guitar chord progressions for the Gin Blossoms' "Hey Jealousy." Moreau's best friend from high school stood a few feet away, tuning up his bass in front of the mess of speakers, instruments and cables they had set up in front of the rickety old hall's large electric Bingo board. Moreau's two kids were running around the front of the hall, screaming and causing a ruckus. It was easy to see how it could feel like home.

Although he left Jay five years ago, Moreau still proudly identifies as a "Jay Boy," and comes back to town a couple of times a month to play with some of his friends from high school in Shredder Blues, a local pop rock cover band. The band only plays shows a few times a year, often at benefits like the one they were playing at that day, which was raising funds to support the 248 people in town who have lost their jobs over the last year with the closing of the Otis Mill, the smaller of the two paper mills in the town.

Moreau says that when he heard about the opportunity to help his community by coming back to Jay to play the show, "There was no question." Moreau lived in Jay until he was 31, before leaving home to pursue a career as a teacher and school administrator. Today, Moreau has a comfortable home in Saco and a good job as the Vice Principal of South Portland High School. But he still misses life here. Like many of Jay's residents, his family has lived in the town for over a century. He longs for the close knit multi-generational community he had around him when he was a kid that could transform a quick stop at the corner store for a gallon of milk into a 45-minute social event. He says, "I've now experienced away, and I want to come back home."

ABOVE >> WASAU PAPER COMPANY'S OTIS SPECIALTY PAPERS MILL IN JAY, MAINE, WILL BE CLOSED BY MAY 31, 2009, ELIMINATING ANOTHER 96 JOBS IN THE TOWN.

With each passing year, however, there is less and less to come home to. Jay is an old mill town whose mills are in trouble. The larger mill in town, The Androscoggin, or “The Andro” as it is called, is owned by Verso Paper and weathered the recession decently, suffering a series of temporary shut downs but no large-scale layoffs. In late March of this year, the Wausau Paper Corporation announced its plans to permanently close the smaller Otis Mill. When it was built in 1906, the Otis Mill was one of the largest paper mills in the country. By 2009, the mill was costing more to maintain than it was generating in revenue, and Wausau expected that closing it down would boost their annual pretax operating profit by \$20 million. First, they shut down a paper machine in December, 2008, laying off around 150 workers. The remaining 96 workers received notice of their termination at the end of March. By the end of May, the mill had entirely shut down.

As Moreau was preparing for the show upstairs, Ann Hammond, one of the main organizers of the fundraiser dinner, worked downstairs, filling small paper cups for the community supper from a large cooler of Hi-C donated by a local McDonald’s. Hammond has seen the town change over the last few generations and predicted that if things continued this way, “People are going to move. The young people aren’t gonna stay here.” In fact, one of her sons has already moved to Florida, leaving her with only minimal contact with some of her grandchildren. She says, “Used to be Sunday afternoon, you went and spent the afternoon with your mother. Now the kids are everywhere, so you don’t see ‘em, three or four times a year.”

Jay is far from the first town in this country to lose its manufacturing jobs. In fact, between 1967 and 1987, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Detroit each lost more than half of their industrial jobs. But, for most of this time, Maine’s dense and sprawling forests have enabled the pulp and paper industry to remain the largest segment of manufacturing in Maine, contributing about 4% of the Gross State Product. Back in the early 1990s, it looked like paper might even emerge as one of this country’s last great industries: the economy was booming, desktop printers were making it possible for people to use entire reams at the push of a button, and paper sales were going up 6 or 7 % a year.

The last few years have seen a different story unfold. The combined threat of cheap imports from Europe, Brazil and China, and a marked decrease in total sales as consumers have come to rely less and less on hard copies, has left the industry in shambles. The American Forest and

Paper Association reported that, between 2000 and 2006, 95 paper mills closed and 123,000 jobs were eliminated in the paper industry. In the wake of one of the worst recessions in American history, the last year has dealt a massive blow to several of Maine’s paper mill towns. Baileyville and Rumford have each suffered drastic layoffs like those in Jay.

Even when wages in the paper mills were relatively high, life in Jay always came with a certain amount of hardship, and the people of Jay have a deep history of with-



COMMUNITY SUPPORT >> ROLAND SAMSON AND STATE REPRESENTATIVE PAUL GILBERT, TWO OF JAYS MOST ACTIVE COMMUNITY LEADERS, CHAT DURING THE SPAGHETTI SUPPER FUNDRAISER HELD JUST DAYS AFTER THE CLOSING OF THE OTIS MILL WAS ANNOUNCED.

standing adversity. Since heavy industry first began along the banks of the Androscoggin River in the late 1800s, the people of Jay have endured the hard hours, rough conditions and terrible odors of paper manufacturing. And twice in the town’s history, when International Paper - the massive paper trust that used to own both of the town’s large paper mills - was threatening to reduce their quality of life, the paper workers in Jay came together to wage long strikes, refusing to work until the company backed down. Although both of the strikes ended in failure with all of the strikers being replaced by “scab” replacement workers, people in Jay have continued to hold onto that spirit of community solidarity. Today, even after the massive blow of losing so many jobs, they continue to stand together, trying to make the best of what is for many the worst of times.

About a month after the community supper, Mark Demillo and his wife Yvonne sat on canvas folding chairs at the top of a grassy ridge, watching their son Kyle pitch for the Jay High School Tigers on the base-

ball diamond below. The clouds hung loosely in the sky, offering Mark just the right amount of shade and warmth to relax and watch his kid play ball before heading back for one of his last days of work. In three-and-a-half weeks, Demillo was going to lose his job as a process specialist in the technical department of the Otis Mill, where he has worked for a little over 30 years.

The Demillo family has been tied to the mill for generations. Mark's grandfather came over from Italy to help build the Otis Mill in 1906. Mark's dad worked there for 46 years. One of his brothers worked there until he passed away. Another brother worked there until he got laid off in the first big round of layoffs in December. Now, back on the job market at age 54, Mark says, "I figure I got 10 more years of working." He would like to find a job that would enable him to stay in the areas of quality control or quality assurance, but there aren't a lot of options. He says he plans to take a placement test at the career center that the state has set up in the area and follow the resulting recommendations. "If there's anything that comes up," he says, "It will, of course, be traveling, to Skowhegan, Madison, Augusta or beyond."



LAI D OFF >> MARK DEMILLO WILL BE LOSING HIS JOB AT THE OTIS SPECIALTY PAPERS MILL WHERE HE HAS WORKED FOR A LITTLE OVER 30 YEARS.

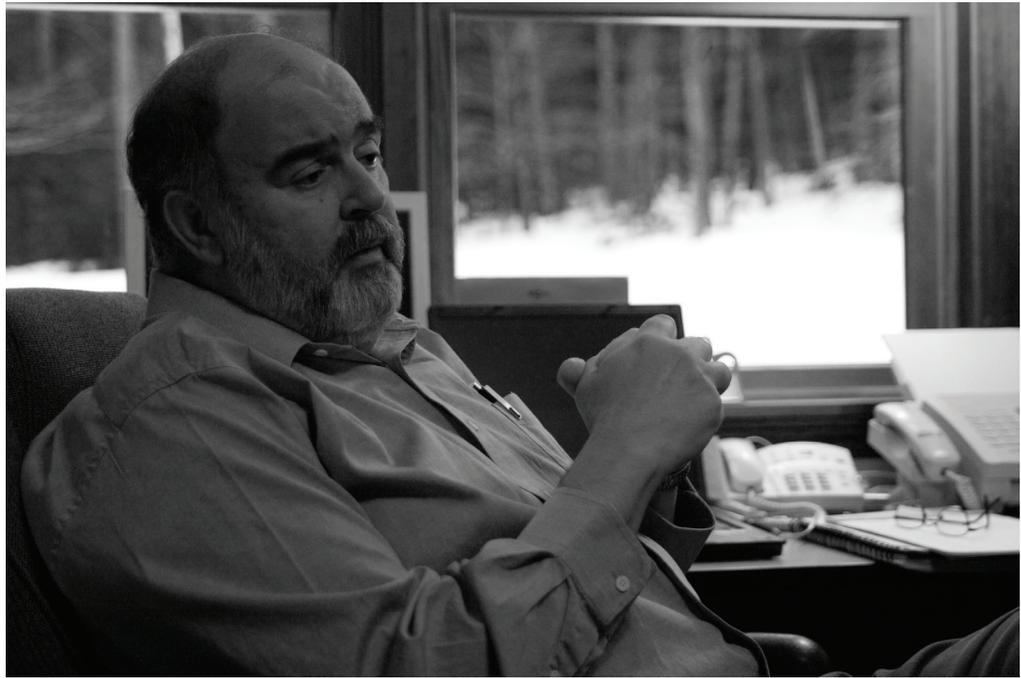
Demillo would rather commute up to an hour each way than move. "My family's here," says Yvonne, "and his family's here, and this is our roots." Their two older children have already moved elsewhere in Maine to pursue careers in medicine and mechanical engineering, and this is Kyle's last season as a Tiger before he heads up to college in Bangor. Even though his kids don't live in Jay anymore, "They think our house is home," says Demillo, "and they would be hurt if we had to move." Jay may be a small town where there isn't too much going on, but many of the people who have grown up here love it and are eager to remain here. Of the hundreds of workers losing their jobs, the only ones whom Demillo could think of who are planning to move are the four people in management whom Wausau is transferring to one of its facilities in Wisconsin.

"Sometimes I think we don't even look at ourselves as the one that's in need," says Demillo. "We worry about other people that are losing their jobs more than we do about us." Yvonne has a steady job as a dental assistant, and with two of their three kids already grown, their bills are relatively minimal. Demillo believes that help is out there for people who need it, but he can't think of anyone whom he knows personally who will need charitable assistance to get through the transition. He acknowledges that there might well be people whom he works with who will need help, but "a lot of them aren't talking about it," he says. Yvonne explains, "It's not something you're proud of."

Much of the help that is available comes from the government. After the first round of layoffs in December, the U.S. Department of Labor approved the workers who had just lost their jobs to receive help from the Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program, which helps workers who are adversely affected by increased imports. Through TAA, workers who enroll in two-year re-training programs are eligible to receive financial aid and uncontested unemployment money while they are in school. But at the time of the writing of this article, the TAA program had not been extended to the 96 workers laid off in the spring. "We're hoping to get it as well," says Rick Richards, a shift foreman facing impending unemployment. "We'll know in the middle of July," he says. "Then we can go to school."

While the workers may have to wait a couple of months to get full assistance from the government, community groups in the area are working to make sure their neighbors have food to eat, clothes to wear, and warm houses to come home to. "I think our town is doing the best that it can," says Priscilla Pineau, a children's librarian who organizes regular food drives at the town library to support the food bank in nearby Livermore Falls. "People wanted to donate," she says, "because they could see that there was a definite need." Nate Churchill, the Associate Pastor at Bean's Corner Baptist Church in Jay, says that his church has a food pantry, as well as a "Deacons' Fund" to assist church members who need help paying their bills.

Although these local programs are tiny compared to state and federal social services, for the most part, they seem to address the immediate needs of the community adequately. “Food is kind of taken care of,” says Hammond at the spaghetti dinner, the proceeds from which were going toward a new fuel assistance program. The workers won’t need the fuel for months, “But they can at least fill their tanks up now,” she says, “and have it for next winter.”



As difficult as this time is for Jay, it is not the biggest challenge the community has faced. Everybody in Jay —and most people in Maine over the age of 30— knows about the strike that happened at The Andro, the other paper mill in Jay, from June, 1987 to October, 1988. This was actually the second large strike in the town’s history. The first strike happened in 1921 and has since faded into the foggy depths of history. The second strike, however, remains one of the most traumatic and influential periods in the life of almost every adult in Jay and, even over 20 years after it ended, its effects still shape the community.

The 1950s and 1960s saw higher wages than ever before for American paper workers like those in Jay, as WWII had wiped out many of their foreign competitors. But when foreign competition returned with gusto in the 1970s and 1980s, IP began to look seriously for ways to reduce domestic labor costs, despite the fact that they were making more money than ever. When contracts at The Andro went up for negotiation in the spring of 1987, IP demanded that the workers agree to a whole slew of concessions. These included working on Christmas —their only remaining holiday— and letting hundreds of jobs at the mill go to non-union workers, drastically reducing the workers’ power. Caught between losing their quality of life or risking their livelihoods to stand up for themselves, the workers at The Andro voted almost unanimously to go on strike. On June 16th, 1987, over 1,100 workers walked out of the mill in resistance to IP’s proposed terms. By the next day, IP had begun hiring workers to replace them. Some of these replacement workers came from as far away as the American south, but most were Mainers, and a good number were from Jay.

ROLAND SAMSON >> A FORMER WASTEWATER TREATMENT OPERATOR, SAMSON WENT ON STRIKE 20 YEARS AGO AND NEVER RETURNED TO THE MILL. TODAY, HE IS AN ORGANIZING COORDINATOR FOR THE UNITED STEEL WORKERS.

“I just remember it being pretty nasty,” says librarian Tamara Hoke, who was in the sixth grade at Jay Junior High when the strike began. There were days, she says, when many of her classmates would come into school wearing blue shirts adorned with the number 14, a sign of solidarity with the strikers’ local union chapter, United Paperworkers International Union (UPIU) - Local 14. She remembers constant conflict in her class as the children of strikers picked on the children of replacement workers.

Even today, some families are still divided. “My parents, in fact, didn’t have a wedding,” said another young woman, looking up from layering extra pepperoni onto a pizza at a corner store in town. She was born during the strike into a family that she said had been torn apart by it. Her mother’s father had crossed the picket line and gone back to work at The Andro when he was unable to find a good job elsewhere. In the eyes of strikers, like her father’s father and brother, this made him a “super scab.” They wanted nothing to do with him, and she said they refused to even come together for a wedding. “We still don’t have much to do with my father’s family,” she says.

Although the strike did leave some lasting divisions in the town, it also brought the people of Jay together to support each other and bring attention to their cause. “It was like somebody had opened the cages,” says striker Roland Samson, “and all of us were free.” Samson had spent the last 22 years working around the clock as a wastewater treatment plant operator in The Andro. “For the first time in my life,” he says, “I felt I was doing something worthwhile to help people.” Although he was reluctant to participate at first, the strike ended up transforming Sam-

son from a withdrawn laborer, who was so anti-social he avoided going to the grocery store, into an outspoken community leader and activist. When incompetent replacement workers at The Andro accidentally caused a toxic gas leak that could have killed thousands of people had the weather been just a few degrees warmer, Samson ended up speaking to the news media. When workers from the strike went to Washington D.C. to speak in Congress about the need for better laws protecting strikers, Samson was right there along with them. “We were able to survive on very, very little,” he says. “That was really the best time of my life.”

The strike quickly became an endurance match. On one side, the strikers were foregoing their high-paying jobs to make a stand. On the other side, International Paper was losing money. To make matters worse, the international leadership of the UPIU did little to support the strike other than offer each striking family a paltry \$50 a week to live on. The UPIU was stretched thin by coordinating simultaneous actions against International Paper in Alabama, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, and many of its leaders were bureaucrats who lacked the dedication and ability to win a campaign of this scale. Almost all of the food, clothing and support that the strikers in Jay received, they got for themselves through a community organized food bank, clothing drive and outreach effort. In October of 1988, 16 months after the strike had been declared, the UPIU’s leaders made their indifference clear when they voted to stop funding the strikers. With their support cut, the strikers were forced to call it quits.

“I just didn’t like going back at all really,” says Bob Roy, a striker who returned to The Andro for another 17 years of laboring alongside people who were “stealing” hundreds of thousands of dollars in pay that he felt belonged

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to the strikers. “I just couldn’t wait for retirement” says Roy. These days, he spends a lot of time hanging around the now defunct Local 14 union hall, shooting pool with other retired union guys. Local 14 has not represented the workers at The Andro since 1992, when the workers there voted overwhelmingly to decertify from the union. “The international union screwed ‘em,” says Roy’s friend whom he was shooting pool with, summing up the reason for the decertification. The pay cuts, of course, originated with IP’s management, not the union, but it’s easy to see why the workers would harbor resentment. “For 16 months, we knew we were going to win this strike,” says Bonnie Samson, Roland’s wife and lifelong partner. Nobody in the town predicted the strike’s sudden end, she says, “And then for it all to fall apart, of course, you’re going to be resentful.”

There were two campaigns to try to regroup and reform the union, but these failed too. “I tried talking common sense to ‘em,” says Roy, “but we knew we didn’t have a chance in hell in getting it back.” Today, the workers at The Andro are not represented by a union of any kind. With the closing of the Otis Mill, the last union mill in town, industrial unions, which have defined so much of the town’s history, no longer have a presence anywhere in Jay. With the collapse of their unions, many people in the area have been left feeling increasingly disengaged from politics. “My dad was like, *what does it matter if I vote?*” says Tracy Allen, a labor activist in Portland who grew up near Jay and remembers the effect those years had on her father, a union pipe fitter. The workers at The Andro had risked so much, just to find out that the only people supporting them were themselves. “I think that’s where a lot of the apathy in town comes from,” says Allen. “You would think it would generate more organizers, but I think it just crushed people’s spirits.”

Even though many people in Jay have become highly skeptical of powerful people who claim to be on their side, they remain dedicated to each oth-



THE SPIRIT CONTINUES >> TRACY ALLEN, A LABOR ACTIVIST IN PORTLAND, GREW UP NEAR JAY. SHE STANDS IN FRONT OF A SIGN THAT HER UNCLE CARRIED ON THE PICKET LINE DURING THE STRIKE.

er. Allen believes that growing up near Jay laid the roots of her passion for justice. Today, she runs the Restaurant Opportunities Center of Maine, which works with food service workers, helping to organize a key sector of the post-manufacturing economy. While the industries today are different, the values remain the same. “You treat everybody the same way, whether they’re the principal or the janitor at your school,” says Allen. “That was taught to me from a very young age.” Jay is still full of this kind of unpretentious egalitarianism. In fact, in Moreau’s band, the bassist is the principal of one of the nearby high schools and the lead guitarist is a janitor.

In some ways, the strike’s spirit of solidarity does live on in Jay, and many of the people who were involved with it still help out at community events around town like the spaghetti dinner fundraiser. At a little after 7pm on the first Wednesday of every month, Roland Samson bangs on the table in the old union hall with a gavel, and the monthly meeting of the Jay Democrats comes to order. Although the days when thousands of people would come to the strike’s massive weekly community gatherings are long past, the dozen or so remaining activists who attend the these monthly meetings still possess some real political power.

Samson has become a high-ranking organizing coordinator for The United Steel Workers, the union that ended up representing the paper workers after a long string of mergers. One regular is Jay’s current Maine House Representative, Paul Gilbert, and he uses the meetings to provide the group of old friends with a window into the state government. Another one of the regulars is a round-

facd and slightly awkward young man from “Mike’s office.” Mike is “Pro-Life, Pro-Labor” Congressman Mike Michaud, a former paperworker from Millinocket who currently represents the vast majority of rural Maine in Congress. Michaud’s campaign hinged on small town activist groups like the Jay Democrats and the support of Jay residents like Bruce Roy, a recently departed Otis Mill worker and proud Jay Democrat who was a pillar of Michaud’s campaign team.

While there are some lifelong activists like these remaining in Jay, they are getting older. Roland Samson has been working since he was 14 and plans to retire soon from his job with the union. Samson plans to continue helping out around town for years to come, but there doesn’t seem to be a new generation coming up to take over organizations like the Jay Democrats. “I think our youngest member is what, 58 probably,” says Samson, “It’s hard to get the young people to do anything.” A lot of this has to do with the fact that Jay no longer offers automatic access to good jobs like it did when Samson was finishing high school. So the smart kids like Moreau and Allen, who might otherwise be taking on those roles, are leaving. But it also has to do with the fact that without something like a strike to galvanize social consciousness, few people in the town are naturally inclined to get involved with politics.

The future of Jay is unclear. It’s possible that new industries will be drawn to the area. “Renewable energy and energy efficiency projects hold the potential to create thousands of good jobs for those in traditional industries,” says Mike Levert, Maine’s state economist. But it remains to be seen whether or not paper manufacturing will make a comeback when the current recession is over. Levert pointed to the facts that Maine’s paper workers are very highly skilled and experienced and the state’s forests are some of the best managed in the world. He predicted that “some of the lost capacity from this recession will come back online as the economy picks up.” But unless Wausau Paper decides to re-open the mill, which seems unlikely given the current instability of their business, or the company reluctantly sells the mill to their competition, the Otis Mill is unlikely to re-open for paper making any time soon. Paper worker Rick

Richards is prepared to move on, but he remains hopeful that things might turn around. “It sure would be nice to get the opportunity to continue to make paper,” he says. For now, the Androscoggin River that started it all will continue flowing. On its tree-lined banks, the people of Jay will continue trying to keep their town alive.



THE JAY DEMOCRATS >> ALTHOUGH THE WORKERS AT VERSO’S ANDROSCOGGIN MILL ARE NO LONGER REPRESENTED BY A UNION, LOCAL 14’S OLD UNION HALL STILL STANDS. THE JAY DEMOCRATS HOLD THEIR MEETINGS THERE ON THE FIRST WEDNESDAY OF EVERY MONTH.