

# Down by the Old Mill Stream

## OVERVIEW

Through a classroom video showing three oral history interviews from people who worked in the Appleton Woollen Mill as teenagers, students will learn about Appleton’s industrial history, begin to consider real-life stories as historical narrative, and identify and explain differences between life in mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century and present-day Lanark.

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

- **Goals of History:** Developing a sense of time: “understanding the experiences of and empathizing with people in past societies; developing historical literacy skills by analysing and interpreting evidence from primary and secondary sources.”<sup>1</sup>
- **Grade 8 History:** A1. assess the impact of some key social, economic, and political factors, including social, economic, and/or political inequalities, on various groups and communities;
- A2. use the historical inquiry process to investigate perspectives of different groups and communities.
- **Grade 8 Geography:** B1.3. assess the effectiveness of various programs and policies aimed at improving the quality of life in various countries.

## PACING GUIDE

### Option 1:

Introduction - 5 minutes  
Video: Viewing & Worksheet - 30 minutes  
Worksheet (discuss in groups) - 10 minutes  
Discussion - 10 minutes  
Reflection/Summary - 5 minutes  
Total: 60 minutes

### Option 2:

Introduction - 7 minutes  
Video 1: Viewing/Worksheet - 5 minutes  
Video 1: Discussion - 7 minutes  
Video 2: Viewing/Worksheet - 9 minutes  
Video 2: Discussion - 7 minutes  
Video 3: Viewing/Worksheet - 8 minutes  
Video 3: Discussion - 10 minutes  
Reflection/Summary - 7 minutes  
Total: 60 minutes

<sup>1</sup> [THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM](https://www.ontario.ca/gov) | Social Studies, Grades 1 to 6; History and Geography, Grades 7 and 8 (gov.on.ca) pg. 7

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Mississippi Mills area was first inhabited by the Omàwìwinini or Algonquin people. However, as European settlement of the area began in the 1820s, the powerful Mississippi River attracted people who wanted to build factories or “mills”, as they were called by the British settlers. By the late 19th Century, the Ottawa Valley was the centre of a thriving woollen textile industry, and Mississippi Mills was processing fleece imported from as far afield as Australia and South Africa. The water power from Almonte’s falls and rapids powered a dozen mills at one time, while even the mill in “quiet” Appleton employed some 300 workers at its peak.

The textile industry in the Mississippi Mills went through a number of cycles of boom and bust over the course of its long history. The First and Second World Wars each brought a huge surge in demand for woollen material, as the Canadian military efforts required vast quantities of material for uniforms and blankets. However, by the mid- to late-20th Century, offshore production became dominant in textile manufacturing. Because Canada has minimum wage laws to ensure that workers are compensated fairly for their time, while consumers still want to buy cheap products, most Canadian manufacturers in the late-20<sup>th</sup> Century found they were unable to compete with offshore productions. Consequently, the textile industry has largely disappeared from Canada. Today, Mississippi Mills is a quiet, largely agricultural area, and the mills have generally either been demolished (as with the Appleton Mill) or repurposed as condominiums, restaurants, and museums.

The Appleton Mill was established by the Teskey family in 1862. The Teskeys owned the factory for the remainder of the 19th Century, passing it down through generations and intermittently leasing it out for others to operate. In 1901, the Teskeys sold the Appleton Mill to Boyd Caldwell and Company. The Caldwells ran the mill for several decades, but it fell dormant in the inter-war period. William Collie bought it from the Caldwells in 1937, and the Collie family operated the mill from 1937-1987, when it finally closed for good. The building was demolished in the early 2000s.

The economic concepts of **supply** and **demand** are evident in the history of the woollen mill: low supply and high demand contribute to a commodity’s value.

- In the first interview, Lenny Spinks says that in the early 1940s, his wife Betty and her sister Gladys were the only two workers who were skilled in their job. The **supply** of skilled workers was low, so Betty and Gladys were considered very valuable employees.
- During the Second World War, there was great **demand** for woollen products, so the value of wool production increased and the Ottawa Valley mills profited.
- After the war, the development of synthetic textiles (polyester, rayon, etc.) led to lower **demand** for wool, and the textile industry had to transition to other materials.

As these interviews reflect, the Mississippi Mills textile industry is a part of recent history and living memory. Depending on the students’ age/comfort level, you could lead a discussion about what we can learn from oral history interviews. Consider the benefits and challenges of using interviews as a historical source, particularly in comparison to other types of primary sources (photographs, newspaper articles, letters, etc.). Students can reflect on the personal connections conveyed through interviews as well as the fallibility of memory.

**Interview #1: Betty & Lenny Spinks 02:27-04:55**

**WORKSHEET: Listening Questions**

1. Why were Betty Spinks and her sister considered valuable employees at Collie's Woollen Mill in Appleton?

*They were the only people who were skilled at their particular job, making warps. (When weaving fabric on a loom, the "warp" is composed of the yarn threaded through the loom, while the "weft" is inserted – perpendicular to the warp – during the weaving process.)*

*In addition, they were well-liked, open, and reliable ("you knew where you stood with Gladys"), and had a good relationship with the foreman.*

2. How did the Second World War (1939-45) affect the operation of the woollen mill?

*The mill ran 24 hours/day, seven days a week to produce as much as possible. (The War increased demand for woollen products, and factories in Mississippi Mills made thousands of yards of material for military uniforms, blankets, etc.)*

3. During the war, how many hours would the workers need to spend at the mill?

*Their typical ten-hour shift often stretched several hours longer. Lenny Spinks speaks about working up to sixteen hours a day because "the work had to be done".*

**Interview #2: Stephen Collie 04:55-13:20**

**WORKSHEET: Listening Questions**

4. What role did the Ottawa Valley textile mills play in the Second World War?

*They made material for soldiers' uniforms, blankets, coats.*

5. Was the mill a comfortable place to be? Why or why not?

*It was not comfortable. Stephen Collie describes it as "horrendously hot" in the summer and incredibly loud with noise from the looms. There was lots of hard work and it was very busy.*

6. Approximately how many workers did the mill employ at peak capacity?

*There were 200-300 workers in the Appleton Mill.*

7. When Stephen Collie was growing up, how old did you have to be to work in the mill?

*Workers were legally required to be at least fourteen.*

8. Did men and women work in the mill? Explain.

*Men and women both worked in the mill. Eleanor McMunn (the mill's dyer in the 1940s) was unusual in that she was an early woman in a technical role. Other women worked on the machines or in the administrative side of the process. During the war, more women joined the factory because many men were overseas.*

9. What roles did the Collie family play in the village life?

*The Collies owned the factory that provided employment for much of the town. They also found jobs for people who were disadvantaged; they supported loans and mortgages for their workers; they rented houses at low cost to their workers.*

**Interview #3: Irene Robertson-Thompson 13:20-21:02**

**WORKSHEET: Listening Questions**

10. Why didn't Irene Robertson-Thompson go to high school? What did she do instead?

*In 1947, the closest high school was Carleton Place, and without cars or school buses, she couldn't commute from Appleton. She couldn't afford to board in Carleton Place, so when she finished elementary school at age 14, she started work in the mill.*

11. How many hours a day did she work at that time?

*Eight hours a day.*

12. When she began, how much was she paid each day?

*28.5 cents/hour x 8 hours/day = \$2.28*

13. How did workers commute from Almonte or Carleton Place to the Appleton mill?

*They came by bus.*

14. In the 1940s and '50s, there were very few social securities (e.g. sick leave, health care, etc.). How did people in Appleton make up for this? What do you think would be some positives or negatives about this system?

*According to these interviews, the Collie family (who owned the mill) were generous to their workers. Some workers were paid unofficially when they were sick or dying. People who needed help, such as the woman whose belongings all burned in a fire, were often given it. When one resident of the village had leukemia, Mr. Collie paid for her blood transfusion and paid his staff to drive her into Ottawa for treatment. Appleton clearly had an unofficial welfare system in place, which helped people who were in trouble and probably contributed to a feeling of community. However, a clear downside of this system (as opposed to the regulated welfare of today) is that none of it was guaranteed. While the Collies apparently valued and supported the village community, other mill owners in other towns were under no obligation to provide for their workers in this way.*

## Down by the Old Mill Stream

### Interview #1: Betty & Lenny Spinks

#### *Listening Questions*

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### Interview #2: Stephen Collie

#### *Listening Questions*

4. What role did the Ottawa Valley textile mills play in the Second World War?

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**DOWN BY THE OLD MILL STREAM**

5. Was the mill a comfortable place to be? Why or why not?

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7. When Stephen Collie was growing up, how old did you have to be to work in the mill? \_\_\_\_\_

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8. Did men and women work in the mill? Explain.

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9. What roles did the Collie family play in the village life?

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**Interview #3: Irene Robertson-Thompson**

*Listening Questions*

10. Why didn't Irene Robertson-Thompson go to high school? What did she do instead?

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