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Research Topic 1

In the mid-19th century, Providence was home to the “five industrial wonders” of the world for hosting the world’s largest factories for tools (Browne and Sharpe), files (Nicholson File), engines (Corliss Steam Engine Company), screws (American Screw) and silverware (Gorham Manufacturing Company). The abundance of companies making their home in Providence provided jobs for many across the country and world. With the presence of companies came the presence of unions in Providence. Unions existed in Providence since the early 1800’s serving and protecting the working community.

Unions have been a strong resource to workers in Gorham Manufacturing Company since the company’s creation in 1821. When the New England Mercantile Union was created in 1848 for the purpose of securing better facilities and giving and receiving better consignments, John Gorman, one of Gorham’s owner, was on the list of workers (Library of Congress). While not many records are kept about Gorham employees unionizing throughout the years, unions were often referenced throughout Gorham’s employee newsletter, *Gorham Perspective*. Their presence was most evident throughout the newsletter in times of change in Gorham.

Gorham’s president, Wilbur H. Norton, described 1962 as a “critical year for Gorham” (Norton 1). Company profits had dropped 33% throughout the country and even more in Providence. Competition was keener, products were increasingly difficult to sell, and it was costing more to promote, sell, and distribute products due to a 12% increase in silver costs. Gorham looked to enter negotiations with the International Jewelry Worker’s Union Local #31 in Providence to reach a “reasonable, thoughtful, and responsible” decision about salaries,

pensions, and benefits (Norton 1). Despite losses in previous years, Gorham employees had good working conditions, employee benefits, and wages and employment had risen rather than dropped. As Norton stated it, “along with maintenance of reasonable wage levels and the continuance of job security should be our primary concern” (Norton 2). Norton’s letter to employees showcased that the relationship with unions was strong enough to be able to talk honestly with them.

The strong relationship between Gorham and unions could be seen throughout the volumes of *Gorham Perspective*. Proof of this is a series of events sponsored by the company but organized by both them and the union. In 1967, the company offered free flu shots to all employees (*Gorham Perspective*). In 1976, the union and Gorham management helped prepare an Alcoholism Awareness and Service Program, providing confidential help to employees or members of their families who are experiencing problems with controlling drinking habits (*Gorham Perspective*). Additionally in 1963, Gorham management and the union helped develop pension plans that increased retirement benefits. Their plan set forth a special permanent fund to be used only for pensions. The plan allowed early retirements of any employee over 55 and after 15 years of service. Employees 45 or over with 15 years of experience could leave the company and still be eligible for a pension plan. Finally, the pension plan allowed pensioners to choose several payment plans and included disability benefits (*Gorham Perspective*).

Unions were most important when Brown-Foreman prepared to close the company and transfer their work to their Lenox factory. In 1962, over 2,000 employees made a living producing silver at Gorham; however, at the time of its closing in 2002, only 60 employees remained. For months, rumors spread across Gorham that Brown-Foreman was looking to close or sell the plant. Brown-Foreman announced what the future of Gorham would be just two days

before closing, and while United Steelworkers of America Local 16031 represented most employees, it was difficult to negotiate their future. In the span of two days, the Gorham union was able to negotiate severance packages with a pre-tax cost of \$11 million. Since Gorham was not being sold, equipment was being transferred to Lenox and a few jobs were offered to employees too. Employees who had between 20 and 48 years of experience were offered jobs in the Lenox plant.

Unions have had a respected and strong presence within Gorham Manufacturing Company for many years. For many years, they helped ensure the safety and continuance of job security for Gorham employees. At times, even going above and beyond to help employees in aspects that involved their life outside of Gorham. The last few days of Gorham showcased that unions were able to help and protect employees. Keeping Gorham running in Providence would be ideal, but in the very least, several employees had job opportunities thanks to the work of unions.

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