Interview

Editor's Note: The following is excerpted from an interview with Eva Higgins of South Portland, a worker at the T.A. Huston Bakery Company and the National Biscuit Company's Downeast Bakery from 1926 until 1954, when the bakery closed. Hannah W. Ashley of Yarmouth, a local historian and graduate of USM's New England Studies Program, conducted the interview in December of 1991.

Q. How young were you when you first started working there? Were you in school?
A. I was 17. My daddy had died and I had to go to work.

Q. Were you interested in staying in the bakery at that time?
A. I was interested because I figured I could start at the bottom and work up. And I only worked at that job (clean-up) for one month, and then I was promoted to packaging and that was more money. That was $15.00 a week. In those days that was a lot.

Q. You packed cookies for a while? Was this on a conveyor belt?
A. Yes, the cookies came down from the sixth floor on a belt. They'd come down and we'd clean them off, and then the belt would go back upstairs, just like a ferris wheel.

Q. I've read in early newspaper articles that there was a cafeteria...and that there were even showers. Do you remember those amenities at all?
A. Yes, and the cafeteria was on the fourth floor and that was very nice, very sanitary—it had to be.

Q. Did the men mostly work the ovens?
A. The ovens were upstairs on the sixth floor. Those were the bakers. And the mixing room was—part of it on the sixth floor and parts of it were on the seventh.

Q. Did most of the workers live near the bakery?
A. A lot of them lived in Cumberland, but most of them lived in Portland. In the early years they would come by trolley car. Quite a few of them lived in South Portland and they would use the trolley cars.

Q. How long did your husband stay with the company?
A. He worked for them 44 years. He worked in Cambridge for seven years and then we were transferred to Pittsburgh for the rest of the time. He retired at 62 due to his health. So he took an early retirement and rushed back to Maine. I hated Pittsburgh, so we just sold our home and came back to Maine.

Q. What were the work schedules like? Did you fill in and do other jobs? Did you punch a clock? Where did you go for lunch?
A. We worked eight hours except during the war. Sometimes there was something special and we worked nine hours. We had a time card and punched a clock. A girl checked up to make sure everyone punched the card. We had one ten-minute break in the morning and one ten-minute break in the afternoon, with one half hour for lunch. Most always they'd go upstairs to the cafeteria for lunch. Sometimes they'd go to the diner at the corner of Winslow Street and Forest Avenue.

Q. Were there any changes between the T.A. Huston ownership from 1920-1931 and the National Biscuit Co. ownership from 1931-1954?
A. One thing was the vacation—we never got a vacation before. Under Nabisco after so many years you were allowed to go on vacation. You worked five years and got a week's vacation. That was good in that time. And I think if you worked 15 years you got two weeks vacation.