

# IN THE MILL



### **In The Mill**

An exhibition at The Hudson River Museum  
August 24 through November 13, 1983

This exhibition and publication were made possible by a grant from The Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A. and by support from the City of Yonkers and the individual and corporate members of The Hudson River Museum.

### **Lenders to the Exhibition**

Mrs. Thomas Appleyard  
Columbia University Libraries,  
Special Collections  
Mrs. Mary Czerwinski  
Alan Eisenkraft  
Maitland Griggs  
Mrs. Archibald Henderson  
Mrs. Mary Krall  
Dr. Virginia Miles  
The Mohasco Corporation  
The National Museum of  
American History, Smithsonian  
Institution  
Vincent Viviano

Cover  
Alexander Smith & Sons Carpet  
Company 1903  
Tapestry and Velvet Mills  
Colored lithograph  
Collection of The Hudson River  
Museum

### **Introduction**

*In The Mill* examines the history of The Alexander Smith & Sons Carpet Company, which for nearly a century was one of the largest industrial concerns in Yonkers. From the time of its move to this city at the very end of the Civil War until its departure in 1954, the mill touched the lives of thousands of local residents who worked there themselves or whose friends and relatives worked there. At the height of its success, the "carpet shop," as it was almost always called, employed over 7,000 people and sold its products throughout the world.

The seemingly sudden decision to relocate the Yonkers mills to a new plant in Mississippi, announced in June of 1954, produced a civic trauma. For many it seemed impossible that a company that had for so long been a vital force in local affairs would simply leave, but Smith did. The closing of the mills represented much more than the loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars to local workers. It signalled the departure of an employer that, unionization notwithstanding, was widely perceived as benevolent and often paternalistic. Most importantly, the closing of the Smith carpet mills ended a way of life for entire families, indeed, for an entire generation of workers and, by extension, for the entire city of Yonkers.

*In The Mill* seeks to explore this way of life by surveying what the mills were and what they

did, where they were, and who worked there. This exhibition does not pretend to be comprehensive. It hopes instead to introduce a topic of considerable local significance and thereby pique the memories of those who worked in the mills and spark the interest of those for whom the carpet shop is no more than a part of local lore.

Our exhibition takes its title from a book written in 1941 by John Masefield, the poet laureate of Great Britain. As a young man Masefield had worked in the Smith carpet mills for nearly two years during the 1890s. The experience left a deep and lasting impression on the poet: he found the comradeship of his fellow workers unforgettable, but he possessed ambivalent feelings about the mill itself. He concluded his book with the observation that "Often, I hated the mill; sometimes in dream, I have thought that I had to be there again...and have wakened glad to find it not so."

Masefield's ambivalence is shared today by practically none of those individuals with whom we spoke while preparing this exhibition. At thirty years distance one is impressed with a sense of the immediacy the carpet shop had, and still has, for all who were involved, either as management or labor. Even more impressive is the virtually complete absence of negative comment. The mills, preserved in the memories of those who worked there, are still very much an important part of our community.

Many individuals were most

helpful and gracious in sharing their time and reminiscences as well as their objects with the organizers of *In The Mill*. The lenders to the exhibition parted, however temporarily, with valued mementos of the Smith carpet shop. Mary Boyle, Rose Dronzek, Ruth Flynn, Senator John Flynn, Maitland Griggs, Rose Mahoney, Catherine Nugent, Andrew Repko, Jr., Vincent Viviano, and Harold Zulauf all consented to be interviewed by guest curator Rosalie Flynn. Anne Macko and Joe Rusik, both of whom work for the Mohasco Corporation, were especially helpful in uncovering historical materials relating to the Smith carpet mills in Yonkers. The enthusiasm of Alan Eisenkraft, whose Yonkers Industrial Development Corporation is currently revitalizing several of the mill buildings, provided a constant reminder that the mills are still very much a physical presence.

*In The Mill* was organized for The Hudson River Museum by Rosalie Flynn, a lifelong resident of Yonkers who has an abiding interest in the history of her community, and by Peter Zopes, a summer intern from the State University of New York at Geneseo. The project quite simply would not have happened were it not for the interest, ability, and energy they both brought to it. It is with special pleasure that they and we dedicate this modest venture in local history to the memory of Thomas Appleyard. For many years general manager of the Alexander Smith mills, Mr. Appleyard possessed a special interest in the history of the company and its role in local

affairs. Although his death this past spring prevented his direct involvement in the organization of *In The Mill*, the photographs and records he collected in his informal archive form a central part of the exhibition.

*Rick Beard*  
*Associate Director*

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Carpet mill employees ca. 1880s  
Photograph  
Collection of The Hudson River  
Museum

Halcyon Skinner, inventor of the  
Axminster power loom, is seated  
at the extreme right in the front  
row.

### Memories of the Carpet Shop

For more than ninety years, the Alexander Smith & Sons Carpet Company was a Yonkers institution. "Just like a family" is how former employees refer to the family-owned company that succeeded in conveying a strong sense of belonging to its workers. Thousands of people who believed, like their employers, in the Calvinist work ethic of hard-earned success as a mark of God's grace found in the carpet-making machines a new and demanding god. The work place became a veritable parish, the factories as sturdy as any church. People worked hard and the hours were long, but they produced a fine product in which they took pride and for which they were comparatively well-paid.

Workmen talked of the all-white carpet on their looms and wondered whether it might possibly be for Jean Harlow, or perhaps for the floor beneath a grand piano. Such daydreaming, fanciful as it may seem, detracted in no way from the care and effort that was lavished on the finished product. The work was hard and the people had to be tough. As one mill worker recalls, "the backs of those carpets were rough and hard on your hands....the first person had to put a little hem to keep it from unravelling....the second operator would turn over the hem and sew it down....the third person had to tack it on both ends....God help you if anybody blocked up any of those operations....the stuff would be all over the floor....and the

foreman was down....you had to see those women and guys work....they took it in stride....they were hard, tough people, but warm."

The supervisor was a "nice guy" who "worked like a dog and made me work like a dog too." A strong sense of class separated management and labor—in the old days, only the bosses could wear derbys, this being considered a mark of distinction. Respect for the authority figure is still evident today, when workers continue to refer very formally to their former supervisors.

Employees stayed at the carpet shop—some for 60 years, many for 40 and 50 years—and they brought relatives to work beside them. It was really by word of mouth that people were selected for jobs there. The hiring practice was similar to a longshoremen's "shape-up." New applicants would stand outside the wire fence on Lake and Nepperhan Avenues, the location of the personnel office. The director and his assistant would come out and point—"....you, you, you, inside." It was general practice that beforehand someone would have spoken to the director—"My son (or my brother-in-law) will be in front tomorrow wearing a blue shirt—give him a job." This exercise had its disadvantages in the warehouse area where it was a daily activity. To those appearing for this shape-up, the boss would say, "Okay, today we need 4 rollers to roll carpet, 2 cutters to cut carpet and 2 packagers to bag....4, 2, 2." Then he would go down the

line choosing from among the men and women who had gotten up at 5 a.m. and stood there with their lunch in small brown sacks. Those not chosen would come in the next morning and go through the same routine.

Not only adults applied for jobs. Children would lie about their ages, get a relative to attest to this deceit, and be hired. Ninety-nine year old Catherine Nugent began working in the shop at eleven years of age and remained until mandatory retirement at 65. Her first salary was \$3 a week, which she gave to her mother and received 25 cents in return. She splurged on cream puffs! It was not unusual for fellow workers to hide underage children when inspectors went through the shop. If you had a job you tried to keep it, and there was a strong camaraderie among the laborers.

Alexander Smith enjoyed an historic reputation for benevolent paternalism, a reputation based on the company's concern with housing, medical care, education, and social activities. Company housing, either "the flats" or the small attached homes constructed on Moquette Row near the factory, were offered at very low rents to employees. Oral histories recall that laborers, as much as five years in arrears in their rent, were allowed to remain in these tenements.

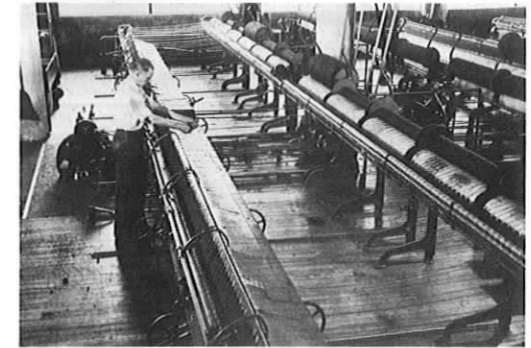
Concern for the physical welfare of their employees was apparent in a company-maintained medical department staffed with a surgeon and three registered nurses. There was a lead-lined

x-ray room with modern equipment and an optical department. Alexander Smith also subsidized St. John's Hospital and its nursing school, and The House of Rest, a pioneer facility in nearby Sprain Ridge for the care of tubercular patients.

Responsible workers who evinced an interest in further education had their tuition paid. One employee reminisced about his training at the New York School of Photography after he had displayed ability in the printing department. This sort of training was feasible since promotion was generally from within, and the industrious employee could work his way up from the ranks.

The company also had a student-training program. In its 1932 pilot project, five young men with varying backgrounds were chosen to spend 26 weeks learning each and every step in the production of carpet. They learned not only the process but also how to repair the machines. This program was the pride of the Vice President, a very forward-thinking man, who wanted to train future "Smith-men-in-charge" and was an early advocate of "aptitude" testing. He knew that men who came out of this program could "...run a big place, run a tremendous place."

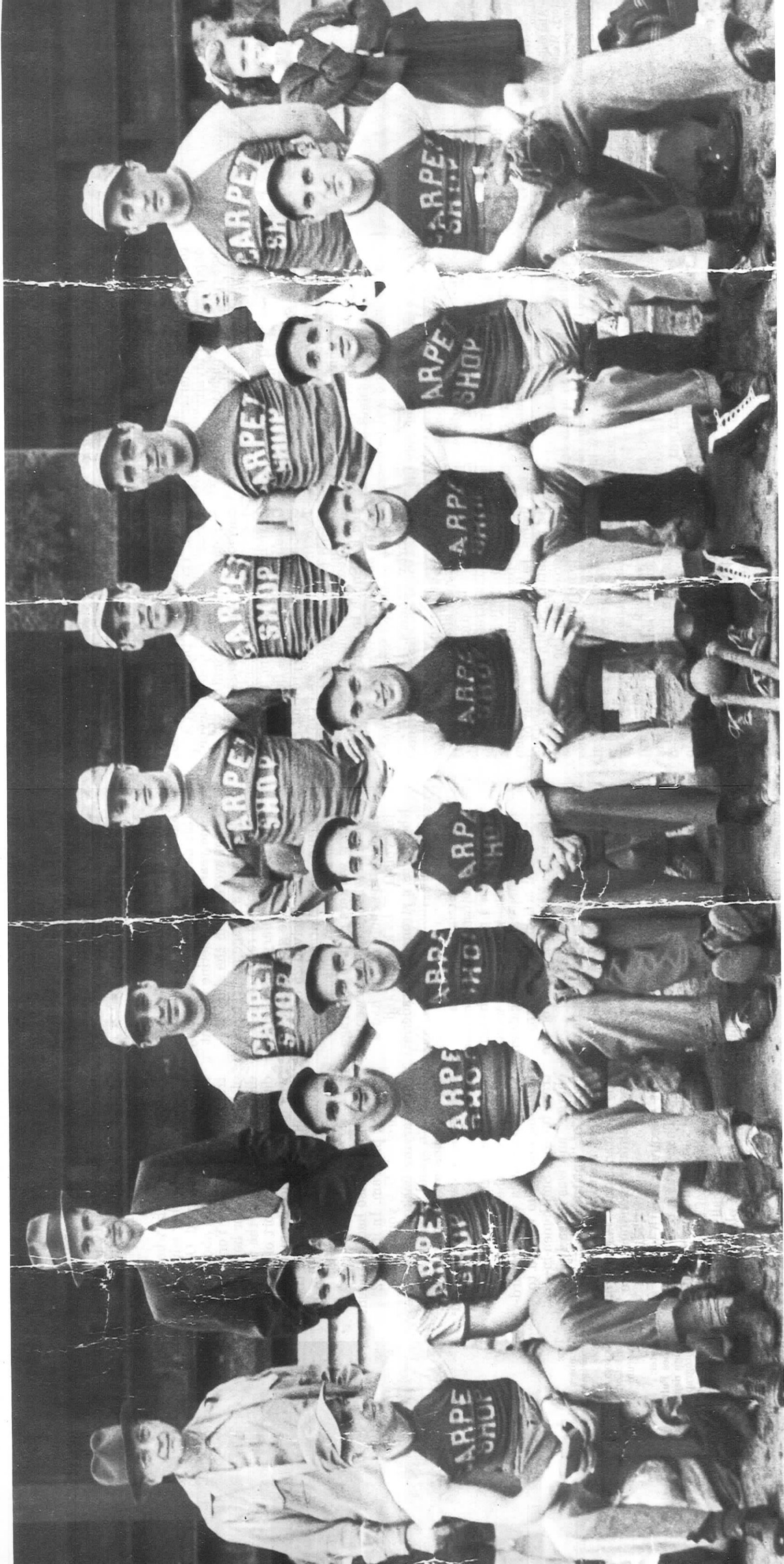
But Alexander Smith wasn't all work. There was a recreational field on Saw Mill River Road at the present site of Phelps-Dodge. There were baseball games and a picnic area with a place for horseshoe tournaments and quoits. Competition was encouraged, and the company sup-

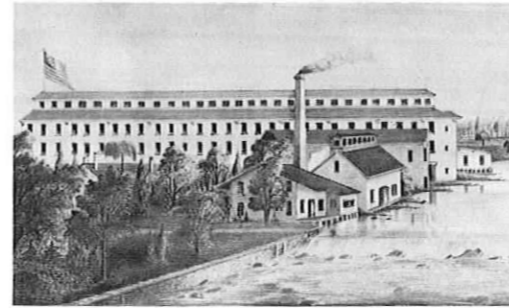


Top:  
Members of the design department and office staff ca. 1896  
Photograph  
Collection of The Hudson River Museum

Center:  
James Fulton, a member of the design department ca. 1895  
Photograph  
Courtesy of Mrs. Archibald Henderson

Bottom:  
A spinner at work 1945  
Photograph  
Courtesy of Mrs. Thomas Appleyard





Top:  
Alexander Smith ca. 1875  
Photograph  
Collection of The Hudson River  
Museum

Bottom:  
The Alexander Smith Carpet  
Factory, West Farms ca. 1855  
Photograph  
Courtesy of Mrs. Thomas  
Appleyard

Previous page:  
The carpet shop softball team  
n.d.  
Photograph  
Courtesy of Mr. Vincent Viviano

plied equipment and a scheduling monitor.

Today, nearly thirty years after the mills closed for the last time, pride and loyalty are still synonymous with Alexander Smith-employees. They, like the industry, were a product of their time. They were all very family-oriented and extended this fealty to the shop. No matter what happened, this loyalty persevered. As eighty-seven year old Rose Dronzek recently observed, "I'd be working there yet, if the shop was there."

*Rosalie Flynn  
Guest Curator*

## Notes for a History of the Alexander Smith Carpet Company

The Alexander Smith & Sons Carpet Company, for nearly a century one of the largest industrial concerns in Yonkers, began as a small factory of twenty-five hand-operated looms in the town of West Farms, New York. There, with the help of a master mechanic named Halcyon Skinner, Alexander Smith developed a special process for dyeing yarns and patented an Axminster power loom. Despite these innovations, the fledgling company had trouble growing. Two fires, one in 1862 and the second two years later, nearly destroyed the whole operation and led Smith to move his mills to the abandoned Waring Hat factory along the Saw Mill River in nearby Yonkers.

Business began to improve almost immediately for Smith, whose new location at the juncture of Elm Street and Palisade Avenue initially housed about seventy-five hand-operated looms. In 1866, within a year of its relocation, Smith's son Warren reported that the carpet shop earned more profits than any other business in Yonkers. By early 1870, the company's success dictated that larger quarters be found. Smith and his colleagues gradually began acquiring property north of Ashburton Avenue along the river, between Nepperhan Avenue and Saw Mill River Road, and during the ensuing sixty years the company erected an industrial complex of staggering size.



The move to larger facilities was matched by the mill's growing reputation, for by the mid-1870s Alexander Smith was gaining national and worldwide attention as the producer of quality carpets. On January 17, 1877 a patent for an improved Axminster power loom (also known as the Moquette loom) was granted to Halcyon Skinner. This patent, the fourth Skinner received on the company's behalf, proved to be the most important because royalty rights of the new looms were sold to several American and European competitors at the rate of twenty cents per yard of carpet produced. Smith and his partners soon found themselves wealthy. The company's founder, however, had only a brief time to enjoy his prosperity. In November of 1878, on the very day he was elected as a Republican representative to Congress, Alexander Smith died.

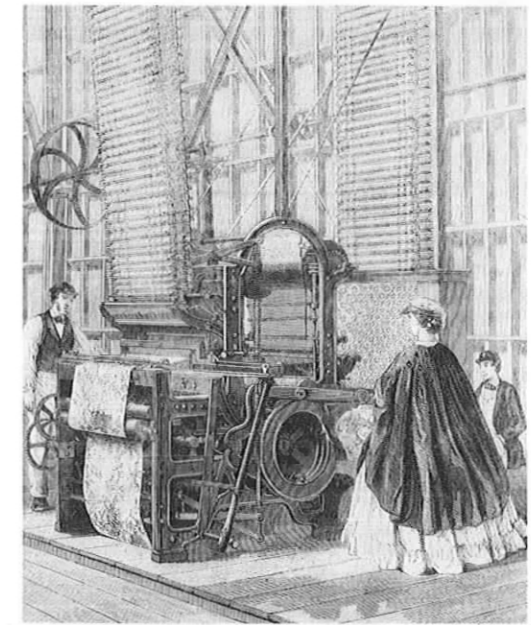
Warren Smith assumed the position of president and under his direction the company made its greatest advances. By 1882 the mills had in operation 106 Moquette looms, 200 Tapestry looms, and 30 Axminster looms. The new leadership proved less successful at maintaining good employee relations, however, and in 1885 the company came to a grinding halt as the mill workers walked out to protest the oppressive working conditions. The strikers had been secretly organizing under the leadership of the Knights of Labor since 1884 and had contributed to a strike fund from their pay. The strike, which lasted from February through June of 1885, was a peaceful display of

solidarity among the workers; when it ended in early July, most of their demands had been met. Although many residents of Yonkers were in sympathy with the Smith carpet workers, the local paper, *The Statesman*, proved to be vehemently anti-union and took every opportunity to attack the strikers. The victory of the strikers did not result in unionization of the company. Warren Smith moderated his views and later executives proved considerably more flexible than he was in his dealings with labor. For more than fifty years after 1885, the Smith mills remained a nonunion shop.

With the exception of the 1885 strike and a five month shutdown during the depression of 1893, the Smith carpet mills experienced few business setbacks of any significance until their final closing in 1954. The mills' success during the early years of the twentieth century was dramatically illustrated in 1912, when the company shipped sixty boxcars full of carpeting worth more than one million dollars to the West Coast.

This commercial success was interrupted but not fundamentally altered by the arrival of the First World War. With great ingenuity the company managed to convert 85% of its manufacturing capability to the production of war materiel. By the end of the conflict, the mills had produced 5 million yards of duck (tent canvas) and 1.5 million blankets.

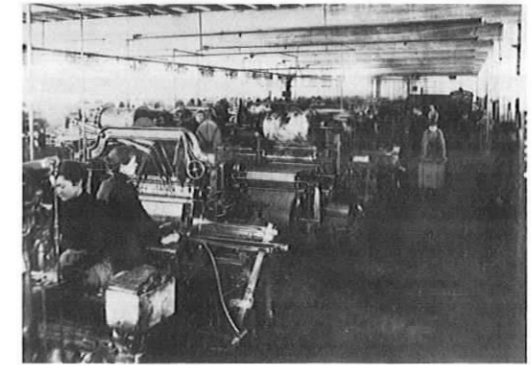
After the war the company returned to manufacturing carpets and in the ensuing two



Top:  
Smith's Power Loom for Weaving Tufted Pile Carpets  
Photograph of the engraving in *The Illustrated London News*, November 15, 1862  
Courtesy of The National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

Smith first achieved international recognition when the loom he and Halcyon Skinner had developed was displayed at an industrial exposition in London in 1862.

Bottom:  
Weavers at work ca. 1895  
Photograph  
Collection of The Hudson River Museum





Top:  
Weaver at work on an  
Axminster loom 1945  
Photograph  
Courtesy of Mrs. Thomas  
Appleyard

Bottom:  
Aerial view of the Alexander  
Smith carpet mills 1945  
Photograph  
Collection of The Hudson River  
Museum

decades achieved its greatest commercial success. In 1928, the mills employed more than 7,000 people and required the wool of over 15,000 sheep to keep its 1250 machine-powered looms producing more than 50,000 yards of carpet a day. In the ten years after 1927, more than 70,000 miles of carpeting rolled off the Smith looms. During the Great Depression the mills never shut down. The workers instead worked half shifts to keep everyone employed.

Although the Great Depression did not result in the closing of the mills, this economic catastrophe did produce fundamental changes in the nature of the carpet mill's operations. The National Recovery Act of the Roosevelt Administration placed strict controls on the carpet industry governing working conditions and hours. As a result the 40 hour work week was instituted, marking the culmination of a gradual reduction of hours worked from 60 prior to 1889 to 54 in 1912 to 48 in 1919.

The year 1934 was the first year the Smith plant saw any union activity since the 1885 strike. Management initially responded to the renewed interest in unionization in a negative fashion, but in 1936 granted the workers a pay raise and a one-week paid vacation. These measures proved to be only temporary palliatives, however, and in February of 1937 the United Textiles Workers of the C.I.O. undertook a major effort to unionize the Alexander Smith shop. In May of that year a vote taken to determine whether the

U.T.W. or the Independent Smith Workers Union would be the sole bargaining agent of the workers resulted in a 300 vote margin of victory for the former union. At the time of the voting, the ballots were written in English, Polish, and Slavic, to take into account the ethnic makeup of the mill's employees. The day after the election Local 122 of the United Textile Workers Union was officially recognized by the company officials.

The onset of World War II led the company to once more retool for the production of war materials. Working amid such slogans as "Remember Bataan—And Keep your Shuttles Flying" and "We are not a defense plant, we are an attack plant," the mill workers manufactured more than 4.4 million yards of duck canvas and 8.5 million yards of blanket fabric. In 1943 the Alexander Smith Carpet Company received the Army-Navy "E" Award for outstanding effort in war production.

The end of the war in 1945 marked the 100th year of the company's operation. In that time it had grown into the largest carpet manufacturer in the world. The mill during this year also suffered its first strike since 1885, when workers sought a union shop. Although the company met this demand later in the year, this strike was only the first of several that were to characterize the postwar years for the Smith mills in Yonkers. Mill activities were disrupted in 1951, 1952, and 1954 by worker walkouts; in fact, the mills were

closed by a strike in June of 1954, when the company decided to terminate its operations in Yonkers completely.

Simultaneous with this upsurge in union activity, the demand for Smith carpets began to fall off as production costs produced higher prices and Americans began to turn to wall-to-wall carpeting. In an effort to combat the losses, the company began to streamline the old buildings and modernize the machinery. This work proved to be slow, however, due to the structure of the buildings and the enormous expenses involved. During the early fifties the company began to absorb losses estimated to be as high as two million dollars a year.

On June 24, 1954, the company announced its intention to close the Yonkers mills. *The Herald Statesman's* headline read "SMITH TO SHUT RUG MILL." The workers on the picket line at first did not believe the story, but their skepticism quickly turned to dismay as they learned that management was indeed abandoning Yonkers for better facilities and tax advantages in Greenville, Mississippi. Although civic and government officials tried to get the Smith management to reconsider, the decision was final. The mill remained open until August to finish production and to liquidate stock.

The reasons for the mills closing will undoubtedly always remain a topic surrounded by controversy. Former union officials often blame the city fathers for not

providing tax breaks and land for expansion to the company. Many former mill workers blame the union for pressing the company too hard. In retrospect, several reasons seem to have contributed to the demise of the Alexander Smith company in Yonkers. High labor costs made it increasingly difficult for the company to contend with competitors whose plants were located in Southern states with a plentiful labor force that was not unionized. The limited access of the plant to transportation facilities made it increasingly difficult for the mills to operate efficiently and profitably in Yonkers. Lastly, the city proved unable or unwilling to match the tax incentives and other benefits promised at the company's new location in Mississippi.

The legacy of the Alexander Smith Company in Yonkers rests both with the hundreds of ex-employees for whom the mills provided not only a livelihood but also a way of life and with the buildings themselves. The workers who once labored in the mills can look back with pride on their profession because the Smith name stood for quality because of their hard work. The factory buildings, currently being revitalized for commercial and industrial use, provide a lasting reminder of the industrial grandeur the mills represented both to Yonkers and to the world at large.

*Peter Zopes and Rick Beard*



Weaver at work on the Axminster loom 1945  
Photograph  
Courtesy of The Mohasco Corporation, Amsterdam, New York

