

**SHOE WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE**

**Lucy Belanger**

*(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)*

**SWOH #010**

October 10, 2008

**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at the Museum L-A. The date is October 10, 2008, and I'm at the home of Lucy Belanger. Did I pronounce that correctly? And this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Lucy, could you start just by giving me your full name, including your maiden name, and where and when you were born?

**LB:** That's my maiden name.

**AL:** That's your maiden name. And where and when were you born?

**LB:** I was born in 1930.

**AL:** In Lewiston?

**LB:** No, I was born in Canada, *(unintelligible)*.

**AL:** And at what age did your family move here ?

**LB:** Well, they came over to get us. My father was American and so was my mother. I was born – what did you ask me?

**AL:** I was asking, how old you were when you came to the U.S.

**LB:** I was eight, 1938, they came over to get us, because my mother and my father were born in, my father was born in Massachusetts, and my mother was born in New Hampshire. When her mother died she was twenty-five, and her father died at thirty six, so her grandmother brought her up. I remember my great grandmother.

**AL:** You do?

**LB:** Oh yeah.

**AL:** What was she like?

**LB:** Oh, she was a nice person.

**AL:** Did you get to see her a lot when you were growing up?

**LB:** Oh yeah. When she died, I was eight years old when she passed away, she passed away in Canada. My mother was brought up in Canada, so was my father. My father used to come and work here, but he wouldn't say he was an American. He wanted to go back to Canada. It's not because he liked Canada, it's because my mother was there. My mother had ten of us.

**AL:** Ten children.

**LB:** In eleven years of marriage.

**AL:** Wow.

**LB:** She had five boys and five girls. I'm the last.

**AL:** You're the youngest?

**LB:** Yeah.

**AL:** So then you moved to Lewiston?

**LB:** No, we moved to New Hampshire, we stayed there a year. My father didn't like it there. He liked Maine better. He used to work here in Lewiston.

**AL:** Where did he work, in the mills?

**LB:** No, in the woods.

**AL:** In the woods.

**LB:** My father worked in the woods, and then he went to the mill. My father died, he wasn't old, he was young. He was only sixty-two.

**AL:** What did he do? He worked in the woods, and in the mill.

**LB:** After he quit the woods, my father had a heart attack when he was thirty-nine, he had angina, so he went in the mill.

**AL:** And what did he do in the mill?

**LB:** I don't know. Clean up or something.

**AL:** Well, working in the woods was hard work.

**LB:** Oh, yeah.

**AL:** Did he ever talk about what he did?

**LB:** Oh yeah, we knew what he did, we used to go with him, Gene and I, I was young, so we went in the woods with my father. We used to peel the wood, take the bark off. We used to help him. But I went to school.

**AL:** In Lewiston?

**LB:** Yeah, I went to Frye School. I went to Jordan School, and then I quit. I went to Pettingill School.

**AL:** At what age did you quit school?

**LB:** I quit at sixteen, on my birthday.

**AL:** Is that because you were then able to work?

**LB:** No, it was to help my father and my mother. They took care of me when I was little, so I took care of them. I went to work at Ranglely Heel. I went there, and I worked there twenty years.

**AL:** Where was Ranglely Heel located?

**LB:** You know where Hanniford is in Auburn?

**AL:** Yes.

**LB:** That's where it was, downstairs, near Watson (*unintelligible*) there. I worked there twenty years, at Ranglely.

**AL:** And what sort of things did you do?

**LB:** I built heels.

**AL:** Heels.

**LB:** And I was fixing machines. I was a machinist.

**AL:** You could fix machines?

**LB:** Oh yeah. I'd take them apart and put them together again.

**AL:** There weren't a lot of women who did that type of job.

**LB:** No, that was a man's job. When I went in, there was Hazel Cross, and Ruth and me. The rest of them was men, building heels. Then they took them off, it was Frank Littlefield, I was working for. And then (*name*) came in. I liked him. He was a nice man. He didn't try to touch you or anything. He was nice.

**AL:** But some of them weren't so nice.

**LB:** No. If you wanted to keep your job, they tried to grab you.

**AL:** And there was no - .

**LB:** He grabbed me, but the old man almost died. I pushed him and he fell. Just like I said, I defended myself.

**AL:** Absolutely.

**LB:** Fire me, I didn't care. But he didn't, because he left. I worked for him for a year, and then he left and (*name*) took over. But (*name*) was a nice man. I used to babysit his son.

**AL:** But at that time, in the shoe shops, did they have, I mean they don't have the safety net for employees that they have now, where you can go talk to somebody.

**LB:** Yeah, we couldn't then. You'd get fired.

**AL:** So you had to defend yourself.

**LB:** Just like, I used to answer back, but I don't know, I don't think I should say that on there. This guy comes up to me, I was sixteen years old. And you know, when you're sixteen, they were picking on me. And I said, you're not going to pick on me too long. So he said, I don't want the heel built that way, I want it built this way. And I said, who the hell died and left you boss. I had been there about two months. He said, kiss my you-know-what. And I said, I wouldn't know where to start, you're all - . I was sixteen years old, and I knew how to answer.

**AL:** So when you started at age sixteen, how much did you make? Do you remember how the change in your wage went up over the years?

**LB:** It didn't go up much in twenty years. I was making, when I first went in I was

making fifty cents an hour. And when I left I was making sixty-five cents. In twenty years. Shoe shops didn't pay nothing. They didn't. The only place I got a nice pay was at Bates College.

**AL:** And what did you do there?

**LB:** I worked at food service with the kids. But before that, I'll tell you about the other shoe shops. I worked at Ranglely Heel for twenty years. From twenty years, I went to Lown Shoe, and I was making heels there too. I was working for Jacob Lown. He was a nice old man. He liked me and I liked him. And I worked there five years. I was making heels, and they paid more, because I was making over two dollars then. And then from there I went to Panther Moccasin. I worked there five years, they closed. I was making shoe boxes. They paid pretty good there too, because I was making about three or four dollars an hour. And then I went, let me see, I worked at Dainty Bits. They were making cookies there. I worked there five years, and then they closed. And I worked at, they didn't pay much there, because I was making a dollar and ten an hour. And then I went to Dori Shoe and worked - .

**AL:** Where was that?

**LB:** Where the mill is, near the New Auburn, (*unintelligible*) St. Mary's Church is.

**AL:** Oh yes, okay.

**LB:** That big building there, I was on the second floor. I worked there eighteen years. I was making, I had five jobs. I was a rougher, I was, I had worked on the saw, and I worked beveling.

**AL:** What?

**LB:** Beveling is a machine, and you have to put the sole in it, and you'd turn it with your finger, but if you missed, sole would fly off. But I got it the first time I worked on the machine. I was good on machines. And I was a stamper. I had five jobs there. Didn't pay nothing. They paid about a dollar ninety-five. My mother was making a dollar ninety-five, I was making a dollar ninety, and I worked there until 1984. And from there, where else did I work. From there, I asked for my walking papers, because my mother was, she was eighty-four when she stopped working.

**AL:** Eighty-four.

**LB:** Yeah. I left her here alone in the day time, while I was working, and I had always worried about her in the shoe shop. And I said no, I'm not going to do this, I'm going to ask for my walking papers, and I did, and I stayed with my mom here for twelve years.

And then she passed. I didn't work for those twelve years. I stayed with her. I was always afraid she'd fall. She was ninety-five when she passed away. After that I said, oh gee, I have to find a job, I can't stand this, my mother gone, because I never got married. I stayed with them. I says, oh, and then I went to see Mrs. Laurence, a friend of mine, and she said Lucy, would you like a job. And I said yeah, I would Mrs. Laurence. She says, go at Bates College. I said, okay.

So I went to see Mrs. Jordan, and I told her, I said, Mrs. Jordan, my mother just passed away, and I'd like to have a job because I can't stay in the house. She said, well, I'll put your thing on top. You know, the paper I filled out. When I went there, I went out and I said, well she didn't hire me, so I'll look for a job. So I walked all day for a job, I couldn't find one. And I came back home and I hear the message on the machine, and Mrs. Jones said, where were you all day, I tried to call you to get (*unintelligible*). I said, well you didn't hire me, so I, she said, can you come in this afternoon, and I said yes. And I started there with four dollars an hour. And I worked there fifteen years.

**AL:** Oh, wow.

**LB:** I retired, I was seventy-three. I walked out, in other words. I had a problem with my boss. Over there too, they picked on you over there, and it was tough. But I didn't mind then, because I wasn't home. And I worked nights. I started at three in the afternoon to set up the food for the kids. There were seventeen hundred kids. And now there's over two thousand. And they have a new building. I haven't seen it yet.

**AL:** I haven't been inside, but it looks really nice on the outside. I'm told it's very nice.

**LB:** How come you didn't go in?

**AL:** Well, I just haven't been in.

**LB:** I can take anybody I want (*unintelligible*) there because I worked there fifteen years. And they used to pick on me, and I picked on them back. I don't know. I'm not like the rest of my family. My mother was real soft. And I have a sister that lives in Sabattus, she's a beautician, she was, she's not now, because she's four years older than I am. I'm seventy-eight. She's eighty-two.

**AL:** So did you have quite a few of your brothers and sisters living in this area as you became an adult? Did you have family all around you?

**LB:** Gene and my sister, Gene my brother, and my sister, they lived close together. But the others, they're all over the state. I have a lot of nephews and nieces. They all got married, but me. My brother had eight kids. And when he died, after my father, he was forty-two years old. And he says Lucy, I'm going to have a boy this time. His wife

was pregnant and she, a little girl was born ten days after he died. He would have been disappointed it wasn't a little boy. My brother lived in New Hampshire, Roland, my other brother. And my mother had two, a girl and a boy that died. They were twenty months old, the both of them, Lucian and Georgette. And then she brought up my nephew, my oldest sister's son. He lives in Texas. He was in the Secret Service for thirty-two years and now he's retired. He's only six years younger than me. He's like a brother because my mother brought him up, he's like a brother to me.

**AL:** And with so many children, there must have been a pretty big age difference between you and your sister.

**LB:** My oldest sister? She was nine years older than me. And my brother was ten years, my oldest brother was ten years older than I was. My mother had, she has two couples, they're the same age for a month, my brother and my sister. She had them quick. I used to say to my father, no TV, dad, in those days? Shut up, he used to say. I used to pick on him.

**AL:** Your mother must have done a lot of cooking.

**LB:** Cooking and sewing. My mother was a seamstress.

**AL:** Oh, she was.

**LB:** She was so good. She'd take anything and she would make it new. Isn't that something. I remember when I was two years old, she made me a little dress, and my shoes, my white shoes, she made those. She made me a little hat, and a coat. And the dress was from a doll. The doll was that high and she made me a dress out of that. And the coat that she had on. And she made me the little panties the same color.

**AL:** Oh, that sounds beautiful.

**LB:** We were in Canada then. I was two years old. And we were walking on the sidewalk, and I walked like this, I remember that. My mother said, why you walking with your arms out like that. I don't want to wear my coat out. I remember. And then my brother, he was twelve, and I was two, and he took me to the dentist, and he wanted to sit me in the chair, and I said no, I can do it myself. I remember, it was a leather chair, and I got on the chair and had my teeth all pulled out. I didn't have no ivory on my teeth. My mother didn't have the stuff that she needed, you know, the food that she needed, because it was the Depression then.

**AL:** Oh, right.

**LB:** One year we'd eat frozen potatoes and the next year we'd eat bread. That's it. And we were happy as a lark when we were all together, the ten of us. My father would

look at us like this, and boy, they'd take off, and I'd say, wait for me. I remember, I was two years old, I used to tell them, wait for me. I didn't want them to go without me. It's funny how things are. I think of that sometimes, and tears in my eyes, because I miss my mom.

**AL:** She sounds like she was a wonderful, long part of your life.

**LB:** She was. I loved my dad too.

**AL:** Thank you.

*End of Interview.*