

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

Henry Berube

(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

June 27, 2007

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Henry Berube at his home on Dockley's Street in Auburn, Maine. The date is June 27, 2007, and this is an oral history for the Brick Makers Oral History Project, through the Museum L-A, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could you start by giving me your full name?

Henry Berube: Yes, my name is Henry Berube, and I live on Dockley's Street in Auburn. And we go back many years now. We go back into 1960, and my brother-in-laws, which was Vern Giguere and Raymond Giguere, they got me started in the brick making. I'd done that approximately three or four years. From there, of course, we had a lot of years, we had a lot of fun together. We went from there, my brother-in-law went brick laying, mason, and that's where I went, brick laying also, mason, and I'd done that for the rest of my life after I'd left the brickyard. And we'd done a lot of work around the area here, like the, the Mason, on Turner Road, and we worked on the high school in Lewiston, which we'd done a lot of fancy work over there, my brother and I, Leo. And, and then we, we started traveling all over the state from here, one end to the other of the state, to go do masonry work, and that's what I done for the rest of my life, and I retired in nineteen, is it '98, '99, and that's where I am today here, talking to Angie, Angie about what I have done. But the years pass by faster than you think.

But the brickyard was quite a, quite a thing. When I worked down at the brickyard, there was a few people I'd like to mention, like the one that was taking off the conveyor, to put the bricks in the rack, and he was real young, and that was Andy Demers, which he is the head of the, he was the head of the state troopers of Maine. And then, another friend was Rene Lavoie, and he is a, he, he was an Auburn

policeman after that, for many years, and I met him at LL Bean, we had talked about it a little bit. And I don't know if they'll like me mentioning their names like that, but that's where they got started, like that's where I got started also. And as far as to describe everything, I have got a booklet like, that will describe everything from brick making, the size of the pit and the clay and how it's done and everything else. And we've got pictures of it, which I'm going to give her a few names on it, so she'll be able to put that in also. And if my brother-in-law, Raymond Giguere, would be here, he'd say we were, we was the best brick makers around, so.

AL: And you were at the Morin Brickyard, is that right?

HB: This is at Morin Brickyard, yes, it is.

AL: Danville Junction?

HB: Danville Junction, and that's where we worked for three, four years together, and we had a good time. When we had enough, we moved on, to the bricklaying.

AL I noticed that in the photographs that you are all wearing bathing suits. Is that how you needed to work?

HB: Yes, that's how we work, because we was in the water. When we get in the water, we'd take, because if that was in a movie camera here, we could have had a little more action, but, but you had to do it on the tape, so. But the pictures will talk for themselves when they do display it, and I wish my brother-in-law was still around.

AL: What were some of the challenges in the brick making? What were some of the harder things to do?

HB: Shoveling the pit. That was a, that's quite a challenge. Of course it's a challenge

in the front also, where you had to go round and round putting a, taking that mold, and you put it in the tub to wash it, and we had a little bit of soap in there, so kind of made it so the clay wouldn't stick, then we'd put it in a machine, and then we'd, then we'd put the mold, there's a handle, and we'd push the mold in, and then we had the, they called a machet, and we used to jump on it, all of our weight. As you can see right there in the picture. We'd jump right there, and that would press the, that would press the clay into the mold. After that, we'd pull the handle back out, and we had a stick that we, we took and we pulled back, so we'd be smooth with the mold. Then we'd pick it up, turn around and dump it on the conveyor. Then we'd go back in the tub. There was two in the front, going around and around like that, and eventually we'd put a hole through the floor with our foot, where we kept going around and around. We'd put a hole right through an inch board, oak. After, we'd have to replace that in the spring. A lot of times, we had to replace that, it would become just as smooth as, as you could get it. You couldn't sand it as smooth as that. We'd done that all day long, and we used to take out forty to forty six cars a day, sometimes forty eight, except for my brother-in-law, Raymond, we had this special machine, where they had a conveyor, and we took out fifty four, fifty six cars, just him and I, and that's a lot of brick. And that's what my brother-in-law used to say, we are the champions. I still wish he was around. But he could tell a story better than I could. He, he, he really could. That's about all I can say, I can tell Andrea about the guys, a few names there, that's on the pictures, so she'll be able to put it into the -.

AL: Yes, they have three.

HB: Yes, she can put it right in there, so they'll know who they are. That's all, about all I can say. We done that all summer long, and I used to go in at one hundred and seventy five pounds, and I'd come out weighing one hundred and sixty five, solid, I couldn't complain, I lost a lot of weight when I worked there, so it didn't make me too, too fat. I guess that's all about I can say about it, I don't know -.

AL: Now, what kind of bricks did they make at Morin? Was it just one type, water struck, or was there different kinds?

HB: No, that was all water scrubbed, but it was all in the burning. Somebody set the kiln. When they set the kiln they had different, different types of bricks, you know, like the light red, they had the (*unintelligible word*), they had some, even had antique bricks that come of it, because they used to burn with, with wood. They could even burn with wood that would give the color, would give the color of the brick, so it was pretty, it was some pretty, pretty nice brick coming out of there. Matter of fact, I still got a few around the house. So he made some nice bricks. They don't make them that way anymore. I don't know how they make it, I'd have to go see, I don't know how they make it now, they don't make it like we'd, we used to. Because that pit right there, it will tell you the dimension and everything, and I know it's fairly deep, but you can see Raymond there, he's just a smidgen taller than I am and, and he's so, boy above him. See the, where you see that hole, where he's shoveling there?

AL: Yeah.

HB: That's the machine. In another words, you'd put a two clay, a three clay to one sand, I can't remember now, but that's, I, I believe that's what it was. That it makes a mix, so if you put too much sand, the brick don't shrink, and if you don't put enough sand, it, it will crack, so you got to have a mix, just like mixing cement, only it's mixing clay to make the, the brick, and then they put it in kilns to, to, as I say, cook them. They burn them, burn them so they, the brick. When the brick, where you take the brick in the mold, I believe, I'm not, I think it's nine inches long, and I believe it's four inches wide and three inches thick, and there's, there were six of them in a mold. That's what we used to, that's what we used to put on the pallet, and then they'd put them in, then they'd put them in the rack. It was pretty interesting. I done that for years, and still I don't remember everything but I, the picture over Deep (*unintelligible*) South,

(unintelligible), the picture will speak for itself.

AL: Now, were you, when you were doing this process every day, were you also building new kilns?

HB: Well, yes, that there, I don't have of it, but they had, which that's all changed now, they had kilns, but they had men there setting bricks, when it's all dried, see, when you see them, them sheds there, can you see the shed, no, no, not there, see the sheds right there?

AL: Yes, yes.

HB: That's where we'd make them, right there, where they'd draw the curtain, but, up above, and they had many sheds, they had a lot of sheds, and they'd put them racks in there to dry.

AL: Okay.

HB: Then when it's dry, they used to come and get it, and, and they used to have a kiln, it's a special place again, right there, and they used to set. I never, I never worked a set bricks and stuff like that, but I did work a little bit to pick up brick when it was all burnt and ready to go, I done that a little bit, but I never worked too much in there. So it's a lot of, it's a long process. You know, I don't have all that, we had mostly for the brick making over here, that you see some shed, and plus today's altogether different than it was back then. They used to set the brick in the kiln, and they used to make, I believe, is three, three or four million bricks a year, that's what they used to make there, water struck. And today, well they got a, everything is going on, it's set on tar, just like a railroad, and it's built with oil, and it goes through this kiln, and by the time it starts, I think it takes twenty four hours by the time it gets all done, at the other end, the brick's

done. That's how they do it today. But back then, they used to have big kilns where they'd put, I can't remember if that's three hundred thousand bricks, I think, they used to put per kiln. Now it's, maybe Rachel's got the, the info on that, I don't, I was supposed to go talk with Norm, and called him up and he was supposed to call me back and he never did, so I didn't bother to get to him.

AL: Norm?

HB: Davis.

AL: Davis? Okay.

HB: Norm Davis. That's about all I can say about it.

AL: Yeah.

HB: Of course the picture will talk for itself, and you read the -.

Unknown: Reading (*unintelligible*).

HB: Yes, you're going to find out that I don't remember everything, but it's, I kept that. I had one, I had one of them and I kept it, and I said, I'm going to cherish that one.

→ When I couldn't find it, and I had looked all over the house for it, and finally I found it, and I had some copies made for you, and that way there, you can give it to Rachel and she can make up the story as it goes, that talks good, I guess.

Unknown: She can make (*unintelligible*). How many bricks and (*unintelligible*).

HB: Oh yeah, so the, the stories will tell what's, what the rest of the story, where I can't remember. I should have read that, it would have helped me out, but I didn't.

Unknown: It would have.

AL: How long were your days, when you worked there? Do you remember?

HB: I would start early in the morning, it starts sometimes at five in the morning, six o'clock, five mostly, when it got light, we was there. And at one, two o'clock in the afternoon, we was gone, we was gone home. But we had to pour, well, you can't see it, after we got done striking, you see where my brother-in-law is working in the pit there?

AL: Yeah.

HB: Up above, these certain, these certain ones there, we had a big bin up above with the bags with the handle, we used to open up the water, and we used to take the dry clay and, and we used to, to kind of even it out, so it wouldn't be too soupy or too hard, and we'd fill the pit, and then after the thing was filled up, then we'd go home. Wash up and go home.

AL: Let that set?

HB: Yes, overnight, and then in the morning -.

AL: And then what did you do about it the next morning, (*unintelligible phrase*)?

HB: Then we'd be ready to go again, every day we'd do that, so we was quite a bit. We had it a little easier than some, some had to shovel that in, like that over there, they had to shovel it in, we didn't. We had the, we had the easier way. So we probably weren't as tired as they were over there.

Unknown: That was something. I'd seen (*unintelligible*) brothers.

HB: We done that anyway, and at the end of the day we got to go home. ^{*}(But the first weeks, though, I used to have holes in my fingers, it wear, it wear my skin right off, where I, I'd, I'd go to, my brother-in-law says, go to the drugstore and get yourself some benzene new skin, and I'd put that, when I got home, I'd put that two, three times, maybe four times, by the time I'd get to bed, and it took me two weeks before my, my fingers were hard enough, where I wouldn't have no more holes in my skin. I mean, it wore it right off, so I had to build it up, and that's the only way I could build it up quick.)

AL: Is it because you really couldn't wear gloves, or -?

HB: No, you couldn't wear gloves or (*unintelligible*), you wouldn't be able to handle the molds and stuff, because we, see that little tub right there, that's where, every time we had to dip it in there, see, and it goes back in the machine, (*unintelligible*), you know, after we put it in, take it out, strick it, go around, we kept doing that all the time, all day long. So, we'd take turns, we'd take, let's say, like four cars, four cars would be two turns on both sides there, like you see there. And then sometimes we'd switch, one of us, we'd go in the back, the other one would come in and then, you know, we'd rotate. But he used to stay in the pit long, you know, and then he'd say, turnaround, Henry, it's your turn now. He said, now today, you're going to start the pit. I did, I did good. After a while he says, who's there in the back helping you? He'd laugh, we used to joke about it.

Unknown: Did you tell of how many bricks they made, Henry? They made five hundred.

HB: Yeah, like the one I was talking about there? We'd switch machines, it was just very nice, sometimes we'd do the same job as, as three men, so, it was hard work but

we did it, just to prove, just to prove that we could do it. But we was young back then too.

AL: Yeah. What is your birth date?

HB: My what?

AL: Your birth date.

HB: My birthday? I was born in 1937, 13th.

Unknown: November 13th.

HB: Yeah, November 13th.

AL: Were you born in Auburn?

HB: Yes, well Lewiston actually, in a hospital, and then we lived in Auburn.

AL: But you lived in Auburn. What part of Auburn did you grow up in?

HB: Right here.

AL: Right here.

HB: Well, not in this house. My brother lives right over there, that's the family house over there, and I didn't move very far, I probably moved about eight hundred feet away. I stayed pretty well in the area.

AL: Yeah, now, how many, were there several brickyards in the area?

HB: Well, there was, there was quite a few, but I never went anywhere else, I stuck right there, and then when I got that done, I went bricklaying, I went mas-. Well, of course, you got to start at the bottom, like anybody else, you got to start tending a little bit, and then after that, then that's a couple years in, and then done some bricklaying, started a (*unintelligible*), yeah. So, I done all right, yeah.

AL: Now, can you talk about the term striking, and what it means, in terms of making bricks?

HB: Well, I just told you, when I, when, this is what they call striking right now, when you take your mold, wash it, put it in the machine, and push the handle in -.

AL: That's called striking?

HB: Yes, when -.

AL: Okay.

HB: When you push in, when you push that handle in, that goes underneath with the clay. Do you see that, that thing turns in the back? It's like a mixer, okay, and when you jump on this, on this, it's a machet, it's, it's a thing about that, that long, when you jump on it with all your weight, that's when it presses, it presses the mud, or the clay into the mold, and then when you pull it out and you strick with a stick, you know, it's taking your stricker that makes it even with the, with the mold, and when you take it out, that's what they call striking, right there, and you keep turning, and that's what they call, this guy here and this guy here are striking, that's myself and my brother-in-law, and we kept going around, that's striking. That's striking out the bricks on the machine, when

you jumped on this pedal, jump on this pedal, that's when it, it pushed the clay into the, because this clay is mixed, it's just like putty. You can't have it, you can't have it too soupy, if you got it too soupy, when they pull the mold out like this here, you pull the mold out, that brick will collapse, it won't stay square, okay. So, that's why you have to have the mud just, well, the clay just right. I call it mud, it's clay, and it's just like putty. You know, you can take putty and, and you can add water to it, and it gets too soft, it's not good, it's got to be right. And by putting a mold into the water, that had a little soap on it, you know, add a little soap, that's just like washing our hands all the time. And we'd go around, that's why if you didn't have that, the mud, there I go again, the clay would stick to the mold and wouldn't come out good.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about, in terms of this, that you think is important to add?

HB: No, I don't know, it's, I think I got it pretty well covered. And of course, you can read my st-, that, that booklet there, the template or whatever you want to call it, pamphlet, or whatever, you can read that and that'll explain just about everything. Like I said, I may forget a few things, but that'll cover it pretty good.

AL: Now, I'm going to interview Norm Davis tomorrow. Now who, has he been somebody you've known in the brick making?

HB: Oh, he's been there for years. He'd been there for a long time.

AL: Okay.

HB: He's the, as we're talking now, I believe he's, the last I knew he was president of the brickyard down there, because all the Morins, as you know, they're all passed away now.

AL: Okay.

HB: And the LaChance were, of course Norm will know more about that, LaChance, one of the Morin married LaChance, a Morin woman married a LaChance, and that's how they got LaChance and Morin in there. But that only come in later, but when I worked for them it was Morin all by, strictly Morin. Well, Norm will be able to fill that in pretty good.

AL: He will, okay.

HB: I wanted to talk to him, but he, he didn't, he didn't talk, he didn't call me, so I didn't talk to him.

AL: Well great, thank you so much.

HB: Well, you're very welcome, and I hope it comes out good, in whatever you're doing.

AL: Thank you.

End of Interview

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