

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

**Penny Drouin**

*(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)*

**SWOH #04**

April 2, 2008

**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at the Museum L-A. The date is April 2nd, 2008. I'm at the home of Penny Drouin, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Mrs. Drouin, could you start just by giving me your full name?

**Penny Drouin:** My full name is Hermance Drouin, I was known with an alias, as Penny in those days, and I hope that I can be useful to this project, and share what I remember, and how the experiences I've had while working at Knapp Shoe.

**AL:** And did you work at Knapp Shoe all of your years in the shoe shops?

**PD:** No, I've worked in the shoe factory when I was about fourteen, fifteen.

**AL:** And what, what one was that?

**PD:** That was up, that was up in Auburn at the old Cushman building. I can't remember the factory, the shoe factory that was at the top, and then I went to department store work, then I went to my own tailoring place, then I went, I went into a lot of different things, but I settled in at Knapp Shoe, like for over, I worked there for over thirty years, until the mid seventies. I retired at seventy two from there, because of my husband, he was a wounded World War II veteran, had died at ninety three, so I stopped working after he was, he passed away, so I could enjoy the rest of my life. And things were getting a little too heavy at that age, because factory work at Knapp Shoe was very heavy work, and it took its toll on our energy and some of our health.

**AL:** Now, where and when were you born?

**PD:** Oh, I was born October 22nd, October 20, October 22, 1922. I should remember that easy.

**AL:** And where were you born?

**PD:** I was born here in Lewiston, the only one of a big family, Canadians that came from Canada and eventually were heading for Lawrence, Massachusetts, to work out there, where my mother's sisters had set up jobs for them, but with all the stuff that was happening, heading into the Depression, they, they, my parents stopped in Lewiston

and I wind up being the only one born there, here.

**AL:** Oh wow, and so, so are you the youngest?

**PD:** I'm the youngest of a big family.

**AL:** How many are there in your family?

**PD:** There were seven living, seven living in my family, but my mother had lost four pregnancies, so we were like thirteen kids, I think.

**AL:** So, what was it like growing up in Lewiston in the '30s and 40's?

**PD:** It was nice, and I think about all the good things. The railroad stations, the trains that my father worked on the railroad, so we used to have me and some little friends we used to have there, and sit in the, in the, where you come in for your tickets, and we'd watch the trains go by. Sometimes my father had gotten us on to take a ride over the bridge. It was so exciting, and we were so scared, me especially, I never learned to swim. So it was, it was a real nice experience. And I remember the snow sleighs coming down the streets, with horses and with their little bells ringing, so we'd know that they were on the road. I remember that next to my house, where the Main Street fire, where the fire department is now, I grew up there, and my mother kept us in a very confined area, because of things that were going on in the '30s, like the booze (*unintelligible*), that people would go in to buy homemade brew here and there, and with a whole lot of commotion going on, so I was kind of restricted. I thought the world was only that big, you know, around Ash Street, around, not beyond Ash, Ash to Main Street, and from Middle Street, where I was born, to, to Blake Street, that's all the (*unintelligible*) part, I'd lived there all my life, when I was young, so, for me, it was.

And on the corner where the fire station is, they had the horseshoe place, that they would shoe the horses. We used to go look and they'd never let us go in, we'd thought it was so exciting to see them, the sparks flying when they were putting the horseshoes on. And the city yard was next to it, and we used to go over the fence to, to go play in there, bunch of us kids, when it was closed on Sundays and they had fences, but we could get over them easy, and we used to go in there, and we'd, we'd step, we'd climb up in the, they had these, to carry tar I guess, the back side of the truck would tip down, so we used to run up and down in there, thinking it was so exciting, wow.

But, but then after growing up, my life was not, it was kind of quiet at home, because my parents kept us around a lot, we weren't allowed to go everywhere, because my parents were old when I was young, being the last child. So, we had, I remember going out to Santa Claus, Salvation Army used to play music on the corner of Main and Park Street, we could go there. The city park in Lewiston, we used to go there every Saturday to listen to the band, the Saint Cecil Band that was playing at that time, it was nice. We

used to walk around, of course we noticed the boys that were walking around too, being thirteen and fourteen, lots of fun, that was nice. I was so shy, I don't know, I made believe that I never noticed and kept looking at the ground when they come facing towards me, but I knew they were there. So we had, we had a real nice growing up experience.

That's where I met my husband, when we were fourteen. We stayed married for sixty years. The romance never ended, it was straight through sixty years, through the hard times, through anything. It was always a partnership that we worked together at. We were happy, but even if we had a big family, it's not the amount of money or the riches that you have, it's nice if you have it, but if you don't, if you have love, and you can have a, build a nice life and teach a kid that you love them, and you know, (*unintelligible*) that you're forgiving for the growing up years, I think you wind up with a fairly great family. Mine, I think, is wonderful. I think that's my, my treasure in life, my children.

**AL:** And how many children did you have?

**PR:** I had seven. Now they're catching up with me in years, some are sixty one, some are, they're all pretty much following one another in age, except the two last ones, they were ten years difference and the other one four, the last two that I had. So, I was busy. And then I started working at Knapp Shoe, before my daughter here, the youngest, she was probably four or five, and I've worked there until evidently way over '70, 1977, because they took that picture at that time, and I worked until '80, '80 something, '82 maybe, 1982, it's a long stretch. It was a long stretch, but you know department, the store work and being salesperson and all that, that didn't pay like if you were fast (*unintelligible*). When I entered Knapp Shoe, I just knew how to sew, the rest to me was strange, and one of my girlfriends, I says, I need to go where I can earn more money to help with supporting my family, growing up, because both my husband and I wanted them educated, so and they all seemed to have wanted to, except one. So, for us, it was a big advantage, I guess we made the right choice.

So, I finally went in, applied, and they took me right off, and I started doing little jobs here and there, but then I started on the sewing part of it, and I remember sewing on a job that was like a fancy stitching on the men's vamps, and those were like, that one machine had about six to eight needles. Now, if ever there was a skip in one little thing at Knapp Shoe, the work had to be done right. We used to have to redo and try to fix it, and make, make it like it was supposed to be. They were very strict with their work. But then I was always very careful and very work oriented to do the best I could give anyway, so that kind of let me through more probably than someone that wasn't fussy about what they did. It was, I'd, that was fancy stitching. Then I went, they put me on top stitching. Now that was something big. The vamps style stitching on the fancy wasn't hard, it was piece, piece by piece. Now these big engineered boots that went up to the knee, for all kinds of work, male boots, those were heavy and hard to handle. That was hard work, all those years. You developed (*unintelligible*), you developed all

kinds of things you're left with and you know it had to go back to the work floors. We had to reach for work that was, they used to put the wires to put the boots on when they were done and hook them back up on the top of, of, of pipes they had running up a little lower than the ceiling, we couldn't have reached it, but it was hard to do. So in the factory, being a piecework person, you have to work really hard and fast and well to do, to be able to put your quota out, so.

**AL:** Right, let me pause for just a second.

**PD:** I always made, I always made sure that I came in on time. When we know the hours of work, I'm very consistent with what I do most of my life, so when we know the work of hours was from seven to four or five, mostly five. And I always made sure that I came in early enough to, to try to save time, because to the company, the important thing was to put the work out, because to meet their, the deadlines on the deliveries, so it was, it was a struggle, but it was always rushing. So I used to, I found ways, having been the stitcher with Cole's and all this, I found ways in the morning or at noontime, during our time, to make sure I got my thread, I got my needles, I got my, my, my machine cleaned and setup, instead of waiting while I'm working, it breaks down, you have to go put your name, whatever I could for my machine, I would do it, so that kind of helped me to have a better paycheck at the end of the month, plus be proud in a way of the work that I was doing, because it always mattered. If I get paid for something, I like to give my money's worth, you know, their money's worth. So for me, it was, it was like I say, hard work, and you have to be quick with your hands when you work in a factory, piecework. It's not the easiest thing to do, but you, you get used to it.

And the company always expected good quality anyway. They were very fussy. Sometimes, the, the man who owned Knapp Shoe, Mr. Knapp, would come from Massachusetts, and he would, there was no union at our place, but there was in Massachusetts, he used to come every now and then to visit the people, one to one. Very, very nice, very likable person, and he made us feel good about the work we did, checking what we did, and what our records were. So for me, I thought that was (*unintelligible*), giving your best to, to a company that tries to make your living better, you know, and at least your earning living. The work was hard, this I think anybody can say it was easy, working at Knapp Shoe. It was heavy work, it was real, you got out of there, you knew you had worked.

**AL:** Yeah, did you get any benefits? Were there vacations?

**PD:** Well, we had vacation pays.

**AL:** Sick pay?

**PD:** Yes, we used to have, depending on the amount of years, you had two, three, four. When I quit, I think I was up for four or five weeks of vacation pay, and somehow I



kept working, I wasn't feeling good, my health was deteriorating, and I kept thinking, I've got to hold on and hold on. From the time I was sixty to seventy two, I think, I was working, always saying, boy, I'll be glad when I retire, I'll be glad when I retire. But I didn't until I was seventy two almost, quit work. So and Mr., Mr. Harrison Foster was our top man here, and there's a Bouch-, I don't know what his name was, his last name was Bouchard, I know him, and I still see him somewhere sometimes at banquets I've gone to, I've seen him there. He, he was the second man beyond, after Foster. And our boss, I was in the stitching room working and he, his name was Butch Richards. Nice, all nice, nice, likable men, very business oriented, very work oriented. Sometimes they'd come in, especially Mr. Foster or Mr. Knapp, with a ruler, and we knew what that was for. If they wanted just so many stitches to an inch, that's what you had to do, to correct, so it was, it was pretty, a matter of fact, it was, it was all right for them to expect the way they wanted things done.

So, our lunch hour was like from twelve, twelve, twelve thirty sometimes to one, but mostly twelve to one. I used to sit with the girls, we made good friends that are forever friends, when you work in places like that. And we used to have our lunch and hurry, and then we'd knit, crochet, like instead of sitting, resting, we, we found it was distracting, too contrary to what we were doing, so used to knit and crochet, make quilts, and whatever. So, and then we used to sometimes, one of the friends that sat next to me, who is still a good friend today, I haven't seen her, in between working there with her and, and finding her again, there was a twenty some years space there we didn't see each other, and then all of a sudden, when my husband died, she appeared again. At that time, that was, I think I needed probably someone like that to inspire me to get into something, not to just stay at home, and I did. I joined a small elderly group, well small, thirty people at that time, now they've (*unintelligible*) back, which I've stayed with, and because, and we meet once a week, and now we're probably just about, most, a lot have passed away, but it was such a nice rewarding thing to do this, because it kept me more alert with life, with not retrieving into a sad, a sadness that would have kept me just doing nothing. So that was a kind of a reward, having met her in my lifetime. So, so if we were quick with our hands and alert and did good work, we were there for life if we, you know, at Knapp Shoe they were very, very concerned about keeping, maintaining their people. They tried hard not to, to have to let you go.

But between that and the years between, there was a strike at Knapp Shoe. I don't know if people remember that, I don't think that is something that no one probably ever forgot, but a lot of people of that generation have passed away so. They had a strike, because in Lewiston here, it was the only branch of Knapp Shoe that was not, that didn't have, what -.

**AL:** The union?

**PD:** The union, that's right. So what they did is the, I had a brother-in-law that was working as a cutter on the upper floor from us, and that group of cutters started to get together to start fighting to have the union come in. So they worked on everybody in the

factory to join them and to be, and most people did. But the ones that did, all lost their jobs, because they never, they, Mr. Foster, of course I shouldn't say probably just the good things, but there's all sides to people, and he had decided to, that it wasn't going to happen here, probably because the Boston factory didn't want this one to be unionized. They'd have to pay certain wages, as opposed to what we were getting here for the heavy work we did. So they str-, they invited the cutters to come to a meeting with just them, not the rest of the people, the factory didn't know about it. So they went in, and they talked them into, made it so interesting and so good for them that they broke that, that, they broke that the strike, so we were all called back in, the ones that had gone on strike had lost their jobs. I have a friend and her husband, both worked there, they both lost their jobs, that was sad, that was a hard time. Myself, I don't know if they would have let me go or not, but I don't think I got into it enough, that I developed a blood clot. I was prone to having phlebitis and all this good stuff, so I was in the hospital at the time. But they were nice enough, they send me a letter, telling me not to worry, my job would be waiting for me. I thought, you know, gee, I don't know why, because most people that were on strike were, were let go.

**AL:** Do you remember about what year was that, or decade? Was it '60s, '70s?

**PD:** I can't really, I know my, my life there was from the, from the years of '48, '40 to '63, '70 something. So I was there like thirty years or thirty, so for me, I've been trying to get back to the actual dates, but I had so much going, you know. I took people in at home in my house that didn't have a home, I'd take (*unintelligible*). I said, my house is Grand Central Station, and, but he needs a spot, it's open. So all those years kept me so busy, and I got so busy volunteering with the elderly, with the sick in nursing homes and their homes, and I just ended that just a few years, two years ago, because I got so I couldn't depend on how I'd feel day to day. But that was my, my big drop back to something else.

**AL:** Now how did you come to be working in a factory at the age of fourteen?

**PD:** Oh god, from a big family, we had to -.

**AL:** You had to work?

**PD:** We had to go work, and I used to walk from Lewiston up to Auburn, and back home at night. And I remember the time of the flood, the water was up at the bridge, and I never learned to swim, because my parents were old when I was young. I was the youngest of all the family, so they didn't have a car, didn't have a phone. So I remember crossing that bridge just the same, as fearful as I was, to get back home, so I wouldn't be kept out there. I didn't know who or what or where I'd go from there, so I remember those years a bit too. So there's, so it's to keep all this together, it's the (*unintelligible*) that's, that makes life full. Over there I had to, I'm trying to think, I did some trimming with the sharp knife, that was trimming around, I did sewing there too.

**AL:** When you were fourteen?

**PD:** Yes.

**AL:** Yeah.

**PD:** They had put me on a sewing job too, I remember. I remember some of the girls in my mind, my, the faces and the, that goes a long ways too. So, there's quite a -.

**AL:** So growing up and being from a big family and coming here, your family emigrating from Canada, you must have had a lot traditional French food in your home?

**PD:** Well, we had a lot of traditional Canadian food. And there was always some, I trying to think about the right, was always roasts and chicken and mostly what we do today, because we, I think we tend to stick to that food, when we'd been brought up on a certain way of eating. You try other foods, some are good, and some are, you seem to be able to pick out more, the different tastes in food, because of your being always on the same, you recognize one, it's a homemade Canadian meal. One thing I found, I cannot eat pancakes, even today. I remember going in line with my mother, when they had, when that Depression part was coming up, I was probably four or five, maybe, maybe three, but I know I was very young, she used to take me with her to this place on Park Street, where they, they opened up a place, the government opened up a place for people and they were giving all the big families flour, that brown flour, whatever they called it, I don't know, I can't remember that, and was eating pancakes so much to survive, that for me, I look at a pancake and it's like I block up right here. And they look good today, but I still don't, yeah, so that was.

And the Salvation Army, now that's something I've always regarded as, as precious, because where there were big families, I remember one Christmas, I heard this knock at the door, my mother opened the door, and I saw they had left a big basket full of food. They knew what big families were. And the only thing I really remember more than anything else, I took that can of Carnation milk that was in the basket, because we didn't have much of that, and I went, the stoves, and the kitchen stoves weren't close to walls back then, they usually had a box of wood on the side, and the stone in the space, so the fire would kept the wall warm and burn the rest where it heated back then. And I remember my mother had this little thing that you could open a can with, it punched a punch hole. So I punched a hole in the can, went in back, sat there, drank the whole can of Carnation milk. Up to today, I still can't drink Carnation milk. That was being, you know, it shows how, how far you can go, when you crave something that you haven't seen, or something you know that would be good to, to survive, to really to, yeah, so there's a lot of.

My mother was always wanting to go out and help neighbors. Back then, when people

were dying, they were, they were in their own homes. And I remember when she took me to, to go see, because she used to offer friends, neighbors, or people she didn't know, if they would, needed help, she was always there for them. So I had a good teacher. And I remember her bringing me, and she said, just touch, touch it. They used to go in back then and wash the dead for the family, because sometimes the family couldn't handle that, so my mother used to offer if they needed someone, she'd be there. I remember her taking me there, and I remember not wanting to touch, but I finally did, I thought I'd be brave, you know. And it really settled me with that, forever after, I never dreaded going where there was person laid to rest in the house. So that was -.

**AL:** So you must have been, your family must have been close with the neighbors. Was it a close knit community of people?

**PD:** Yes, fairly close, yeah, there's a, the *(name)* Oil of people today, her son from the *(name)* that used to live across the street from us. And there was a school on the corner there, that is now a city building, I don't remember if it's for public services or the school on the corner of Oak and Bates Street. What they have, oh, where they have the, the home for the aged there on Park Street -.

**AL:** Yeah, I can't recall.

**PD:** I know that name too, and I can't. They used to be, when I was little, my first shoe factory job I had was there. It was known as Bay Shoe, up there on the fourth floor. And I remember my mother said, you need to, my father and my mother, you need to try to go look for work, see if you can find something to help the family. Again, that was in the year of the Depression, now that crappy stuff. So I went and I was so afraid. I heard myself climb up the stairs, going up to the fourth floor, they were all steel, and when you walk on them, they make a noise, your shoes, you know. And I remember walking, pushing myself to walk all the way up, and they hired me, twenty five cents, I think, a day that, that I was getting. Social security came out, I think, just about during those, a year, or a year after, or just about that time. But the women that were there, I remember, were middle aged. Somehow they always get the, gave the worst work, that they didn't want to do, that wasn't earning anything, to their young people that were going in. It wasn't very much fair play back then, no. It was like a struggle, me or you. But it was, it's been interesting, life's been interesting. I never found I had a really hard time to adjust to anything that I had to do or chose to do. For me, it seems that if it's something you have to do, you do it. Find yourself a good reason why you have to do it, then it won't be as hard as we think, you know. So the years kind of took its toll, but it's not, now that I sit here and look back on life and think about all that, the things that took place.

We used to have, the credit union that Knapp Shoe has across the street, it's been there for years, I've always belonged to it. I started when I was working there, and I've



always put my savings away, whatever I could, I still do. So for me, I've seen, I've seen a lot of different people come and go. And then summertime, we used to have picnics, oh no, the more I try to figure what was going on. We had picnics, and I think it was up in, they have a lake, going up Main Street, you go straight, straight, straight up, they had a big place, fields, and the water there, I'm trying to think, but the, it's not lower Waterville, it's not. Anyway, Knapp Shoe used to open that and rent that, and we used to go and have banquets. Those were the best banquets I've ever enjoyed in my life. They used to be well put together and well enjoyable. Everybody hated to leave. So we'd play games -.

**AL:** So it was like for all the employees?

**PD:** All the employees.

**AL:** A thank you?

**PD:** And you can invite family, a family member. So the food was good and the games were good, and so we, so my husband was always coming with me. So we had a bathing suit contests for men and women. He won the contest for best looking legs that the man has, and I won. I came up after the one that won first for the bathing suits and all that stuff. I had pictures, I tried to look to find them, and I couldn't. I guess they're all boxed in yet, but I've got so many pictures in boxes, that I tried to go through them, but there's too many today. I should have thought of that before now. So it was really, that was the best time of the year, I think, going to this. Christmas parties were great too. They had a banquet, and they were trying to show their hap-, their appreciation for workers, you know, the company. But that strike and after the strike there, it became harder and harder to, to work there. So I worked until I thought I was going to drop, and one morning I got up, went down to see the nurse, told her, I felt so bad, I'm going home. I had a hard time making it to my car, wound up in the hospital, and I never, I never went back. I told them, that this, this was it.

**AL:** Well, is there anything else that, that I haven't asked you yet, that you think is important to include?

**PD:** I just wrote a few little things here and there, but I don't see anything I've wrote here, that's how, how I developed the greatest relationship with friends that I still see and occasionally meet with. Sometimes we want to meet to celebrate each other's birthday. And today, I think, many today aren't around, but, but they're not forgotten. The true and sincere friendships we developed on our journey always remain in our memories to the end of our journey on earth. So for me, I think that tells it all. I think it's, hard work doesn't really kill us, and you can enjoy it, or you can hate what you're doing. Myself, I like all kinds of things, I enjoy all people, I love people, I love, the only thing I have now is that I, I still want to be doing things for the sick and the elderly and the dying, and I, I've had to stop, and for me, that's a big, that's a biggie.

**AL:** Thank you very much.

**PD:** I thank my god for my family there. I think, not to brag, but I've got the best bunch of kids, and I always ask myself, how come, that anybody can have. They're really, they love each other, they're always close to each other, they don't have to see each other all of the time, because they're all busy, and all the works they do. My, my son's, my son's a doctor. My other son is a, at Bath Iron Works, I can't think of what he does, I know what he does do. Sometimes the words skip me, when you're gone, it will come. My other daughter was a dental hygienist, she's kind of retired now, because of her health. My other daughter's a nurse at Maine Med in Portland. My other daughter, she was in the emer-, EMTs, and the one that lives here, but she's had so many surgeries now, that she, she's been retired, retired at forty four, forty three, forty four.

**AL:** Are there any other people who you worked with in the shoe shops that might be good people for me to talk to?

**PD:** I'm trying to think. I don't know if they would though, because some of them, it seems as though, I think it makes us nervous to try to put out a good story, you know.

**AL:** But this has been wonderful. I would love to capture others' recollections. Well, anyways, I'm going to turn the recorder off now, and I thank you very much.

**PD:** Okay.

*End of Interview*

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