BRICK WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE

Richard LeBlond
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

June 26, 2007

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for Brick Makers Oral History Project. The date is June 26, 2007. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and I'm here today, on Minot Avenue in Auburn, Maine, with Richard LeBlond. And Richard, could you start by spelling your name for me?

Richard LeBlond: L-E, capital B-L-O-N-D.

AL: And where were you born?

RL: In Auburn.

AL: Right here in Auburn?

RL: Right here in Auburn.

AL: Have you lived here your whole life?

RL: My whole life, yeah.

AL: And what is your birth date?

RL: January 24th, 1933.

AL: And so when did you first work in a brickyard?

RL: In 1945, I worked at Morin's Brickyard, I was sanding at the time. The sanding process is when they, the strikers, the guy making the brick there, there down in the yard, and when we get so many molds up, you take, you take dry sand and you sand over them, so that the bricks won't crack in the sun, that keeps it from cracking. And the sander's job is to go to the other yard next door and lay out some sand, make sure you always have some sand ahead for the next day, and this way you always, you keep going. If you've run out of sand, and then you get wet sand, it's a basket with a screen in it, and you screen it over it, and if you have wet sand it don't work too well, so it's got to dry. And that's what we used too, and in the afternoon we used to wheel brick. We used to wheel it off the yard, the dry brick, to put in the kilns. We did, they'd make out days, strikers would take out ten thousand bricks in the morning, then they'd *(unintelligible)* tell you have to fill your *(unintelligible)* for the next day. They'd scrape the clay off the banking, bring it up to the pit, and then shovel it in the pit with water, and then you let that set overnight, and after that in the afternoon, well, we wheel bricks or do other jobs around the yard. So it was pretty interesting. I did that for a couple of summers.

AL: When you were twelve and thirteen?

RL: Twelve and thirteen years old, yeah.

AL: Wow.

RL: There was a lot of kids doing that. The Giguere brothers, there was four of them, and they're all dead, you know, the whole family, but a lot of their, a lot of guys are gone now, yeah.

AL: Now, did you work at other brickyards later?

RL: Yeah, after I came out of the service, Roland *(name)* Dennis had started Kennebec Brick, and I worked up there for a couple of summers. But we were traveling from here at first, we'd leave here about four thirty in the morning, and we'd come back almost seven o'clock at night. And over there, we were only five or six of us, so we had to make, take out the bricks, wheel, set up the kilns, we had to burn, you know, the kiln at night, go get the sand, go get the slab. I mean it was, it was long days, but we were working six, seven days a week. We did that for, I started there the week of the fourth.

AL: And where was that brickyard?

RL: Between Sidney and Augusta, on a back road, yeah. It had been an old brickyard years ago and they reopened it, so there was a lot of work to do, building up the sheds and all that. And when we burned, the kiln, after the kiln was built, we were working, we worked thirty six hours straight, then we'd sleep a couple of hours and start over again. But we were still making brick, going to get the sand, and doing all that work at the same time, because there were only four or five of us maintaining that, yeah.

AL: Did it pay well?

RL: Not really, but it was all right. It was fun.

AL: A lot of hours.

RL: All right, a lot of hours, yeah, you worked a lot of hours, and yeah, and if the kilns, I mean, there were ten thousand bricks per door. And I think, I think the kilns we burnt was, I think we were burning twelve doors at a time. So it used to take us a month, a month and a half, to make a whole kiln, yeah. And after they set up the

benches, then the doors, then they'd start the building the, the, the, you had to know what you are doing, building the, the kiln. You had to set your bricks a certain way so that things would work through. And then after the kiln was all done, you'd plaster it all with mud, with clay and sand, so it wouldn't, to keep the heat in. And on top, you'd put on some, some already cooked bricks, on top of the kiln to keep the heat in, while they got going, then you'd you put a shed roof on top of that, wooden, wooden planks, for a few days, to keep, so if it would rain hard, it could ruin your kiln. But this way, with the planks over, it would keep the rain out. But after a few days, it was so hot, you had to take them planks off. After that it didn't matter if it rained.

And during the process, while they, the kiln was baking, it would shrink, so you had to go up on top to tighten up them bricks. Now this was hot, you had to tie boards on your feet, you couldn't walk on it. You had to have boards, and then sometimes they'd catch on fire. Oh yeah, it was hot, believe me. Then you had some spare bricks to fill in, and on the ends, they used to put a row, the used to call it scolding, it was all old bricks. They'd build a wall, I think it was six inches between, you'd fill that up with sand, because it was not the heat in the end with, you wouldn't get that much heat toward the end, so they'd keep that to keep the heat in, so they'd fill that up with sand, probably three quarters of the way up, to keep the heat in. And when we'd get done, that sand was bright red. It would really bake it.

And when we were burning, we had to keep the fire going, I mean, that, that was hot. So we used to take these big chi-, big sla-, big chunks, and you'd open up that small door and you'd put the chunks in there, and they call it poling, you used to take a long pole with a pick on it, and you'd drive that piece of wood to the middle of the kiln, because you, you couldn't throw that slab that far. And then you had to wear about three pairs of pants and gloves, and you'd do a couple of doors, and I mean you had to back off a little bit. And sometimes, we had to pole about twelve doors, and we used to keep the pole in water, but it had a pick on it, keep it in water all the time, and after two or three doors, it, at the end where it was really a hot tip, that pole would catch fire. So, you had to keep changing poles. But that was hot, that, that poling was hot. That was

hard work.

AL: Yeah, were, were there a lot of dangers, in terms of being burned?

RL: Oh it's, yeah, not real danger, but if you get up on your hours, some of these guys thought they were, they were tough, you know, and they try and do it without. And there's no way you could, I mean no way. And on the machine itself, when you used to make bricks, you'd start in the morning, that clay, that tip is full of clay, then you'd have to dig, dig your way down to the bottom, so you were working, otherwise than that you're in clay up to your knees, shoveling to fill the machine. Then you had to put so many shovelfuls of clay, and then a shovelful of sand, and they'd let you know out front, if the other, the clay was coming up, you could adjust, you know, you put more sand or less sand, more clay and more water. And you'd keep that, by the end, you're in the pit, then you were on a wooden floor. I don't know, I mean, the pit was, you know, above your head. And then you could work from the bottom, it was easier, you could slide the shovel on the floor, you didn't have to carry it. And then when you get your hole down the bottom, then you start, and you do that, then you switch off, you go so many thousand, then you switch off, you, you keep moving around like that. And then when you get done with that, then we'd have to fill that pit for the next day. They'd scraped the clay out the banking, then you put that, fill up your pit like that, then we'd wheel bricks again in the afternoon, and do whatever had to do.

So it's pretty, it's pretty intriguing process. But some nights, I mean, I don't care if it's raining, we had some sheds built up over the woods, where the doors are, where you worked there, so we could keep the wood dry and we'd stay there, but that was, that was long nights, I mean. And every so much, so many hours, you had to do that again, to refurnish the wood, because that slab, they're burning quick. So, and after that, when them big pieces were in there, we'd take slab and we'd shoot them in, fill up the hole, and we'd cement that door. And we had a brick that had built in the bench, called the, you could open that up, and you're looking in there, and there's white heat,

and I mean white heat, and by the end there, I mean the, the flames are almost reaching the top, I mean, the heat, I mean, yeah. I remember going up there and crawling up to the top there, and the, them boards would catch fire, yeah, it was hot, yeah. But it was a pretty good job, really, yeah.

AL: So, when you -?

RL: I did that when I came out of the service.

AL: Now, what branch of the service were you in?

RL: The Army.

AL: The Army.

RL: Yeah, yeah, I had the, I had a couple of jobs, I come in March, and I had a couple of jobs that were in there, and then Morin's asked me to go to work for them, and, and I started there the week of the fourth, fourth, whatever. It was quite a job.

AL: Now, because I'm not, I don't know a lot about this process.

RL: Okay.

AL: When you mix the clay and the sand, and, and got it ready, did you put it in forms?

RL: Oh yeah, oh yeah, and -.

AL: And were they huge?

RL: In the front of the machine, there's a, there's a tray, there's six bricks in it, all right? And then there's a cover on it, and you put that in the machine, and there's a handle, you push the tray, that, that tray into the machine. Then there's a paddle on it, and they jump on that, and then the clay comes down into that mold. All right? Then you pull the handle back, and you take a strick, striker, they, they, stick, and you clean off the top of the mold, so they'll be even. Then there's a buggy over there, you have six trays, six in a mold, you put them on that, that little truck, then you put the other one in. And when your truck is full, you take off, you don't walk, you jog, you got to jog, I mean you got to keep moving, you get down in the yard, wherever you're going to dump it. Then you had two pieces of wood on the side of the handles. Now this form, on the s-, when you pick it up, it's on the fingertips alone. You've got to flip it on your fingertips to put it on the yard, then you slide that cover off, and your bricks would fall off in the yard, they'd fall out of the section you'd keep them in. Then you take that back around, you keep jogging for, all morning.

AL: Right, wow.

RL: Oh, it was, some of these guys, the old brick makers, they, they did that for years and years and years, yeah.

AL: Do you know how, how far back the brick makers go?

RL: No, no.

AL: Did you know any old timers when you started? Had they been there a while?

RL: I think, oh yes, some of the guys that I would, when I first, I worked with at Morin's there, some of the guys had been making bricks for ten years. Every summer

they'd go back to the brickyard, yeah. There used to be a brickyard on Bartlett Street.

AL: Oh, really?

RL: Exactly, right above the, right up the hill that you go up Bartlett Street, down by the, where they built that big, that home for *(unintelligible)* the state or something there.

AL: Okay.

RL: Right across, the bakery, that used to be a brickyard at one time, yeah. There was one on Brooks Avenue on Main Street, off Main Street in Lewiston. But that was a good sized yard over there, LaChance, I think the name was.

AL: Okay, yes, I've heard that name.

RL: Yes, then they had one in Yarmouth, LaChance, and yeah, it was a, it was quite a process. Then you let it dry, you let them dry on a yard for a few days and after that, every, when they were ready, they, they used to call it picking the bricks. So you pick up six bricks at a time, and then you'd put them out, all in one row, on the yard, so they'd really dry over there. Then you had these caps that you'd put on, so the rain wouldn't, and a lot of times you did, you did your ten thousand, and it rained overnight and they weren't dry. Well there, these bricks were a little different, they used them for backing or stuff like that. And after a while, the, like the bricks today, you know, *(unintelligible)* and stuff like that, they became very popular at the time. But you can't, you can't get any of those. The only place you can get any of those is close to the bench down below, where the real heat is, you know. Well, there's some brickyards, when you clean your benches out like that, they throw those away, they pile them up in a place, they throw them away, throw them away. Well, when they get popular, they dig them up, and then they're a lot of money, you know. Well, that brick was all, it just sit

there, nobody, it won't rot, so they dug them bricks out and they were selling them, sort them out and sell them. They made, you know, they were getting good prices for them antique bricks, *(unintelligible)*. But in the bottom of the bricks there, they, they're burnt, I mean, they were all so brittle you'd hit them together and they'd fall apart.

AL: Oh, yeah.

RL: They were really brittle, all black, all perfect, but they were selling. I remember in Colby College, there's a lot of houses, they were building, the contractor, he was building houses up there, and he bought a lot of these bricks. I mean, they make the front of the house, you know, something like that, just for, as many bricks as they could do, *(unintelligible)*. They'd build the front of the house, the chimney, the fireplaces, they build that with antique bricks like that.

AL: Did a lot of the bricks go to local areas?

RL: Yeah, oh yeah.

AL: They didn't ship out a lot out of state?

RL: The telephone building in Lewiston, my brother-in-law, *(unintelligible word)*, each yard, each crew had a certain kiln that they'd built, I guess, and that, that kiln, the brick that these guys make, the three guys, they, they ended up over there at the telephone building in Lewiston. Morin sold a lot of brick in the twin cities. Dennis had two kinds of brick. They had the water struck and the wire cut.

AL: What's the difference?

RL: The wire cut brick is very smooth, very smooth surface. Now, they have mold,

they have a machine similar to that, but when it comes out, there's wires that cut the bricks, but this top is very smooth, it's, it's really more, you know, it's brittle compared to the water struck, but it's a nice finished surface. Saint Louis Church, that's wire cut. There's quite a few buildings wire cut brick. That's the difference, it's cut, and these, they don't lay in the yard. They have two trolleys, two carts, and they put them in there and they wheel them around. And they're in the shed, they don't, they don't go in the yard, the water struck. They don't have to sand them, they, they stay right on the pallets, and then they move the pallets, and haul them over, they haul them the same way we do. But that's the difference. And your, your water struck, I think the, the mold, the, the, the clay is harder when it comes out of the machine compared to the water struck, see, so it will cut. It, it's a squarer brick, it's very square that wire cut.

AL: Now, you grew up in Auburn?

RL: Yeah.

AL: What was it like growing up in Auburn in the thirties and forties?

RL: Great, I thought so.

AL: What part of Auburn did you live in?

RL: I was brought up on Court Street in Auburn, yeah.

AL: Over in New Auburn?

RL: New Auburn, yeah. I moved, we moved there, I was five years old I guess, when I moved over there. And I was there until I, until went into the service. And then when I came back from the service, we were living on South Main Street. My dad had bought a

house up there. After that, I got married and we moved out, then I lived in Lewiston for a while, and then I get back to Auburn, then I bought this place about thirty, thirty five years ago, I guess. We've been here ever since.

AL: Did you have a lot of brothers and sisters?

RL: I had six brothers, I had three brothers and three sisters.

AL: Oh, wow.

RL: Yeah, and there is one in Portland, Oregon, there's one in Germany, and I have a sister in town, and the other one died, yeah, yeah. So, are you guys doing a lot of interviews?

(*Pause in taping*)

RL: They, they didn't go in the yard, it was on pallets. Okay? And they used to strike the same way with the mold and everything. But when they turned around, there was a pallet on, on a conveyor belt. They'd put it on the belt, then they'd put it on these little trolleys. They had hundreds of them. Then that's where they would dry, they would dry right on the trolleys, these carts. They'd move the trolleys around, I guess they had to, it's on a railroad track, and they had two sides that they put the trays in, they'd fill those up, and that's how they, they operated. But that pit was real big, and that was a tough job shoveling that pit, yeah. I remember this guy, *(name)*, I mean he was, I don't know if he weighed a hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet, but that, that, that man, he was something else. He'd shovel that pit like nobody's business. I remember one time, he had, he had busted his rib or something, and the machine went dry, and they found him, *(unintelligible)* in the pit. Oh yeah, but he was a nice guy, he was a nice old man, very pleasant, and *(name)*, I mean, Henry *(name)*, that guy was something else, yeah, yeah.

We had a lot of, we had, there was a lot of characters. But it was, it was a lot of work. And that clay, I don't mean, you know, you work in clay all day long, you take a shower, and the first thing you know it comes out through your pores again, you know, the dust and stuff like that, yeah, yeah. And you're always working barefooted, so.

AL: Oh really?

RL: Oh yeah, *(unintelligible)*, I mean, you, you, I mean, you couldn't have worn shoes, I mean, they'd have been, they'd have been soaking wet all day, by the end of the day, you couldn't be running with them. No, no, you work barefooted and a bathing suit, that's all you wore. And late fall, I mean, these guys, like Morin, they worked as late as they could. I mean, some mornings they started working, they had to break the water out of that, they had a trough there, to soak the molds and stuff there, they had to break, there was ice on there when they started in the morning. You know those early fall mornings? I mean, it was ice on there, it was pretty cold in a bathing suit.

AL: I guess so, I wouldn't want to wear a bathing suit.

RL: That's right, yeah. Well, the guys *(unintelligible)*. And burning, that was another job that was, that was hard. Long nights, rain, rain or shine, I mean, you had to -.

AL: You had to keep the kiln hot all the time?

RL: Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh definitely, you'd have, if you'd have let it go, you'd have lost it. You had to keep it until the bricks were, the brick cooked, you know. And then on the top, they had the light, hard brick. I mean, it was almost yellow because it wasn't that much, it was enough to bake them, but there was no color to them. So they used those on the inside, the masons used those for backing and stuff like that, and we used to keep them in the yard to build the outside of our kilns, make the doors and stuff like

that, you know. So we used that for that, but, and yeah, that, that yellow brick, they used that for backing. And what else is there? Oh yeah, we used to go haul wood, out in the middle of the woods, pick up slabs. We had to have fairly dry wood, you know, otherwise than that, you wouldn't, it wouldn't burn.

AL: It sounds like that probably was a hard thing, to keep up with the supply of wood.

RL: It was, it was, because I remember going from Sidney, Morris had found some dry wood, we needed dry wood, and he had found some dry wood. I remember going to Belgrade, ten o'clock that night, and he took me out in the middle, this guy took me out in the middle of a wood lot over there, he had some dry slabs, and raining to beat all, and I loaded, I was loading slabs. I didn't get back to the yard until three o'clock that morning. Yeah, the guy left me out there all alone, and I loaded the truck, and then I got some sand, we used to haul some sand, and Roland, Roland did a lot of delivering and took care of the book work, but he helped them when we were burning. But on the yard itself, there was Rene, Morris, Carl, a kid, he lived right above the yard in Sidney, myself. Everything else, we done it. And Morris' relatives, his uncles and cousins, when we were short of help and we were really plugging to finish our kiln, these guys would work all day long in town here, then they'd come up at night, and they'd wheel bricks for two or three hours to help us out, then they'd come back home. But every once in a while we needed help, that his cousins were very nice people, they used to come up and help us out, yeah. And Morris, he was something else. After we guys worked ten, twelve, fourteen hours, we'd go to bed, we had to fix up a shack up there after a while, Morris would go out and get on the tractor and he'd work in the yard and do this and all kinds of that. The guy, he'd never sleep. In the wintertime, we were delivering oil there, he used to do that, then work here and work there. I mean, the guy worked very, very hard, he's a hard worker, yeah. It was a lot of traveling too, I mean, you know, we'd leave here at four thirty in the morning and never get back here until six, seven o'clock at night. Long, long trips. After we fixed up a shack down there, we slept

in there for a while. It was nothing special, but you didn't have to travel again.

AL: Yeah, so, the brick making was something that couldn't happen during the winter months at all.

RL: No, oh no, oh no.

AL: It had to shut down and wait until spring.

RL: Yeah, and I say, no, and I haven't been to Morin's for years, but nowadays, everything is animated, I mean, it's, it's, because everything is, nowadays they burn with, with oil. When they first started to burn with oil, they burned for, we'd say, twelve, fifteen days with oil, but then they'd finish it off with wood, because wood is the thing that gives it the color.

AL: Okay.

RL: Yeah, but now, I don't know, do they still use wood, or they found a way to do it, I have no idea. But that's what used to give it the colors, the wood. That's why they, they, they used to, they, they do it, the benches were all set up all the time, they didn't have to take them apart, because they didn't have that heat of the wood, you know. But they, they had a way to fix it up, they didn't have to take them benches apart. We, us, we had to tear down right to the ground and start over again. But them bricks were all crooked and the benches were falling apart. By the end of the kiln, the benches were starting to collapse, you know, there was nothing left of them, they were all, that's why we stopped it, we had to clean up and start over again. Yeah, we had these wooden doors, metal doors, and once we finished filling the doors with poling and filling up the slab, we'd seal them doors. Then there was a hot side, I mean, that was hot. When you opened that side, you knew you were in for a lot, lot of heat. But you'd look, you'd

look in the side, it was just white heat in there. Oh yeah, you had to keep it going, otherwise than that you'd have lost your kiln, and that's why we put the shed roofs up on top, and stuff like that, long ledger boards, long ledger boards. All it was, was posts and beams, and we'd nail ledger boards on, yeah.

AL: When you built the kiln, how long would it last?

RL: The kiln?

AL: Yeah, would, would you have to rebuild another after so long?

RL: Oh yeah, after they, after the kiln was done we let it cool off, then you take all the bricks out of that *(unintelligible)*, then you build another one.

AL: Oh, so, it was a constant thing?

RL: Oh yeah, yeah, Morin, Morin had, I believe Morin had, they had places for three or four kilns, when I worked there anyways. But we had places for two, two kilns, we build one, then work on the other one. Yeah, it was pretty interesting work at one time, and wheeling bricks is always fun. Then this guy, he had to know how to set your, your kiln, so your bricks would be set in a way, so the flames could come through, you know, you had space all the way down the bottom, so your, your flames would go through, and you had to know that. You had to wheel them and toss them, you had to toss four bricks at a time, and if you did farther, bricks were all over the place, a guy would say, could you toss four bricks, and the guy on top there would, in fact, catch four at a time like that, so yeah, yeah. I remember doing that, especially with loading the trucks after, you'd toss like that, and you had mittens with two tongues, but if one side was worn, you'd turn the mitten around, otherwise than that, you're forever buying gloves. Them mittens had two tongues on it. Well, I thought it was pretty interesting, I liked it. I

wouldn't want to do it steady, but you know, probably at the time I was twenty one years old, so I didn't care. Long hours and everything, yeah.

AL: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think is important to ask?

RL: Well, I never drank a lot of beer in the summer. All right, I ran through beers and I could keep going. But when you burned, you, you burned the kiln there, you worked for, you know, two or three weeks there steady, seven days a week. And when you let down, you stopped working, the kiln, the kiln is all burnt, you just, I mean, you're dead. You don't feel, after you rest it's hard to get going again, but we had to, we had to get out more bricks. Yeah, then the, then the yards, like Morin's, it's unbelievable the clay they've taken out of that yard. The company is ninety years old, a hundred years old, and they're still taking clay out off that banking. I mean, they've taken a ton of clay off that banking. That banking must have been fifty feet higher than it is now, as you go into the yard, at least. I remember the long *(unintelligible)* road. I don't know if they buy it from somewhere now or they still get it there, but I mean they're still making bricks. They, they've done a lot of bricks, that's the biggest around right now, anyways. So, that's about all I can remember.

AL: Well, thank you so much for your time.

RL: You're very welcome.

End of Interview

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