

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

Irene Madore
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

SWOH #008
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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is September 5, 2008. I'm here at Montello Heights in Lewiston, Maine, with Irene Madore, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could you start by giving me your full name, including your maiden name?

IM: Irene Y. Bilodeau, my maiden name, Madore.

AL: And did you grow up in Lewiston?

IM: Oh yes, I lived right here on Montello. For fifty-three years I lived here. I saw this built, when they were building it.

AL: And what's your birth date?

IM: March 6, 1923, and I grew up over here and I went to Holy Family School, and then I went one year in high school, and I start working because my mother was alone, for me and my brother, so I went to work at sixteen, and I worked at the Maine Shoe for a long time. I learned a lot of jobs over there. Then it got slow at the Maine Shoe, there wasn't enough, things didn't look good, so I went to Clark Shoe and I got a job there. That's where I married, I worked for my boss, I married him, and I worked there for a couple, three years, then we got married and I stopped working, because I was having my kids, you know, for five years. And then I went back for a little while, and then I heard about Falcon Shoe coming to Lewiston, and where I was working at Belgrade, before that, well when I quit at Clark I went to Belgrade Shoe, and it was quite a ways, you know, for the winter, to travel about seven miles, way up on Old Hotel Road. So I heard about Falcon shoe and I went and I got the job. I started with them, in '63 they opened up, and it was about the month of November when I worked there, but they weren't in full operation til after January 1st, but I helped to line up my packing room, finishing room and packing, because that's where I always worked.

AL: What was finishing and packing? What was it that you did?

IM: Well, we finish the shoes when they came out of the lasting room. From the lasting room, they came out to me, last pullers, and I had girls who were cleaning the shoes, putting a dressing on it. First of all they put a sock line inside, you know, it was a

process of finishing and making them look good. I had somebody to put a spray over them, shine them up. After that, well we had the repairers who touched up here and there, that was done along the way, and then I had some girls to pack them, pair them up and put them in the boxes.

AL: Now, starting at age sixteen, was that legal then to work?

IM: Oh yes, oh yes. I was working for twenty-five cents an hour until the NRA came in. We had the NRA parade, and I remember looking by the windows, we could see them parade on Court Street. And they passed the law of seventy-five cents for minimum. And gradually it went up, you know, but working for twenty five cents an hour, you know, it didn't give me my twelve-fifty. But in those days, in 1940, 1942, it was a lot of money for us. My mother worked at the mill and she only made fourteen-fifty a week. I had to go help her, and I learned every job along the way. From two, three different shoe factories, I learned different jobs, and when I went to Clark, I knew every job in the finishing and packing. But he needed a packer, so that's where I learned how to pair up the shoes, match them up, size them and pack them.

AL: Did you make different kinds of shoes at different places?

IM: Oh, yes.

AL: What kinds of different shoes did you make?

IM: Well at Clark Shoe, it was a novelty shoe. It was all sandals, and we made zebra, satin, leather, patent leather, all kinds of different sandals we made over there. They were beautiful shoes. When I was at Maine Shoe, we made nurses shoes, and regular lacing shoes. Different places had different style of shoes. When I went to Falcon, they were making, well they started on men's shoes that they brought in from Brockton, when Ted came, and he was with Bruce Hanley and they opened up Falcon Shoe on the fourth floor. So there wasn't many people, there was only one cutter and four, five stitchers, and they were starting to learn how to put them on the lath, how to make the shoes. But by January it started in full production. I got a little more people. I new a lot of people in Lewiston and Auburn, having worked for so many years, that I brought in a lot of people to get things rolling. And gradually we had a second line, so they made the men's shoes and we made the children's shoes. So I ended up that by the time I retired, I had about forty, forty-five people working, I had two lines and, you know.

AL: Did the different shoe shops have reputations in terms of one being better to work for then another?

IM: Yes, I know, different places is right. They're very tough to work for. But Falcon

Shoe came in and started, and from the beginning they were wonderful. They were good to the people and they paid well. Of course we didn't have the union, and they didn't want that, so they always paid a little better than the union would allow the other. So they were very, very nice people to work for. I really enjoyed there, I worked their for twenty years and it was great, it was very nice.

AL: Did you make friends with and socialize with other people that you worked with at the shoe shops?

IM: Oh yes, oh yes, you mean at Falcon Shoe?

AL: Or whatever shoe place. I just wondered if your coworkers were also your friends outside of work.

IM: Well, you can't please them all, so there was always little bit, a little if's in there, you know. But at Falcons, a good worker would last quite a while. And really, the young girls that had never worked before, well they didn't stay very long. But we managed to get good help. We had very good help and they were steady, you could depend on them, you know. And as the years went on, we had a dinner meeting at Falcon Shoe, and we had share of profit, every meeting we had a share of the three months, you know, and very good bonuses, very well paid. I have no complaints, I really enjoyed working at Falcon. It was the best place to work, really.

AL: And you said your husband was also in the shoe - .

IM: He was a foreman for thirty years with Clark Shoe. And the reason I didn't want to go back there is because a lot of people resented me, you know, they thought I was telling on them, what was going on, because there's always somebody goofing off. So I got to the point, I didn't want to, I said, I'm not going back to work for you, I'll look somewhere else. And that's how come I ended at Belgrade. I was a packer at Belgrade, then I became a foreman over there. I worked there thirteen years, and then I came to Lewiston to work, be closer to home and less traveling. So I really enjoyed better. The reason I stopped is because of my legs, my veins were hurting me so bad, my legs used to swell up and I couldn't sleep at night. My husband had passed away, but I toughed it out til sixty, and I decided I was better off to retire and take care of my legs. That's all.

AL: So you didn't really experience, I know a lot of people have talked about getting laid off as the shoe shops started closing, did that affect you at all?

IM: No, no, not us. They were always in good production, Falcon Shoe. But like at Maine Shoe, they were good for two seasons, and then it would be slow, and I was laid off, and I went to work a little bit at Lombard Watson. I hated it, I worked only about a

month, and when my boss called me I went back. Where I worked, from Belgrade, at Clark Shoe they never laid off anybody. It was slow, sometimes they'd work half a day for a few weeks and then it would pick up again, the orders would come in and it would pick up. But this never happened at Falcon, I'll tell you, we were always very busy, yeah, it was a good place, and I got to meet Ted's father, Elmer, and his uncle Roy. They came in from Brockton and walked around in the factory and checked out the shoes. They were pretty happy about what we were doing. We made kid's shoes for Lamey Wellehan, and different other companies.

AL: So you would make them and then they would be sold to many different companies, not just one.

IM: Oh, they were already ordered. They would have ordered like so many pairs, and they were in corrugators for thirty six pairs. So we would have quite a few, let's say like one order was four, then we had another order with the same company, and we made shoes for, you know, it's been a long time and I can't remember all the people. I know we made shoes for Cole a long time ago. But we always were busy. It was great.

AL: Did people have a chance to socialize on the job?

IM: Well, we didn't stop them from talking, but there was just so much socializing. They had to stay at their place, and they would talk with the next one to them and all that, you know. But the production kept pushing. They had to keep up with the production. And sometimes the shoes were not like it should have been, so we would have a back up, you know, but they would be very good and end up by cleaning it all up. They were pretty good.

AL: I want to go back to something you said earlier about the NRA parade. Do you have any more recollections of that? What was that like to happen, were they a national organization?

IM: It was a group of people that got together, and there was a band, and there were like demonstrations, you know, walking down the street, to increase the wages. And it passed. The people voted on it, I guess, I can't remember. But anyway, from twenty-five cents we jumped to seventy-five, plus a little more, a dollar twenty-five, and slowly, every year, slowly the minimum went up. Just like now, I think it's up to five, seventy-five, the minimum, I'm not sure.

AL: Even higher.

IM: Higher, oh yeah. A lot of people made big money at Falcon. They would come up with thirteen, fourteen dollars an hour. A lot of people, in the stitching room, people on piece work. If they were good workers, they could make a good pay, the cutters, the

stitchers. The lasting room and the making room, they were hourly, but they still were well paid. We didn't loose much help. We always had good help.

AL: And you mentioned that your mother worked in the mill. What mill did she work in?

IM: She was working at the Hill Mill.

AL: And what did she do?

IM: She was in the spinning room. She worked there for quite awhile. Then she worked at Bates a little bit. Then she moved to Connecticut. I didn't move, I wanted to stay here, so I was living with my aunt and uncle, my mother's sister.

AL: So you had other family in the area.

IM: I have a family.

AL: I said you had more family in the area.

IM: Oh yes, oh yes.

AL: Did they have children?

IM: Oh yes. I had one brother, that's all I had.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about your time in the shoe shops, and your whole experience, that you feel is important to add?

IM: No, I think I've covered about everything that happened. I can't think much of anything different. I retired in '83, and then I kind of lost track of what was going on, and then the shoes started to move abroad. But I think Falcon Shoe is very good that they lasted this long and they're still, and we made boots too, you know, but they were not the kind of boots, now they're making waterproof and fireproof boots, but we made regular walking boots. They could work with them. And we used to, the kind of leather that we had was a little blah, you know, so we would have some wax that we put on a brush, and brush them and give them a texture. And there wasn't much to do the boots, just a sock lining and a little repairing and touching up here and there, for scratches or something, and then we'd polish them and they were ready for the packers.

(Pause in taping)

In the stitching room, after, well I guess it's been about, well, longer than I'm saying

now, but when I was working there, they had these new machines that, they would emboss the vamp and make it look like the stitching, and it was a lot of time saver. They would just the cutters would cut the vamps, they would give them to this machine, have somebody, and they would just make little perforation on it, or stitching. It eliminated quite a few people, but it was fast production.

AL: Can I ask a silly question? What is a vamp?

IM: The front of the shoe. See, the front of the shoe, that's a vamp. Like, well not these, but you know, they go around here. And then there's a back, that's before it goes to the lasting room. So when it goes to the lasting room, they're put on a last, they call them the last puller, and they put them on the last, and it goes around, they're cemented in the bottom. And it goes, it starts with a counter, they put a counter in the back of the shoe, and then it's on the last, and then it goes around, and then it's on the sole layer. It goes around on a conveyor. We had the conveyor in the lasting room. We didn't have it everywhere, but I had, finally, after awhile, they extended the conveyor in my room, you know, where they came, the last puller will take the shoe off and put them on a board, like three pairs, and pass it on, and the girl would put a sock line in there, and pass it on. It kept moving like this, board after board. Sometimes it went fast and we got overloaded, the girls sometimes couldn't keep on, so I would add another girl to clean it up. Because I had a girl, an all-around girl, who would, the cases are sometimes short. If they break something, they don't finish, we have to have it re-cut, so when they pack them, they leave the papers out, and when the shoes come around we finish them and put them where they belong, you know, to try to fill up the case. So, that's what it was.

AL: Okay, thank you so much.

End of Interview

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