

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

Mike Rancourt

(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

SWOH #041

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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Industry Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is April 16th, 2010, and I'm at Rancourt & Company Shoecrafters in Lewiston, Maine with Mike Rancourt. Mike, could you start just by giving me your full name and spelling your last name.

Mike Rancourt: Michael Rancourt, R-A-N-C-O-U-R-T.

AL: And where and when were you born?

MR: Lewiston, February 7th, 1954.

AL: And you grew up in Lewiston?

MR: I grew up in Lewiston, yeah.

AL: What was Lewiston like in the fifties and sixties, growing up?

MR: I wouldn't remember the fifties, because I was too young. I would say my first memories would be the sixties, and it was, you know, we were a family of five and so my siblings at that time, we had maybe three of us in the early sixties. And I remember Lewiston was a fun place to be. It was a great place to grow up, never had any concerns as a child, and so it was good memories of growing up actually in Lewiston.

AL: What part of Lewiston?

MR: We were on Holland Street, again, that's my first memories of where we resided, Holland Street in Lewiston, which is over behind CMMC, Central Maine Medical Center.

AL: And what sorts of things did you do for fun growing up?

MR: For fun, that's a good question. You know, I always liked sport, so I ran, I ran track when I was in school. But with friends, I mean I was never a winter sport person, so it was really in the summer, it was all about heading to the ocean or to the lakes or spending time with friends or family.

AL: And what was downtown Lewiston like then, very different than today?

MR: Yeah, very different than today, yeah. That was kind of the place to be. I remember as a young teenager, along with my older sister and my younger brother, we would every Saturday head to downtown, sometimes we'd walk, sometimes we'd take a bus, and that's where all of our friends would gather. But all of Lewiston would spend some time in downtown Lewiston at some point, you know, adults, my parents, my grandparents, my siblings, friends, neighborhood friends, neighborhood acquaintances. So yeah, downtown was very different in the sixties and early seventies, and then it started to change dramatically.

AL: Because there were a lot of businesses still vibrant in that area at that time.

MR: Yeah, retail was very vibrant at that time. And of course the mills, the textile mills were still in operation. Not, obviously they were starting to shrink, but the shoe business was very strong in downtown Lewiston and Auburn. So yeah, there was a lot of reason, you know, there were retailers that attracted people, there was industry that attracted people, all brought us to the center of Lewiston-Auburn for many years.

AL: And was it a lot more what you'd call pedestrian traffic, walking rather than cars?

MR: Yeah, very much so. I think most teenagers, none of us really had, I mean we started having cars in the later years of teenagerhood, but yeah, it was all walking or bicycling down. More like a traditional European city that you see today, where the center of the city is the center and heart of the community.

AL: And can you tell me your parents' names and what they did for work?

MR: My father's name is David Rancourt, and then my mother's Norma Rancourt. They're retired now. My father had been in the shoe business for many years, he started in the fifties as a hand sewer, learned how to hand sew, and then went to work for a company in Auburn by the name of – I'm sorry, I can't think of the name right now, excuse me – but went to work for a small company in Auburn, and then over a matter of years became, you know, worked his way up the ladder, if you will, in management position, and then finally bought it in the mid sixties and then owned his own shoe contracting firm for a number of years, and then sold it.

AL: And did your mom work outside the house?

MR: Yeah, my mom, it's funny, because my first memories of my mother was homework. At the time, there was a cottage industry where you would take these leather uppers, people would drop them off at home and women, many women but my mom in particular would take needle and thread and whip stitch the two pieces together, the plug and the vamp. That's my first memory of her. And then she did have outside jobs, not just in the shoe business. I mean, she worked for, again, Raytheon I believe, over here in Lewiston at one time, making parts for the military I believe. And then she

did finally join my father when he bought the company, she joined my dad, worked in the office and did administrative things.

AL: So, did they both come from Lewiston as well, or from other places?

MR: My mother was born in Lewiston, my father was born in Canada, he was an immigrant. His entire family was born in Canada, you know, traveled back and forth. His dad owned a business as well, my grandfather, he was in the lumber business and he would cut, he had me that would actually cut trees and then sell it to the pulp industry, for many years.

AL: And did your dad have a lot of brothers and sisters?

MR: Yeah, I believe it was nine all together. That was the good French way back in their generation.

AL: So he emigrated to the U.S. and he met your mom, probably here in Lewiston?

MR: Yes, right.

AL: Was your mom Franco American as well?

MR: Yes, yeah, her parents were Canadian, they were born in Canada and immigrants as well, worked in the textile mills, both her parents did. But she was born, and I believe both her brothers were born here as well, in Lewiston, so two uncles.

AL: And so what sorts of traditions, did you have any particular traditions that were French oriented?

MR: It's interesting because, you know, I've spent a lot of time traveling and those traditions are true for many Europeans in particular, but Catholics in general. You know, whether I'm in South America or Europe, wherever I work or interact with Catholics, they have very similar traditions, Christmas being a big one. That was a big holiday for us, the Christmas tree, decorating it, because the whole family would get together and plan on the day that we decorated and decorate the tree. And Christmas Eve was always a fun gathering with aunts and uncles and nieces and nephews, those were big gatherings, could be thirty, twenty, thirty, forty of us at someone's home, whether it was our home or whether it was my aunt and uncle. So that's the one that sticks with me the most. And then of course the cooking, you know.

AL: Yeah, the food is always an interesting topic. Were there particular dishes that you counted on every year?

MR: I would say not counted on but things that we could always plan on, especially around the holidays. But even daily, weekly kind of menus that they would prepare, you

know, there was always something with pork and there was always something with baloney, and there was always something with mashed potatoes, so those are the things I remember. And the other thing that was interesting from the standpoint – and this is fairly unique to us – was the maple syrup Sundays or whatever it was at that time, so my father would get us all together and we'd all go out and find what he called a sugar shack and, you know, take the maple syrup and pour it on snow and let it freeze up like taffy. And so that was an annual event for us as young kids as well.

AL: So talk to me about your first interest in the shoe business, at what age, was it after high school?

MR: No, you know, it's interesting because at a very young age, I always remember my father bringing shoes home, whether they were partially finished, because he would hand sew at home as well so he would bring these leather – well, so there are two elements here. My mother would have these whip stitch vamps and pieces, so that was always intriguing to me, that this leather would show up at the house, all rolled up on a big string and they'd be carried in as bundles. And it had a very distinct smell, which you probably can smell walking into this building. And my father would bring home these moccasins that he would sew. And so from a very young age, I always remember having that leather, that scent and aroma of leather in the house, and also seeing shoes in different forms than you normally would. You know, the average consumer would only see shoes finished on their feet or in a box, I would see them in parts or pieces, I would smell the fresh leather. So it goes back a long ways.

So, and then my interest in shoe making, I think probably because my father was interested in it and he was a very passionate guy about the shoe business and making shoes and owning his own business. And so I think that helped me to find my way to the shoe business, because his love for it was infectious, if you will. I mean, it was something that you grow up with and you recognize that your parents, when they like something, enjoy something, love something, you feel good about it. So I always felt good about the shoe business.

I worked there in high school with him, in his factory, but as a high school person, you know, young kid, not really responsible the way I should be, you know, took more days off than I should so it caused some tension between us. And you know, I enjoyed it, but I just didn't want to be committed to it. And then I went off to college for a couple years and stayed away from it for a number of years, he sold his company to Quoddy and he worked for Quoddy Moccasin for ten years, and so I was away for a number of years. And then finally in '82 he wanted to leave Quoddy and he asked me to join him in a partnership, so we started a company called Downeast Casual Footwear, and we made shoes for people like Cole Haan. We had great accounts, and it was a terrific experience for me because, from not ever having run a business, managing anything, and all of a sudden I was responsible for many people and lots of different processes. So, and it's stayed with me ever since, continues today.

AL: So you just, once you were there you decided to keep going with it.

MR: Yeah, it felt right, you know, again, those smells, those aromas for me. And most people find it pleasant when they smell leathers and the waxes and the glues. And it's funny, because it's difficult to be away from it. So, you know, I used to travel a great deal but I always traveled to factories around the world, but there were weeks where I wouldn't walk into a factory just because I had a different position then, and walking back into a factory just gives me this great feeling, that this is where I should be, and this is where some great things are going to happen because people are coming together to make some beautiful products.

AL: So Downeast Shoe, and that lasted until when?

MR: That lasted, Downeast Shoe was five years, and then we sold to Cole Haan, and I stayed on, both my father and I stayed on with Cole Haan for another five years and I became the president of manufacturing for Cole Haan, and we had multiple factories in Maine. And then they started, as most companies do, they grew and they were bought out by Nike, and as most public companies and large companies do, they began to look for lower costs, and so they started to close their factories and I decided it was time for me to leave. (And started my own company with my wife in 1992, called Maine Shoe, we bought a factory that had closed, and then kind of the same scenario where our business grew, we had great accounts, and one account in particular, Allen-Edmonds, as you've seen on the door, sign on the door, they became our largest customer and asked us to become part of them. So we did, we sold to them in '97, and I stayed with them up until October of last year. And now once again, except now with my son, I started up again.)

AL: And so a particular type of shoe that you're focused on through the years?

MR: Yeah, always, the foundation of our businesses has always been hand sewn moccasins. Most people would know it as a loafer, and it's a great product because it's leathers that are cut and then shaped and formed by people, by hand, by workmanship and craftsmanship. So only, it's fairly unique, you find it, in regards to the United States you find it in Maine, and I would say that of all the shoes that are made in the United States, this one in particular, the hand sewn loafer, became synonymous with Maine because of Bass Wejun, or L.L. Bean, put those two names together and they've sold products all over the world. And people have, wherever you travel, people have a great feeling about L.L. Bean or Bass Wejun, and as a result they have a great feeling about Maine and about the products that we make.

AL: Now, you've talked a lot about being in the management part of the business. Did you also learn to hand sew?

MR: Good question, somebody asked me that the other day, because we have young guy training in our factory right now and someone asked if I ever took the time to learn how to hand sew. And here's my answer, I did, my father, at one point, I was in high school, he said to me okay, your summer job is going to be learning how to hand sew. And I did it for about a week, and I was just sticking my fingers with the awls and the needles, I said, you know, dad, I'm sorry, I just can't do this, so I'm going to give up on hand sewing. So no, I never actually, I never learned how to hand sew.

AL: Well, I've talked to a lot of people and they said, you know, you try it, it either comes naturally to you or it doesn't. And I wonder, because your things are hand sewn. Is it difficult to find good hand sewers? Because I know a lot of the older generation really had that art and they were teaching younger people, are you having, is it difficult to find people who can teach that art?

MR: Yeah, I mean that's a good comment, I mean it's a great question, because it's certainly what we struggle with. I can remember my father's factory, and my memory's a little vague on it but I remember walking into this factory as a young person, probably thirteen, twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old, and seeing what I thought to be a sea of hand sewers, you know, men and women at these benches with their arms moving in unison as they were sewing, and thinking – and it's a very quiet craft, there's not a lot of noises, there's not machinery, you don't need machinery, it's people taking an awl and needles and they're pulling together. And it was an amazing thing to watch, to see all these hands and arms move in unison. And I always thought, it's amazing how many people are willing to do this, and can do this.

And as I got involved in the business later on and realized how tedious, demanding, and how much skill is required to make a great pair of shoes, and worry about whether or not we were going to have young people coming up and willing to take the time to work with their hands and create something and craft something. And twenty-five years later, you're absolutely right, it's a real challenge. The average age in our hand sewing room, we have eight sewers right now, two of them are retired on Social Security but they want to continue working, and the rest of them are all between forty-two and sixty-two. And today we have a young man downstairs who's twenty years old, he was introduced to us from some friends, and he's the type of person who's always seen himself working with his hands, he does not like the construction business, he was in the military, and he just wants to create something. And so we're giving him an opportunity.

I think, as I look at this business, it's very different than what I grew up with. It's all about crafting, and there's an incredible value today placed on authenticity and craftsmanship and skills, and especially in our country, in the United States. And so I think it's a smaller, you know, the business will be smaller than what we've probably planned for in the past. I recognize that, I understand that. We have to be, as owners and managers, we have to be creative, we have to think more about what other types of products are relevant in the marketplace that we can produce, not just handsewns but

other things, so that's what we'll do with this Rancourt Company.

AL: That was sort of the question I was going to ask, how do you stay vibrant. A lot of the businesses have moved overseas for cheaper labor.

MR: Yeah, so again, I come back to the fact, I've traveled a great deal over the last ten years, actually twenty-five years because I traveled to South America and India and Asia and Europe, and so I've seen many, many models, shoe models and business models around the world. And today when I travel to a country like India and you see many young people who are in the factories, the shoe factories that I visit, and they have one job, they perform one task every day. It's tedious, it's monotonous. It's a different world there. It's about mass producing, producing something at a cost that can be sold all over the world at a certain price.

The converse of that is, or diametrically opposite of that is the Italians, you know, when I travel to Italy and I visit their factories. They're small factories, full of craft people who have been at it for three generations and four generations, and they do multiple jobs, and they understand shoe making, they've made a life of it, they've made a living of it, and their parents did and their grandparents did. And you see the pride that they have and the artistry that they have in what they're making. And they have found, the Italians have found a niche in the marketplace, in the world marketplace, not just the Italian or the European marketplace but in the world marketplace. They've remained relevant, and they still are today.

And I think we can do the same thing, I think we can remain relevant as long as we're authentic, as long as we're creating something. It's not just creating a new business, but it's creating a new business model that says we can make these wonderful things that people around the world will pay a good price for, because we need a good price in order to stay here. And then we also have to, I've learned how to make other shoes along the way, because we've had to, you know, in this factory and also because we've worked in so many different factories. So we'll direct our skills and our monies and our interests to other types of shoes over the next two years so that we'll have, we'll meld two operations, you know, lasted shoes and then hand crafted shoes.

AL: Do you have a perspective on what you saw as changes in the Lewiston and Auburn communities as the shoe businesses closed? Did it have a very visible effect?

MR: Yeah, the connotation I think, you know, anyone who's grown up in Lewiston-Auburn, the connotation with the shoe making industry has not been a positive one. You know, comments like low wages and unskilled, or little skilled, which has, in the opinions of lots of people, whether they're economists or whether their politicians or political people, the opinions were that because of our industry we've kept people at levels of income that don't allow for a better than average lifestyle. That's what I experienced over the years.

And it was difficult for me to accept, because I worked with many people, came to know many people in this community, and felt like we were providing jobs that were above average pay, and were meaningful jobs and that people wanted to come to work, and they felt that they were – sure, they always wanted to make more money, everybody wants to make more money, but they were meaningful jobs and that people enjoyed coming to work, they continued working in our field for many, many years. They could have left our field, and our industry, but they didn't, they stayed with us. And they still do today.

So as the factories started to close, I just felt that we were losing something important and vital to this community, and it was about skills and crafting things, that people felt good about. And as those jobs went away, it's not like we replaced them with something that they could go home and say hey, to their children and to their family, to their mom and dad, and say hey, today I did this. Because they were replacing them with pick-and-pack operations, or shipping operations, or storage operations, or operations where you get on a telephone, you know, making a sales call and being rejected twenty-five times in an hour. So you're never walking out of those jobs, those kinds of jobs and feel like, you know, I created something today that the world wants to see from me, adding value to this world economy that we're all in. That's my sense of it.

I still believe tremendously that we need to make something, we absolutely, this country, and our generation and my son's generation, we need to make something, we need to create something, we need to create value and beauty and have people around the world be interested in what we're doing.

AL: And how did your son become involved?

MR: So, like me, at a very young age I used to, it's funny because my wife would say, okay, it's Saturday, and for some reason Saturday morning was always a morning in the factories, you know, we were always working as many hours as we could, our work force, and trying to ship as many shoes as we could, but we never quite made it so we'd have to have people come in on Saturday mornings. So every Saturday morning my father would go to the factory and I would go to the factory, and my wife would say, as my sons became older, she would say, take your sons, take the boys and go to the factory. And the younger one, Kyle, who's now with me and my partner, he was always the one that was excited about coming to the factory. My other son didn't really care, wasn't interested, and hated the thought that he was going to have to come to the factory again. He always enjoyed it, and there was a reason, I mean the women in the packing room would always have little prizes for him and little candies for him and so he always remembered that. Plus, it was a factory, so you can imagine as a seven or eight or nine year old and you have all these shoes and racks and lasts and all these objects that he could run around and play games, and so for him it was a big playground.

And it stayed with him, you know, again, the aromas and the smells of the factory, and he'll talk about that. He just graduated from the University of Marquette about a year ago, he said to me, hey dad, I think I want to get in the shoe business, and he asked me if Allen-Edmonds would be a place for him and I said, you know, my concern for you now is that if you join at Allen-Edmonds, is that you're really going to spend a lot of time traveling []. And at first that's fun, but over time you find it becomes a pretty lonely life. And at the time I wasn't really planning on this spin-off and re-acquiring, so I just said be patient, wait, and sure enough, something came up and because of this opportunity he and I were able to re-acquire a private business.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about the shoe business, about your experiences that I might not know of, that you think is important to add or talk about?

MR: No, I think we hit the most important topics, the types of shoes we're making, the people who are making them. No, I'm comfortable.

AL: Thank you so much.

MR: You're welcome.

End of Interview

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