SHOE WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE

Monique Young **SWOH #054**
(*Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu*) September 13, 2010

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is September 13th, 2010, in Lewiston, Maine, this is Andrea L'Hommedieu and today I'm interviewing Monique Young. Could you start just by spelling your name for me?

Monique Young: My name is M-O-N-I-Q-U-E.

AL: And Young is?

MY: Y-O-U-N-G.

AL: And where and when were you born?

MY: I was born in New Britain, Connecticut, and I only lived down there for a year and then my mother and father moved in this area, Lewiston-Auburn, and I was raised in Lewiston-Auburn, spent part of my married life there.

AL: Now, tell me about your parents, what were their names?

MY: My father's name was Emilien J. Montreuil, and I'll spell that for you, M-O-N-T-R-E-U-I-L, and my mother's name was Muriel Yolande Poulin, before she got married, and they were married in 1953, June of 1953.

AL: Were they from Lewiston-Auburn? You said you were in Connecticut for a year, was that where they grew up?

MY: They went to Connecticut after they got married, because there was no work here. So they only stayed down there a year or two, and as soon as they could find work up here then they moved back up in this area, because this is where their family were.

AL: So they were born in Lewiston?

MY: Yes.

AL: And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

MY: I have two sisters, I have an older sister, her name is Michelle, and I have a younger sister, her name is Marilda.

AL: And so your parents were, what did they do for work?

MY: They worked in a shoe shop, ever since I can remember they worked in a shoe shop. My father was basically a hand sewer, he used to make stitched moccasins, he actually brought home work, so he worked full time in a shop and then brought home work for the weekend, and we would help him by waxing his threads and threading them with needles so that they would be all ready for him to sew. There was always thread hanging in the living room, ready for him to sew. We all helped, even though we were little.

AL: Yeah, that's neat. And your mother, what did she do in the shoe shop?

MY: She worked at a place called Rangeley Heel, and I was very young when she worked there, and she worked there for quite a while and she used to scour heels, and she used to actually scour the skin right off the end of her fingertips. She used to use this stuff called New Skin, she'd put that on every morning, and then she would scour. Because she had to scour right up close to the edge, and sometimes her fingers would be close and she'd scour the skin off her fingertips. And it was piece work I remember, it was piece work, so that's why she had to put something on it, because she had to keep going to work.

AL: And was that painful for her?

MY: She was quite pained with it, but that New Skin really made a difference. It made a protective layer over the end of her fingertip to protect it. She had to apply it during her breaks and lunch. But then she had an opportunity to move on to another shoe shop and she had better work there.

AL: Now, when you were quite young, you said, both your parents worked in the basement of a shoe shop, can you describe where that was, if we can't think of the name?

MY: I can't remember the name, but there was a store off of Park Street, right off of Main Street, there was a store, and there was shoe shop in the basement. We used to walk down like, I don't know what you'd call it, a platform type thing, like a delivery man would go down into the cellar of the building to make deliveries, and that's where the shoe shop was. And my mother worked first shift and my father worked second shift, and they would switch us off, one would go to work and bring us along and then the other one would take us back home. And I remember because there used to be these little corkscrews of pieces of plastic, because they used to make women's high heels,

plastic high heels there, and I was very young, because I don't remember much more than that, because we used to run around and pick those up and play with them while we were waiting, while they greeted each other and talked and whatever, you know how parents do.

AL: And so do you remember more times of your parents working in the shoe shops? That was early, when you were really young. When you were older, what shops were they working in?

MY: My mother has worked at, it was called Etonic when it left, but when it started it was Bon-On, and then it was changed to Bon-Ann, and then it was changed to Etonic, and she was there through all those changes. As a matter of fact, I think when I started working there right out of high school, that's what it was, was Bon-Ann, I think I missed the Bon-On, that was earlier. And they started what they called a slush mold over there, where they made boots, and she worked in that area, and then when I started working there she was, I don't know if you remember, children's shoes used to have a stripe around it, and she used to take markers, and it was piece work, and she used to take this marker and go around the edge of the sole and put the blue line or the red line or whatever line, and she was paid piece work for that, and she had to keep track of how many pairs of shoes she did and what color. And she was only 5' 2" so sometimes she had to have the boss come over and lower shoes, because the racks were hanging from the ceiling and she had to have a little bit assistance. So when she saw it coming from a distance, she would get somebody to lower the shoes for her, because sometimes they'd have replacements on that end that didn't realize it was a short person working on the other end.

But then she moved on to packing and repair, so the shoes would come to her and she would check them over and clean them and repair whatever she could, and if she couldn't repair them but they could be repaired, they were sent to a cobbler, or if they couldn't be repaired at all they were seconds, which means they weren't first quality and they had to special stamp them and do special things, she had all her equipment lined up on her bench. And I remember she used to eat fireballs all the time, they kept her going, she used to have a hot fireball in her mouth all day long.

AL: That's funny. And did your dad at work much?

MY: I didn't see him at work, I saw him more at home. And towards the end he didn't work in a shoe shop anymore, he worked for the Lewiston Housing Authority, he was one of their men who worked taking care of the buildings and cleaning up and stuff. But he used to do a lot of hand sewing, that's mainly what he was, and that one seemed to go out first, phase out of the area first. Here they still have some, but I don't know of anybody who really does anymore. But he used to do a lot of it. I remember those threads hanging, and needles waiting to be threaded onto them, for a long time. Yeah, he used to have a great big bucket, and he used to soak those leather in there to

soften it, and then when he'd start stitching them, there was a needle on each end of his thread, so he would be going both ways at the same time, and it had to be softened leather so he could shape the toe part right, the way he stitched it really made a difference. And he taught us how to close them out, at the end. He would leave the needles dangling, and he showed us how to close them so that we could help him, and that supplemented our income.

AL: And did that get you interested in working in the shoe industry too, or how did you come to it?

MY: Oh, I was a silly girl when I was a teenager. I had wanted to go to college, but I got caught up with my boyfriend, and in the last year of high school I didn't need very many credits and I had like half a day, and I found a part time job in what was Jones & Vining, just beginning, and it was down across the canal, where Canal Street meets Lisbon Street, that building across the canal, and I would go there after school. And the heels and soles were on this conveyer belt that would go through this sprayer, and I would take them off and put them on cardboards to dry, and that was what I did in the afternoons after school, and then got married right after I got out of high school and went right to work in a shoe shop.

My first job wasn't at Etonic, though, Bon-On, it was at Belmont Shoe, and I was doing this job where it was a hot iron machine that had a cover something like a waffle maker, and you put the reinforcement on them, and it would have markings on your piece of leather, and you would press it down and iron it on, so that when they stitched it, it would be reinforced, that's why they called it a reinforcement, so that it wouldn't rip out so quickly. So I was doing that job, and got promoted to floor girl and I was doing that job, but it didn't pay very much, just barely minimum wage, and then I got a chance to go work with my mother at Bon-On and I went there. Except it was Bon-Ann then.

AL: And so you worked with your mother.

MY: I did, she traveled me, she picked me up for work and helped me drop the kids off at the sitter's, when I started having kids, and I worked with her until, well I stopped twice to have children, and the second time was in '74, when I had my second daughter, they didn't have any openings to come back at that time. So I went to Jones & Vining and found a job there working in the staining department, where we stained soles, and I worked staining soles, and I was a sample girl for a short time there. I worked there for about two years, and then I went back to Bon-Ann.

AL: Now, what is a sample girl?
MY: A sample girl, they get orders from different shoe companies for different shoes that they showed at a show, and I would make up their samples of one or two of this and one or two of that, and sometimes they would come in and give me new soles that they wanted stained in particular stains, there was varying stains, and I would make up

the samples and they would look them over, and if they approved of them, they'd be sent to different companies to see if they liked them and if they wanted to order them. Because Jones & Vining was mostly a sole company, and we made soles, polyurethane soles over there and I would stain them.

We used to have these different stains, like black with a reddish tint underneath, and when you put it on a buffing wheel there'd be a little bit of red that would come out, and so they would make decisions as to whether it was enough red or too much red, or if they didn't like it. Then there was some tan that would come out through the black or the brown, so there was different stains. And how you held them made a difference to how, because all we did was use a pick, stick it in the sole and then dip it into the stain, because it was very important not to be too fussy in making them because when you go into production you have to be able to make a multitude of soles and have it look as close to the sample as possible. So I had to make it so that it was as if I was doing it in a major production line. So I had to keep track of each sole I did, and what I did to it and how I did it, and it was kept in a little file box so that if they decided to go with that, they knew what was done to make that sample look like it did. It was a fun job.

AL: And did that job end, is that why you went back to -?

MY: I had a new supervisor, and I had trouble with this new supervisor and I went to the boss over him and talked to him about it, and wasn't satisfied with the reply that I had at the time. So I waited and talked to my mother and she had me call, and they had an opening at Bon-Ann so I went in and I got the job, so I just left.

AL: What was it like to work with your mom for all those years?

MY: When I first started working at Bon-Ann I had an hour job, and all I was doing was air hosing these shoes before the workers got them, because there'd be a lot of dust, rubber dust from where they were making the soles. And all my job was to do that, and I wanted to work a piece work job and make some money. And I complained to my mother and she says, well you're being watched, and they're going to watch to see how much of a worker you are, and if you do your job and are conscientious about it and then you do a good job, she says, just be patient and do the very best you can.

So when I finally did get a piece work job, my job was to cement the inside of the shoe before the insole was inserted, so that the insole would stick. And she came over and watched me for five, ten minutes, at her different breaks, and would come over and watch me and give me tips on – and maybe it was just making sure that I put my piece work tickets in the envelope in the same way, instead of, you know, in the same direction, so that it would be easier when it came time to count it. Any little things that would make it easier. And she taught me to train my left hand to work as hard as my right hand, and all these little shortcuts, and it really made a difference.

And I worked my way, at that time, let's see, this was '75, it was unusual for somebody to make six dollars an hour in a shoe shop, and I was making six dollars an hour in the shoe shop with my piece work job, so I was doing pretty good.

AL: And I forgot, did you tell me, do you remember when it became Etonic Shoe?

MY: I don't remember exactly when it became Etonic. I was there when it became Etonic.

AL: So it was the same building and you were producing the same thing, it was a name change first?

MY: I think it was an ownership change, the company changed hands and they changed it.

AL: But the product, did that remain mostly the same?

MY: Mostly the same, and sometimes after it changed we'd start to see something new come in and something old go out. I know that, I worked for a time, most of my time was in the packing room, but towards the end of my stay I had gotten laid off and when I got called back, I got called back to what was called the making room, and at that time that was being phased out, where they dip in a rubber solution, that when it dried it made a covering on the bottom of the sole, to make the sole, and then it would go into an oven to cure, and that process was eliminated. And then it became, I worked in the making room, but we did it different. We had soles, separate soles, there was no more dipping, and they cemented the bottom of the upper that was folded onto the last, and then they'd cement around the edge and then the sole was laid on top of that. It was different. But when I went to New Balance, that was totally different, because I hadn't been working in a shoe shop for a while and it was like, whoa, where'd all the sewing machines go? That was totally different.

AL: So tell me about that, what year was it you started with New Balance, you have an idea?

MY: I started at New Balance in 1998.

AL: And that was after a break from working?

MY: Yes.

AL: Do you know how many years?

MY: Let me see, I got remarried in '87, and I worked at Norway Footwear, and then Norway Footwear went out of business and I worked at Ames department store for four

years, and then I worked at Tambrands for I'd say close to a year, and then I didn't work for a while, my father-in-law was decreasing in health so I had to stay home at that time, and then he went into a nursing home, so I could work again. And I heard about New Balance and I went in for an interview, and that was the thing that really caught my mind, because when you walked through Etonic, the stitching room was just rows and rows of people at sewing machines, and it was not that way at New Balance. New Balance, they had stitchers, but they had computer stitching and then they had these stitchers in a horseshoe fashion, and there was like five people in this horseshoe shape with all the different machines, and they'd have to work two machines, this one and then one next to them, and be able to go from one machine to the next. And they would finish a shoe. The computer stitching would lay the parts all down and all the parts got all stitched on, and then when it would go to the horseshoe, they would close it up, put the sock on and stitch up all the ends and close everything all up. And it was so much faster and efficient than those rows and rows and rows of machines, I was just really amazed. It was a lot less people, a lot less work.

AL: And so is the shoe very different that you make now? Is it sneakers, a lot of sneakers?

MY: Yeah, we don't call it sneakers, though, they're called – jeepers, what do they call them, they're called athletic footwear. They're not called sneakers. I still call them sneakers, but they don't call them sneakers. And basically, yes, they're differently made but basically that's what they are. They have different styles of them, but they're sneakers, that's what they are.

AL: And so you've been there since '98?

MY: Yeah.

AL: During your time, you saw an awful lot of shoe shops close. What was that like, to see that?

MY: There was a lot of people out of work, a lot of people didn't know what to do. A lot of people, who when they got out of high school had gone into a shoe shop didn't have training for a lot of these other jobs, computer jobs out there. I mean, our kids are growing up with them, but we didn't grow up with computers. I don't even own a computer. And I know a lot of people who worked in the shoe shop didn't know what they were going to do when they got their layoff slips. And even at New Balance, when I first started there, they used to have cut-through stitch, but our manufacturing facility has gone to assembly only, which means the soles come already put together and the upper comes already put together, there's no cutting of the upper or anything there now. And when we found out, there was a lot of people that were very upset, because they were losing the jobs that they'd been doing all this time, and it's quite painful when you have to go from, when you're making piece work at a certain level to all of a sudden not

having a job, or starting over at the bottom and having to learn a whole new type of job, even in the shoe shop. It's trying.

AL: Did you know of any shoe shops that invested in the employees to help retrain them?

MY: When my mother got done at Etonic, she could go to school for whatever it was she wanted to do. It was almost time for her to retire, so, she had quit school in her senior year, so she went back for her GED and got her high school diploma that way. But she could have gone to school had she been younger, and there were others who did go to school, and they helped her go to school and paid for her while she went to school, and there were others who did do that, go to school to learn something different. But I don't know of any others. You lose contact with people when you go in different directions.

AL: And you talked about your parents, and they were from Lewiston, the French community I would say. Did you have grandparents that you grew up with, too, or were they from Canada?

MY: I believe my father's father came down from Canada, they came over from France to Canada, and then from Canada down here to Maine. And he worked basically at Bates Mill, and my aunts, my father's sisters worked at Bates Mill. One of my aunts that worked at Bates Mill the longest, she was an inspector and she would use a light behind the quilts that they made, the blankets they made, to inspect to make sure that the quality of material was the same throughout, and that was her job. And my father worked in the mill, he worked the looms, and that's what my grandfather did, too. And later on, he did work at a label manufacturing company, across from Marden's there was a label manufacturing company worked out there, and he did work there and they made like labels, they wove the labels on the back of clothing. He did that for a long time, and it was his experience from Bates Manufacturing that got him in there.

And my mother did work at Bates for a short time when she come out of high school, because we found her I.D., my daughter has it, she's making a heritage album, to go back as far as she can, and she's going to use that for her heritage album. Otherwise I'd have brought that too. And my grandfather on my mother's side, I found out that he was a cobbler in a shoe shop, so I didn't even know about that. Because when I remember him, he was already retired so I did not know what he did for a living, and it never crossed my mind to even ask what he did for a living.

AL: And that was way back.

MY: Yes, that was way back. He died when I was like sixteen years old, so I never really had a chance to, you know, when you're younger you don't think of those things, and I never really had a chance to talk to him about it. But that's what he did, he was a

cobbler in a shoe shop. And my uncle, I talked to him yesterday, he came over for this express purpose, to talk about this subject, and he worked in a shoe shop and he did the stitching into the sole for government shoes, where they stitched right into the sole, they stitched the upper right into the sole, and that's what he did, on this great big huge machine. And I didn't know that either, so I learned all kinds of things getting ready for this interview.

AL: And what is his name?

MY: His name is Norman Poulin.

AL: Wow, so it's really a big part of your family history, the shoe industry.

MY: Yes, my older sister worked in the shoe shop but only for like three or four months. My younger sister used to work over here at Supreme Slipper for quite a while, she was a stitcher, and she worked, I think she worked in the sample department, she was assistant floor girl, I'm not sure. She wasn't the boss, but she wasn't just a regular stitcher. And I got a lot of the material when Supreme Slipper closed, that they were going to throw out, that I got to keep and made some quilts for my grandchildren with them.

AL: So talk just a little bit about the Lewiston-Auburn community when you were growing up, and how it's changed over time. What was it like when you were a kid in the fifties and sixties?

MY: Oh, fifties and sixties. Well, fifties I don't remember too much. Sixties, we lived on Chabourne (*SP?*) Road, and that's right on the edge of Sabattus and Lewiston, and town seemed so far away, you know, there was woods and woods and then there was town. And we didn't go to town, us kids didn't go to town very often. When we did go, it was all wide-eyed, and the downtown Lisbon area, dime stores, I mean there was a lot of stores, we used to do all of our Christmas shopping and we would come downtown to Lisbon Street and the Christmas music would be playing, and they would have decorations from one side to the other, all lit up, and people would be singing along with the music, different stores. We really enjoyed that.

We miss Kresge's and Woolworth's, and it's so empty now. There was a lot more business here. We used to go to Spark's [*sic*] and sit on Santa Clause's lap, and then they would have this, it was like a playpen, it was full of toys, and then they would have this cardboard thing of water and a fishing pole, and you put your fishing pole over after you sat on Santa Clause's lap and you would be able to pull out a gift. You know, it was like a fish, there would be an elf back there putting it on there, but we didn't know, we'd be tickled.

So, it was a lot more French speaking. I don't have very much French speaking out in

Oxford, and there used to be a lot more French speaking in this area that what there is now. I did spend a little bit of time in what they used to call Little Canada, on Oxford Street, I lived there for a year just before I got remarried in '87, and I heard some stories. My grandfather used to live right here on Lincoln Street when he was younger, and he had quite some stories to tell. He was quite a prankster, I guess, yeah.

And things are different now, there's a lot more businesses, but they're further up. And if you come from my mother's house, or what was my mother's house, there's a lot more businesses, there's hardly any woods left, it's all built up and town doesn't seem so far away, it seems like town is coming towards us. But when we come downtown, there's a lot of empty stores. It's a really strange sensation, to see so many empty places, and see them building out that way. I don't know how come they do that, rather than use the empty spots, but they do.

AL: Before we end, is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think is important to add, something I didn't think of?

MY: Concerning the shoe industry?

AL: Yes, or your family or anything like that?

MY: I remember when there was a big shutdown of a lot of shoe shops here, and we wanted to bring attention to the plight of shoe shops and how we wanted to keep that manufacturing business here in Maine, so we wanted to send a message to Olympia Snowe, who was congresswoman at that time. So they passed out, they cut these parts to the shoes in florescent orange material, and we all got to write our names and addresses and a short message to her on these, and they sent them to her. To try and get her attention more focused on us, that we wanted to keep our jobs and continue working. And I really think that as a country we have lost too many jobs to overseas manufacturing, and this country is losing the ability to be able to so a lot of those jobs. If we had to make shoes from scratch today, I don't know if we could do it. I mean we'd have to start over like probably our founding fathers did. But I would like to see it come back to more manufacturing here in the States, instead of all of us going overseas. There must be some way of keeping our jobs here in the States, instead of sending them overseas. There must be, there's got to be.

AL: Thank you very much.

End of Interview
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