

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

**Vernon Daigle**  
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

**SWOH #027**  
April 10, 2009

**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is Friday, April 10th, 2009. I'm here at the museum with Vernon Daigle, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Vern, could you start just by giving me your full name?

**Vernon Daigle:** Vernon Roger Daigle.

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

**VD:** In Fort Kent, Maine.

**AL:** What was your date of birth?

**VD:** 3/4/1936

**AL:** And so, you were born in Fort Kent. Were your parents from there, or had they immigrated from Canada?

**VD:** No, they were both born in Fort Kent.

**AL:** And what were their names?

**VD:** Alma Daigle, and Eva Dumont Daigle.

**AL:** What did they do for work up in Fort Kent?

**VD:** Lumberjack, my dad was a lumberjack, and my mother used to be a cook for the lumber camps.

**AL:** How many brothers and sisters did you have?

**VD:** Nine brothers and five sisters.

**AL:** So your mother was used to cooking for a large number of people.

**VD:** Yeah, we were a big family. Nine boys. We had a heck of a time.

**AL:** What was in like in Aroostook County, way up north?

**VD:** When I left there I was seven years old, to move to Lewiston, and I don't recall too much about up north.

**AL:** So your parents moved to Lewiston.

**VD:** Yeah, they moved to Lewiston to go work at BIW during the war. They went to build ships or whatever, mom and dad.

**AL:** Was that unusual, for your mother to work at BIW at that time, or did they need everybody they could get?

**VD:** Everybody that would pick up bolts and nuts and rivets, I guess. They both worked at BIW for several years I guess.

**AL:** When the war was over, did they go into doing other things?

**VD:** No, my dad went back in the woods and my mother stayed home and take care of the kids.

**AL:** Where did you fall within the, is it fifteen kids, or fourteen?

**VD:** Fourteen kids, yeah.

**AL:** Where were you, in the middle, the older?

**VD:** Oh, I'm about the middle of the boys. There was, you want me to name them? There was Norman, ahead of me, Morris, Reynold, Donald, and one of them died after Donald, and then there was me, I was the sixth boy. But I still say the fifties was the best time of my life.

**AL:** Why was that?

**VD:** How could I put it? Everything was better. You were closer to everybody. It seemed I had more fun in the fifties. I was younger.

**AL:** You would have been in your late teens, early twenties.

**VD:** Okay, '36, '46, '56 -

**AL:** Fifty-six, you would have been about twenty.

**VD:** I'd have been about twenty. And I got married at twenty-one. My wife was nineteen.

**AL:** And how many children did the two of you have?

**VD:** I had two wonderful kids. I have a son Jimmy, and a daughter Sandra. Two beautiful kids.

**AL:** So you moved to Lewiston at the age of seven. What area of Lewiston did you live?

**VD:** It's right next to Lincoln Street. Cross Street, they used to call it. Cross Street, and then there was Lincoln Street. We stayed there for maybe twenty-some-odd years, and then we moved on Chestnut Street, right by Emile LaCasse Bakery. We moved there.

**AL:** So, what was Lewiston like at that time? Being a kid, what did you do?

**VD:** Ride my bike. Those days, there was a lumber yard, they used to call it Yard of Skinner, White's Lumber used to pile their wood over there, and that's where we used to go play all the time, White's Lumber yard. It was right next to the Androscoggin River, and that's where we used to go make some camps in there, play cowboys. It was fantastic.

**AL:** Were there lots of other kids in the neighborhood that you could play with?

**VD:** Oh yeah, a lot of kids. There was a lot of kids. The Labrecques, Dumont, Boutot, unbelievable.

**AL:** And at that time, did you get everywhere most places walking, or did your family have a car?

**VD:** No, my family didn't have a car. My father never drove, and my mother, if I remember right, she did when she was younger. The only thing we had was a peddle bike, and sometimes my brother would have a little car or something like that.

**AL:** Where did you buy your food? Were there stores nearby? How did that work?

**VD:** At the time there was, I'm trying to think, the name of the store that was on the corner of Lincoln and Chestnut. Roy, Roy's Supermarket, that's where we used to trade. We used to get it on credit and pay it when we could. There was another store too, across the street, but I really don't remember the name of it though.

**AL:** So you could walk there and buy your groceries.

**VD:** Oh yeah, it was right there, not more than five hundred feet away. It was right next door. Where we used to live on Chestnut street, there used to be Lacasse Bakery, and I used to wash the floors and this and that and he'd pay me some pies.

**AL:** Nice. Do you remember how old you were when you did that?

**VD:** Sixteen, fifteen, sixteen, whatever. Then I quit school to go work in Rutland, Vermont, in the woods with my dad and two of my brothers, Don and Stanley.

**AL:** And you did that for a couple of years.

**VD:** Done it for about three years, and then I went to work in the shoe shop. No, I'm sorry, I went to work at a body shop first. I worked at the Prospect Hill Garage for maybe three, four years. And then my brother-in-law, Bud Ritchie, showed me how to hand sew, and then I became a hand sewer. And I loved every moment of it.

**AL:** Did you work in the mill before?

**VD:** When I was eighteen, I worked in the mill when I was eighteen.

**AL:** What did you do at the mill?

**VD:** I used to work in One and Two weave room. I used to change the, they used to call it the warp. Those big, big rolls there. I used to go get them way on the corner of Main Street. They would be on a little horse that I would push. Sometimes I had to push it all the way to Chestnut Street. I liked it. So I done that for several years.

**AL:** What was the first shoe shop that you went to?

**VD:** My first shoe shop was Koss Shoe, Koss Shoe, and I didn't work there long. And then I went at Billings Shoe as a tacker, I used to tack innersoles and all that. And I used to, at that time the hand sewing threads, you had to hackle them by hand. Maybe there was a thousand little needles, and you put them on your wrist and you'd hackle them to make the ends so you could put a needle on it. So I done that at Belmont for a couple years. And then I used to bring some old shoes home and I'd practice to hand sew.

**AL:** And you said your brother was the first one to show you how.

**VD:** My brother-in-law.

**AL:** Brother-in-law.

**VD:** Yeah, Bud Ritchie.

**AL:** Okay. And what was it, do you remember what it was that he taught you, that helped you become such a good hand sewer?

**VD:** The basic of it, you know what I mean. Hand sewing is like an art, you're going to be good at it, or you're not going to be good at it. And I don't know if he taught me well, whatever, but I was pretty good at it, and I loved it. And like I say, the money was good. And I had hardly no education, I came out of school in fourth grade. So then, I said well, that's going to be my life, so, I think I was very good at it.

**AL:** Over time, did you get better and better, were there techniques that you learned?

**VD:** No, I'd say once you hit your peak, that's about it. That's about it, right there, know what I mean. And like I say, I loved it. I loved the job, and I loved the work, and I could do it without, how could I put it, I could do my job and talk to you just like I'm doing now. Some people, they got to stop to talk. And I didn't have to stop, I kept on working and whatever.

**AL:** So how did you make good money? It was piece work, right?

**VD:** Right, the more shoes you sewed, the more money you made. If some guys would do, we'll say, twenty four pairs, I would do thirty-six without sweating. I was just good at it.

**AL:** And did you in some ways make your own hours, or what was your work day like?

**VD:** Oh, we all had the same hour, from seven to three-thirty mostly, seven in the morning to three-thirty. It was mostly eight hours a day, so everybody would work eight hours a day.

**AL:** And you said there were a lot of hand sewers at Billings. How many, do you recall?

**VD:** We were one hundred and twenty-eight hand sewers, if I remember right. And at Belmont, I would say we were at about the same thing at Belmont three years ago. And like I say, I mostly started at Belmont, and I got fired over there. I had an argument with this guy. And the guy was bad. I mean, usually when you go get your work, you'd take the first case in line. Okay? This guy would go and he'd take the one that he want. So I had an argument with him, and the owner heard about it, because him and the owner were chip-chip. So the owner told Louie Callons (*sounds like*) to get rid of me, because I had an argument with this guy. I don't want to name him. And Louie came, he says, I'm sorry Vern, you had an argument with so-so? I said, yes. He says, well Izzy told me

to get rid of you. I said well, no problem, no problem. And half an hour later I was working the (*unintelligible*) out in Auburn.

**AL:** And hand sewers, were they in high demand? Could you go from one shop to another pretty easily?

**VD:** Very high in demand, very high, know what I mean.

**AL:** Good hand sewers.

**VD:** Good, anyone really, because there was so much work, right, there was so much work, so you could jump from one job to the other if you wanted to. But like I say, I stayed at Billings Shoe for opening day to closing day. Because we started Billings Shoe, we were three guys that started at night time, myself, Paul Berube, and Roger Larue. We started Billings Shoe on Washington Street in Auburn, and at the time we didn't have no name, so we used to call it (*name*). And after awhile, then, it got big enough so we moved at Bates Mill, I'm sorry, not Bates, Hill Mill. We moved at Hill Mill, and I was there for twenty eight years. To me, it was a very good job.

**AL:** Who was the owner of Billings?

**VD:** Jerry Feinstein. And I met him three weeks ago, I met him at the Auburn Mall. He walks around at the Auburn Mall. He must be closer to ninety, Jerry. So I hollered at him, hi Jerry. Hi Vern. So I went over, and he came to shake hands. I said, no. I hugged him instead, because he lost his wife four months after I did, know what I mean, so he was crying too. So we hugged each other. Very nice guy, very nice guy.

**AL:** So he was pretty easy to work for?

**VD:** I think so, I think so, yeah, I think so. He was reasonable, he was reasonable. And a couple of years ago I was walking at the mall with my wife, and Jerry was walking, so we went and see him. So he told my wife, Jackie – matter of fact, my wife passed away a year ago – so he told my wife, he said, you know, this guy over here made me a lot of money. He was okay, Jerry, yeah, he was okay. So when he retired, he closed the shop. I went and work at Cole Haan for several years.

**AL:** How were they to work for?

**VD:** Fantastic, very good, yeah, they were very good. And the only thing a lot of us didn't care for, we had to have a break every so often to make exercise.

**AL:** So your muscles, your hands wouldn't -.

**VD:** Yeah, a lot of them didn't care for that, but you got to do what you got to do, right. So like I say, I worked there, and then Mike Rancourt started Maine Shoe, started

another business, so I went to work at Maine Shoe with Mike. I was there a couple, several, three years, we'll say. Then something happened, so I left there and I went back to Cole Haan. And all these years, while I was sewing, there was a little shoe shop on Lisbon Street, used to call it Jean's (SP?) Shoe. I used to go work there almost every night to sew, maybe six to twelve pairs every night. I done that for almost fifteen years. So if I wanted to buy something, I'd go over there and make the money, whatever, and then I'd buy what I want. Yeah, I worked at Jean's Shoe for quite awhile on Lisbon Street. There was maybe a dozen guys working there part time. And like I say, I met a lot of good guys, hand sewing. Some good, some were good guys, to be honest with you. And there was a couple of guys that were, they were fast, but I wasn't worried about them, know what I mean. Like there was, like Danny Dufour was a very good sewer, young, and Dick Courtemanche, which, at Modern Woodsman, Dick Courtemanche, he was quite a good sewer too, yeah. And like I say, I could name a hundred of them, I could name a hundred of them.

**AL:** Did people who worked sewing shoes together, did they go out and socialize together?

**VD:** Oh, unbelievable.

**AL:** Could you tell me about that part of it, because I think that's interesting, from a history point of view, there's a social aspect of it.

**VD:** Well, when you worked in the (*unintelligible*), we used to leave there Friday afternoon, and there was a little bar room next door. I don't remember the name of it. We used to get together there and have a few, two or three, beers, and play pool. And at Billing, we used to leave Billing and go at the Twenty-M Club (*sounds like*). We used to go to the Twenty M and play pool, have a few beers. And we went, at Billing Shoe, we went on a lot of trips, deep sea fishing. We used to get a bunch of guys, get together, rent a boat, then go deep sea fishing. A bunch of guys, Larry Bosse, John Beaulieu, oh, unbelievable. We used to go deep sea fishing. And some guys were so damn sick, it was unbelievable. So, it's a lot of things, know what I mean, a lot of things, to be honest with you. And then like Friday afternoon, at the time I had a Harley, and me and this other guy, we'd take off and we'd go eat at Tabor's, at Lake Auburn, have a lobster roll, and then come back to work. Yeah, unbelievable.

**AL:** When you're thinking about the time you grew up in Lewiston and sort of the atmosphere of the town, and you look back on it and you look at it today, what has changed, how has Lewiston changed?

**VD:** Well first of all, I was brought up on Lincoln Street, roughly, okay. Now Lincoln Street is gone, everything's gone. There's no more buildings, no more houses, nothing on Lincoln Street. Very, very changed.

**AL:** It looks more industrial.

**VD:** It looks empty. It's all, it's parking lots, and parking lots, and parking lots. It's empty, it's empty. Like I say, well, they were old buildings, so they had to go down sooner or later. And I remember years ago, when we moved in Lewiston, on Lincoln Street, where the canal comes down, there used to be two buildings, half in the canal. I mean built half in the canal. It was unbelievable. This guy Burgoyne (*sounds like*) had a store in there, too, he had a store there, half of it was on the canal. And the Guimond (*sounds like*), they used to live upstairs too, a bunch of Guimonds. It changed, it changed. And years ago, the water from the mill used to go across Lincoln Street. There used to be so much foam, that it would cover the road on Lincoln Street. Yeah, it would cover it, foam would cover the road on Lincoln Street.

**AL:** And that has changed, in a good way.

**VD:** Yes, yes, that changed a lot, yeah. And our best little hang out, like we used to go to Simone's, eat some hot dogs at Simone's. Sunday's we used to go to the park, every Sunday night they used to be a band in the park, we used to go in the park.

**AL:** Kennedy Park?

**VD:** Yeah, Kennedy Park, yeah, there used to be a band there, and we used to go have a ball there every Sunday night. It was beautiful. And like I say, I mean here, I mean, it still smells the mill. It'll never change. The smell is here to stay.

**AL:** Does that bring back memories?

**VD:** Oh, unbelievable, yeah. I used to work at the second shift, I used to get out of work about eleven o'clock at night, and I used to get three, four guys, buy a six-pack of beer and go to Leeds and park in the big field and watch the deer. Sometimes there used to be twenty, thirty deers right around us. We used to be quiet and watch them, in Leeds. Yeah, that was beautiful. It was very nice. And then on the way home, sometimes we'd stop at a big cornfield and steal some corn. The worst part, it was cow, cow corn. But it was still something good to eat.

**AL:** Was Peck's Department Store still here when you were growing up?

**VD:** Yeah. That's the only place where Santa Clause came, if I remember right. Santa Clause used to come at Peck's, which I never went to see him much, but yeah, Peck's was here, J.C. Penney's, I think, if I'm not mistaken, and Woolworth Store. It was unbelievable.

**AL:** Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think I've missed, or is important to add to what we're talking about today?



**VD:** Well, like I say, years ago, the future of Lewiston and Auburn was shoe shops and mills. That was the future. And now it's gone. There's only, right now there's only one shop left, they call it, Allen-Edmonds. And if I'm not mistaken, I think there's only three or four hand sewers left. And that's it my dear, that's it. There's nothing else that I, like I say, growing up, we had good times on our peddle bike. And sometimes my brother Larry, the one you talked to, he'd steal my bike. I'd catch him, boot his fanny, because he was seven years younger than I, know what I mean. I guess the families were closer then.

**AL:** So you had a big, close family.

**VD:** Yeah, oh yeah. We had a big, close family, and it was fantastic. And like I say, I ate a lot of soup and beans, oh yeah, those days.

**AL:** Did your mother have any traditional Canadian dishes that you remember growing up with?

**VD:** No, not really, no, no, because like I say, we were pretty damn poor, so we didn't have much. And the best thing I loved the most was when, I had two of my brothers, they used to play guitar and sing. Matter of fact, three, even Larry. And we used to sit down there and sing there, it that was fantastic, play the guitar, yeah. It was life.

**AL:** Thank you so much.

**VD:** You're very, very welcome.

*End of Interview*

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