

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

**Dorothy Charpentier**  
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

**SWOH #016**  
January 17, 2009

**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is January 17, 2009. I'm at the home of Dorothy Charpentier in Lewiston, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Dorothy, could you just start by giving me your full name, including your maiden name?

**DC:** Dorothy Blais Charpentier.

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

**DC:** I was born here in Lewiston, 1925, November 1st, and I was raised in Lewiston, and went to Catholic school, St. Mary's, and then to Lewiston High. That's when I left Lewiston High to go to work, both my parents were sick, and I had a job in a shoe factory. That's when I started, with intentions of going back to school the year after. Never turned out.

**AL:** Now, talk to me about your family. How many children were there in your family?

**DC:** Only my brother and I, only two.

**AL:** What did your parents do for work?

**DC:** My father was a shoe worker all his life. My mother worked in the mill when she was a younger woman, and then she stayed home, she was a homemaker.

**AL:** Which shoe shops did your father work in?

**DC:** Cushman's in Auburn.

**AL:** For many, many years?

**DC:** Many years, and then he went to, I remember when I went into Clark Shoe, he had a job there, he worked there too. And then there was a shoe factory on Oxford Street.

**AL:** Where was Cushman located?

**DC:** On Court Street in Auburn. It was a big shoe factory. A big building with,

Shapiro Brother's were there too, I think.

**AL:** Is that where Denny's is now?

**DC:** I think so.

**AL:** I think it's in that area.

**DC:** The building down, yeah, it is.

**AL:** Do you remember, or did your dad ever talk about what different types of jobs that he did?

**DC:** He was a heel fitter, that was his job, and I think he did that all the time. His brother worked in a shoe factory. He was a repairer at Lown Shoe. His sister was a stitcher. So they were all shoe workers.

**AL:** That probably employed a lot of people in the area.

**DC:** Yeah, yeah. Clark Shoe, when I went into Clark Shoe I was sixteen, and they used to pack ten thousand pairs of shoes a day. There were six packers.

**AL:** Tell me what different jobs you had. You started at sixteen.

**DC:** I started at sixteen. I was a floor girl at sixteen, and then I married and I stayed home for about a year. I worked for about three years as a floor girl at Clark Shoe. I stayed home for about a year when my son was born. Then I trimmed flaps. That was before my son was born.

**AL:** Okay, that's in this picture here.

**DC:** Yeah. After that, when I stayed home, I didn't want to do that job anymore, so I went into Lown. I had a friend that worked there, and she says, they're hiring. So I went over there, my uncle was working there, and I made boxes. I didn't care for that too much. But then on noon hour, he'd show me how to repair. That was a better job, it was paying better. I learned, and then I got a job, and I stayed repairing for the rest of my life. I was sixty-five when I retired.

**AL:** And that was in 1980.

**DC:** Not '80, maybe '90, '91. I stayed a little over. It got slack and they laid me off. I was the last one there. I was at Crest Shoe the last five years, I worked there.

**AL:** Were you seeing the shoe shops closing around you?

**DC:** Oh yes, we closed Clark Shoe, I was there when Clark Shoe closed. And then I went into Dori, and I worked there for a good fifteen years, and that closed too. I was left alone to do the repairs, and I'd pack the shoes. There were just a few people then, at Dori. They used to make shoes for that show, *Dynasty*.

**AL:** Oh, did they? I was going to ask you what kind of shoes Dori made.

**DC:** Well, they had shoes from Lord and Taylor. They had beautiful shoes, Dori Shoe. So did Clark Shoe. They used to make Fiance's. There I modeled shoes for fourteen years.

**AL:** What do you mean by model? Did you go to places?

**DC:** No, we'd stay at the shop, there was a place upstairs next to the office, and the salesmen would come, and we were shoe girls there. One day they called me in, I says, why would they want me at the office. I thought maybe someone had stolen shoes, they wanted to know our size. I was an eight B, and they said I had the perfect foot, so I started modeling shoes. If they'd fit well, and then they mold the last to see if – and then I did try a shoe at Dori too. Somebody told them I used to model shoes. But then I had a bunion so I couldn't any more.

**AL:** So did they pay you extra for that?

**DC:** At Clark Shoe they did, not at Dori, it was included. While I was doing that I wasn't working. At Clark Shoe they did. They paid very well. Mr. Fratkin was the owner. He was a very nice man.

**AL:** Talk to me about some of the recollections you have of working at the different shoe shops. Can you give me a sense of what the atmosphere was like, and how people worked?

**DC:** Well, people were nice, good workers then. They'd do their job. They had a job and they did it. Nobody complained. They'd go in and do their day's work, and everybody seemed happy. If they weren't happy in one factory, they'd go across the street and go into another one, because there was a lot of shoe shops. We'd get together at noon hour. We used to have an hour for lunch, and knit and do this and that. People were pleasant. I always worked with nice people. Very few that I didn't care for, but that's okay.

**AL:** As a repairer, were these shoes that had just been made and they needed something repaired before they were sold?

**DC:** Yes, you looked them over, and little scratches or things like that, you had special crayons, and patent leather, and you'd work on that. If we had a hot night, we'd melt the crayon and work it in. It was a trade, to repair.

**AL:** And you said your uncle.

**DC:** My uncle was a repairer at Lown Shoe, and he used to do samples, for years.

**AL:** Is that how you got into it? Did he show you?

**DC:** Yeah, he showed me. I learned from him, yeah. I knew the superintendent, so when I left Clark, I didn't have time to stay out too long. In two days they called me back to go at Dori, and there too, there was a girl doing samples, but I used to help her out. And then she retired, and they put me on that. And they made beautiful shoes. Bloomingdale's, and all big stores. Lord and Taylor, beautiful.

**AL:** And that's all gone overseas now.

**DC:** All gone overseas, yeah. It's too bad.

**AL:** Do you still keep in touch with anybody that you worked with?

**DC:** Oh yes, I have a lot of friends. This man, Bert, calls me every month sometimes, and he talks about, he used to be an edge trimmer. He worked at Dori. He didn't work at Clark, no he worked at Dori Shoe. And then he came to, what was the last one on Chestnut Street that I worked there. They used to make dancing shoes. Crest Shoe.

**AL:** The Capizio's.

**DC:** Capizio, oh yeah, I have something in there about that. They gave me a five year award. Capizio, they were dancing shoes. So I worked there for five years, and then I retired. Then I went to Florida. It's so long, I spend my, you know, I was supposed to go back to school, and I stayed there and worked in shoe factories.

**AL:** So we were talking about friends that you've made. Are there others?

**DC:** Well, lots of them are gone. A few are in the Marcotte Home now, you know. I had a good friend, Blanche, she passed away too. And I had so many shoes, I didn't know what to do. They used to give them to me. Blanche was a size eight, but she had a high instep, so they didn't want her foot. But I'd give them to her after. Keep her in shoes. I had good years there. It was an honest living.

**AL:** When Mark came to photograph you, he said you have a neighbor that - .

**DC:** Yes, she's next door. She worked in shoe factories too. She worked at Dori too. And before that, I don't know where, but she did work in shoe factories. Would you like to talk to her?

**AL:** Yeah, I left her a message the other day. We'll see if she's up for that. What haven't I asked you about, that you think is important to add, about the shoe industry and your time there? Did you ever have any, you said at lunch time you could knit and things like that. Were there other social activities that you did?

**DC:** They used to give us parties at Christmas. When I went in, naturally, they didn't have that at first. We had no vacation time or anything. Then the strike came, I was not in the big strike. I think that was in '36. My father was in the big strike. In the years, we had vacation pays and then we'd have holidays, and we became, and now everything is starting to go. They had union, the union came in. But I had a good foreman, I was lucky.

**AL:** Did your dad ever talk about the strike?

**DC:** Oh yes. I remember the strike. I was old enough, in '36 I was about eleven years old. It was terrible. They had stores on Lincoln Street where people could, I guess it was the union, I don't remember that, where you have to go get food. That lasted a long time. Some people that did not strike had their windows broken, and the police had to go. It was tough. It was hard. I remember that.

**AL:** Did your dad strike?

**DC:** Yes, he did. He wanted to have more. Everybody wants that.

**AL:** So they got vacation pay and those types of things out of that strike?

**DC:** Oh yeah, when I retired, at Clark Shoe, no, Dori Shoe, when I retired, I had two weeks out. They wouldn't close for more than, it was just two weeks. But I had three weeks vacation pay. It was after fifteen years, I think. It was a local shoe union. It helped. Yeah, my God, such a long time ago. Going way back. And then we'd take the bus, no cars. Sometimes a bunch of girls, in the morning we'd meet. We were young. We'd walk to work from St. Mary's Church, way up to Clark Shoe on Hampshire Street in Auburn.

**AL:** That's a good walk.

**DC:** And then come back.

**AL:** World War II was going on, just about the time that you entered the shoe shops to work.

**DC:** I did a man's job for a long time then, that's right.

**AL:** Tell me about that.

**DC:** A sole layer. That's when I met my husband, and he went into the service. My husband, too, was a heel fitter. I learned, because they were short of men, women used to do men's work. I laid soles there for two years, I guess. It was hard work though.

**AL:** What happened when the war ended? Did the men come back and have their jobs?

**DC:** Yeah, and they had to give them their job back. Some went to school. They wanted to better themselves, and they got better jobs. But some came back, and they did the same jobs. They had to give them back their work, and there was a lot of work.

**AL:** At that time.

**DC:** Oh my God, yeah. Over time, you know. And when I went into work, when I started, Roosevelt was president, and they had just passed the minimum wage of forty cents an hour. Imagine that. Sixteen dollars a week. My first pay was sixteen dollars.

**AL:** Evolved a lot since then.

**DC:** Thank God it didn't stay like that.

**AL:** When you started, you had your sixteen dollars a week, what was some of the things that were very expensive for you, in terms of living expenses?

**DC:** In those days, both my parents were sick. My father was in Togus for awhile. My mother had an operation. So that's why I had gone to work, because I was in high school, I was a sophomore. I liked school so I would have, you know, I saw my friends go in the morning and I wished I, but you had to work. You could get a pound of hamburger for eighteen cents, the best. Twelve cents for a dozen of eggs. Five cents for a, whoopie pies, two for five cents. I used to give them my pay, she'd give me two dollars a week, that was for my week. That's why we walked. We'd save our money. It was three tokens for twenty five cents to go on the bus, so we'd save our money. We'd walk so we'd have a little more money. We could go to the dance, sometimes, at the City Hall, or something.

**AL:** They had dances, what other things did they do socially, in town, when you were - .

**DC:** They had dances. They had plays at the City Hall. Sometimes they had French plays over there too. That was about it.

**AL:** Did they have roller skating?

**DC:** Oh yes, roller skating, and ice skating.

**AL:** Where?

**DC:** They used to call it the Maple Leaf. That was on, where the, there's a store there now, they sell day-old bread, I think, LePage. That's where they had the Maple Leaf, right there. And then they had the Derby, and that was on Cedar Street, as you come from Auburn, go up through the street, you turn around there, well, there used to be a place there, the Derby Club, and it was a skating rink in there. Ten cents to go skate. Five cents on candy. And another one, where the fire station is on Lincoln Street, next to that. The firemen used to, for those that didn't have the money, then we'd go there to skate.

**AL:** So they really did have some public areas.

**DC:** Oh yeah. But not as much as today, naturally.

**AL:** Well great, thank you very much.

*End of Interview*  
*swoh016.charpentier.wpd*