

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

Betty Dutil

(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

SWOH #06

May 14, 2008

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is May 14th, 2008. I'm at the home of Betty Dutil, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Did I pronounce your name correctly?

Betty Dutil: Hmm-hmm.

AL: And how do you spell your name?

BD: D-U-T-I-L.

AL: And where and when were you born?

BD: I was born in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in 1940.

AL: Did you grow up there?

BD: No, no, after my father died, we moved here.

AL: So, your mom moved to the Lewiston area?

BD: Yeah, oh yeah.

AL: And what did your mother do for work?

BD: She worked in the mills, and then she worked at the Bonafide Mill, where they made floor linoleum. She worked in nursing homes and Hillcrest, and that's where she retired from, in the Hillcrest.

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

BD: None, I'm the only brat in the family.

AL: So you were here in the, what age were you, when you moved here?

BD: I was about a year and a half.

AL: Oh, so very young?

BD: Yeah.

AL: So you were in the '40s and '50s and '60s?

BD: Hmm-hmm.

AL: What was the Lewiston community like at that time?

BD: Well in the '40s, I didn't, I lived here in Lewiston, but I grew, as a kid, I lived a lot in Lisbon. I was, my mother had to work, so she had me kept by, and she wanted older people, so they, I wouldn't get in trouble, I guess. And then I went to Marcotte home, where I was there for four years. So it was quiet, it's not like it is today.

AL: Right, and you said, how old were you when you first started working in the shoe shop?

BD: I was sixteen, I just, sixteen. We had to have a workers' permit. I remember that, I had to go to city hall to get a workers' permit, I was sixteen.

AL: How many hours a week did you work at that age?

BD: We worked eight hours, and sometimes we worked on Saturday mornings, but we worked eight hours a day.

AL: Which shoe shop was it, that you began working?

BD: Shapiro.

AL: Where was that?

BD: It was on Goff Street, let's see now, I think there's a, I don't remember over there, what's over there now. There's, it must be, they probably tore it down, I don't know. I go by there a lot, but I don't, I don't look to.

AL: Now what, now what different jobs did you have when you first started?

BD: When I first started, we, I used to clean the soles and I did some cementing. We, I couldn't work on machineries at that age, so it had to be things that we did by hand, like cleaning the soles or like cementing. We used to just put the sole in cement and then put them, put them on. I don't remember, it's been so long, I don't remember.

AL: Now, did you stay there for long?

BD: I stayed there for about a year, a year, about a year, and then when it starts slowing, the last ones were out first, you know, when it slowed, it slowed down, in the slow times, so. And I went to work at Hillcrest, and I was there for ten years. And I went to, went back to the shoe shops. And I pretty much, well, closed everyone of them.

AL: Yeah, so what were some of the other jobs? Where did you go after Hillcrest, which shoe shop?

BD: I went to, I'm trying to think of the name, they made sneakers, it was up by the airport, up in Auburn, oh, try to think of it.

AL: That's the one I can't think of either. Fancy?

BD: No.

AL: Not Fancy, not Falcon?

BD: No.

AL: Cole Haan? There's Maine Shoe, Melvee, Allen-Edmunds.

BD: No, they were right, way up in, not far from the airport. They made sneakers.

AL: I'll have to find out which one that is, but anyway, what did you do in that position? Did you have the same type of jobs?

BD: We tacked, I started by tacking the sneakers, they have to tack the top to the inner sole, so they could go around, they called it the camborian operation. They would go around to st-, to fit the soles to the, I mean the top to the soles, and then they would put cement on, cement them, and then put the out soles on them. That's what I started doing, and I, I did camborian operation after that. There's a machine, you go, you just went around the -.

AL: So did, and did you get paid by piecework, or by the hour?

BD: No, we were paid by the hour. We had to, we had to do so many a day, and if you made the, if you made that quota, then you could work. They make you make sometimes a few hundreds before more than what the quota was, and then they pay us more I think for that, but we never worked eight hours, because we always put in our quota before. So we'd leave around one thirty, two o'clock in the afternoon, so. It was a good job.

AL: That was nice.

BD: Yeah.

AL: Did you have a lot of friends that also worked in the shoe shops, or did you become friends from your time there?

BD: Oh, when I started there, there was a friend of mine, we both went looking for a job. I made a lot of friends in the shoe shops. My close friends, we didn't, well they, some of them got married and left town, so. But the one I went to work there was, she was one of my closest friends and we grew up together so. But we did, I did make good friends.

AL: Did you do things together, people in the shoe shops do things together outside of work? Were there like bowling leagues -.

BD: Yes, bowling leagues.

AL: Baseball or -?

BD: I bowled for about fifteen years. We bowled, we were a group of people, we joined leagues. It was -.

AL: And where was the bowling alley that you used?

BD: In Auburn.

AL: The Auburn Lanes?

BD: Right, the Auburn Lanes. I still see some people I bowled with, and they, they say that they're still bowling, but they have to go to Lisbon Falls now, because it was candle pin bowling.

AL: So what other jobs did you have in the shoe shops over the years, can you talk about?

BD: Quite a, at Songo and Bel Moc, Bel Moc, I started stitching at Bel Moc. And then when I went, I left Bel Moc, I went to Knapp, and there I did some vamping. Then there was, I stitched, what did do with, I did -.

AL: Yes, so, so you were talking, you mentioned, you pretty much closed down with the different shoe shops, so you would work at one and then it would start closing down, and you'd go find work at another one?

BD: Yeah, and then I left Knapp, and I went to Bel Moc, and then I left Bel Moc and I

went to Songo. Songo was a good place to work. They closed, and then I went downstairs to one of the shoe shops, they're, I'm trying to remember. They had a, they did some stitching down there, and I stitched there, I can't remember what I did over there, must have been vamping or, because I was stitching, and that's pretty much what I did. But in a few of them, I did a lot of cripples.

AL: What are those?

BD: I fixed, fixed the cripples. If you have cripples, you, you know, it's like if there's some stitches missing or things, you repair them. They used to call it cripples, but it's repairing them. I did that at Songo. I started some of that at Bel Moc, but that's what I did at Songo. Then I went to the Supreme Slippers, I did that for a while, until the woman came in, came back, and she didn't want me to do anything, so I went back to vamping. Trying to think now, I went to Nike. Nike was a good shop to work with. I did cripples on that too and there. Unfortunately, it didn't stay open too long, because -.

AL: Oh, the Nike?

BD: Yeah, yeah.

AL: Yeah, because I didn't even know there was one here.

BD: Yeah, yeah, it didn't last too long. I don't know if they, they were, I don't think -.

AL: Do you know why?

BD: I guess they were cutting down, because they had one, one at the, in Sanford, I think, and they opened over here, but it was just, it wasn't very big. And then it stayed, I don't know if they're, I don't think they were there, they were in Lewiston for a year, and I think now they're only up in the west somewhere. But they, they pay good and they, the work was good. Of course, I followed my boss, because I had the same boss three or four places.

AL: Oh, really?

BD: Yeah, he would, well, one place would close and then we'd go too. The first thing I'd know, I go in and there he was.

AL: Did you go through any periods of strikes?

BD: No.

AL: No?

BD: No, the strike was, the strikes were before, the biggest strikes, I think, in the shoe

shop was in the '30s.

AL: Yeah.

BD: And I wasn't born then, so. But I -.

AL: I didn't know, I thought there were possibly smaller ones here in the area.

BD: I think there were probably some smaller ones, but I never was involved in strike, in the union, so. I don't think any place that I worked was union, unionized.

AL: So the shoe shops, they were just going out of business, left and right?

BD: Well, they were moving down south. There's a, was it Songo that went to, one went to Mexico, and the other went to south, one of those islands, and I can't remember the name of it. Yeah, because they're cheap, the labor was cheap. But I know of some that one company, what they made pocketbooks, they went to Mexico, and they were sorry they had gone there. They would have come back, but it would have been too much, I guess. But I remember hearing one of the men saying that he wish he would have never gone. It's the same thing now with clothes and toys, China and Japan.

AL: Yeah, now were there others you worked with or bosses, that can remember and talk about a little bit?

BD: Roger, I had Roger Martin. He was very, he was a good man to work for, he was quiet. And there was Roger Ouellette, I think Roger passed, Roger Ouellette, I think he passed away. There were quite a few Rogers. There was Roger, then the last one was Roger Nadeau and Roger Vessieux, he was my, Roger Vessieux was my former (*unintelligible*). He's at, I don't, I think he's still there at Falcon. I think he's a supervisor now, or. There was a George Fine, I think his name was, he's a little guy. I worked for him in a couple of shoe shops too. They were good, good foremans. And Roland at, the shoe shop, I'm trying to think of, I can see it, and I can't think of the name. He was, he was foreman when I went into work, and then he became the boss, I can't think of the name now, superintendent? He's a super. And then there was, at Falcon Shoe, we had good bosses, and there was, I, I liked working there. I had to stop because I was sick. It was hard work, we worked hard, but it was good.

AL: So you could, you could make your quota and get out of work early for the day? But you couldn't stay longer and earn extra. Is that how it works?

BD: Where I worked, where I'm trying to think of, yeah, yeah. There were, like I said, they set a quota, you had to that, and if you did it, you could go out. That's what we did, and we always a little bit more, so they'd have something to start with. But some of them, well, we had a girl that used to, we worked on conveyors, and she used to push

the work, so that's how we got out early, because the others didn't, didn't get out that early. But it was, you had to make a quota, and then you were paid. I made money there, I made good money, for the time now, now, that's when you worked at for fifty cents and seventy five cents and a dollar an hour. But of course, things didn't cost what they cost today.

AL: Are there any recollections you have, of things that happened when you worked there? They could, you know, were there funny jokes, were there pranksters, anything like that?

BD: Well, I remember when I, it was at, where was it that we had worked, we were working, I'm trying to think now which shoe shop it was, I, it was, it was at Falcon, I think, yeah, it was Falcon. We had, no, it's when I worked in the pocketbooks. They, the foreman comes over and he says, one of the owners, says, Betty, just take your stuff and leave. So we took our stuff and we left, and we went downstairs, and they told us to go across the bridge. So we had to cross the bridge and stand about, the place is closed. And (name) said, they had a bomb threat. So, George Fine was working there, and he says, here I am, looking all over the place. He, he had to look around to see if everybody was out, and he walks into the cutting room and he hears a tick tock, tick tock, and he says, I almost died. He looked, it was a big alarm clock that somebody had. So he came out, and he was telling us that the next day, so they, they started checking, because they had found a note. So they started checking out the notes. The one that did that was an idiot. He had, he had his slip, and he had made a slip, and then he wrote that note and puts it in the same box, so when they started looking through it, they said, well now, somebody had to put it in there. So they started looking through, and they, they saw it was the same handwriting. So he fun, he thought he was funny, and we were all about ready to kill him. So they had, they gave him an escort to the door to make sure that he wasn't going to come back. And there's a few other things that I can't remember, and then they had some people, in those days they were smoking, and somebody had left a lit cigarette, and the fire extinguishers went off, sprinklers. We came in the next day to wet leather. We had to go through, we had to take stock. So we, oh we had a few things that happened there.

AL: Did any of the companies, that you worked for, sponsor picnics or dinners or anything, throughout the year?

BD: Nike, we had the day, the week after Labor Day, when Old Orchard was closed, they had paid to open it, and we went there for the day, a Saturday, we spent the whole day. The one in Sanford, the one in Lewiston, we had picnics. Other than that, I don't remember any other shoe shop having picnics.

AL: I just wondered. I remember when I talked to mill workers at the Bates Mill, in the heyday, they, they did dinners and holiday type get-togethers.

BD: Well, we had holiday parties, but it was more or less a group of people, that we get together and we go out to eat. Because I remember going to Rolandeau's and going to different restaurants, and we were probably about twenty or thirty, that we'd get together and, and I'm trying to think of picnics. The only one I can remember is Nike. But the other shops, unless they had some and I, Knapp Shoe used to have Christmas parties, but other than that.

AL: Are there others that you worked with, that you think would be important for us to talk to, as we try to capture the history of the shoe workers?

BD: There's a few friends that I worked, I made friends with them through the shoe shop, and I know there's one, I don't know if she, she'd, there would be maybe, I'm trying to think now, who, Jeanine Roux, Jeanine Roux, her, her father-in-law was foreman at Sea-, Shapiro, maybe Jeanine, and I'm trying to think of other names.

AL: Well, if you think of any, just let me know, or let Rachel know at the museum, because we'd love to expand our list of people. Is there anything that I haven't asked you about your time in the shoe shops, that you feel is important to add?

BD: No, not really, right now I can't.

AL: Okay, thank you very much.

BD: You're welcome.

End of Interview
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