MILL WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE

Charlie Herrick **MWOH# 018**
(*Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu*) February 2, 2006

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History project. The date is February 2nd, 2006. I'm interviewing Charlie Herrick at the Bates Mill store, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could you start just by giving me your full name and spelling it?

Charlie Herrick: My name is Charles Herrick, H-E-R-R-I-C-K, and I started in Bates Mill in 1970, and I started off as a can doffer and worked at that for a little bit, and then went on to learn to run the cards and I did that for a few years, and then I also ran the drawer frames for a while, and then I went on to fixing, and then I went into the shop as a machinist, and I was in there for the rest of the time that I was there.

AL: And you started in 1970?

CH: Yes.

AL: As a can doffer?

CH: Can doffer, yes.

AL: What is that?

CH: That's, the cards are producing a strand of like rope, and it fills a can, and you doff them every hour. And it goes from there onto the drawer frames, which takes about ten to twelve cans, and it splices them all together to make one rope. Okay? And then from there it goes to the slubbers and it's stretched out to make a finer thread. And then eventually it goes to the spinning room, and it's a real small thread, onto smaller bobbins, and then it goes to the, let's see, it would go, like some of it would go to the weave room and some of it would go to, I'm trying to think, (*unintelligible word*), different things until it goes on to making threads which go onto a warper to make beams, which go on to the slashers, which produces the beams to go onto the looms, which makes the cloth.

AL: It sounds like there's a lot of steps in the process.

CH: There was, there was a lot of steps. Because when I started here, it started right from opening the raw bales on through. It was pretty good.

AL: And you said at one point you were a fixer. Was that a loom fixer?

CH: No, I fixed cards, I fixed drawer frames, and like I said, then from there I went into the shop.

AL: And in the machine shop what did you do?

CH: I was a machinist, and then they consolidated eventually down through the years and made it a millwright, so you did a little bit of everything, you made parts, you went out into the mill and you made repairs, so whatever needed being done, that's what you did.

AL: And I heard that some of the workers were quite self-reliant and if they had tools they needed they

were able to make them themselves. Did you ever see that?

CH: Oh yes, in the shop, if something needed like a special tool, they'd figure it out and we had, like blacksmith, could make a little bit. So you more or less formed your own tools that you needed that you didn't actually have, special tools to get stuff apart, to put stuff together. It came in handy, having a little bit of knowledge. If one didn't know how to do it, somebody else did. You always worked together.

AL: Were there any old timers that, or, I guess old timers we'll call them, that you worked with when you first started that you can remember?

CH: When I first started as a can doffer, okay, and then when I went on to the, running the cards, I started out and I was the low man, okay, put in a year and a half, I had all the seniority, all the old timers that were running the cards were all retiring. Yeah, there was a lot of old timers, as you'd call them.

AL: Maybe I shouldn't refer to them as that. I'm just thinking of people that I can't interview that might have stood out in your mind as, to describe, or, it sounds like a lot of them were getting done when you started.

CH: A lot was, it was starting the change over. Because at that time, I think it was a year afterwards, the Hill Mill closed and a lot of them came over to the Bates, which caused a lot of turmoil because of seniority and whatnot. The Bates were afraid that the Hill was coming over and taking their jobs, so yeah. But, it's like my boss in the shop. He started out right down low and he went up to be a boss in the shop. He learned the trade just by being on the job, you know. And he was smart. Like I say, he has long since gone now. Yeah, there was a lot of machinists and whatnot that, you learned from them, they'd teach you as you go. I wasn't that smart, or gone to school or anything to learn machinist. I learned it in the mill.

AL: And to go back a little bit, where and when were you born?

CH: I was born in Mechanic Falls in 1950.

AL: And is that where you grew up, in that area?

CH: That's where I grew up and graduated, yeah.

AL: What was it like in Mechanic Falls when you -?

CH: It's a very small town. It's a lot different than here in the city.

AL: Would you come in to Lewiston to do your shopping?

CH: Oh yeah, my folks would come to, because you had your department stores in here, but, no, you had your little groceries stores in Mechanic Falls, but to do any, like clothes and stuff like that, yeah, you'd come all the way in to the big city, oh yeah.

AL: Was Lisbon Street still vibrant as a shopping area at that time?

CH: Yeah, that was, back in its heyday, yeah, when it was really booming. You'd come in on a Saturday and it would, wall-to-wall people going up and down Lisbon Street. It's totally different than what it is now. This city has changed.

AL: Did either of your parents work in the mills themselves, or shoe shops?

CH: No, my mother was a homemaker and my father was a cabinetmaker. My father did work here in the city, but he as a cabinetmaker.

AL: And how did you come to get in the mills? Was it difficult?

CH: Second application I put in, I got in. And that was about two years after I got out of school, so. I don't know. To me, at that time all I needed was a job, and I started here and I stayed until 2001 when it close, so I spent about thirty one years here.

AL: Did you work with Fred Lebel over the years?

CH: He was the plant manager, so yeah, I still do a lot of favors for him because he's got another business now so I come in and give a hand to his fixers and whatnot.

AL: Do you recall any strikes that the employees had over the years?

CH: No, no strikes. Close, but no strikes. From '70 on they didn't have any strikes. Almost, twice, but never panned out, they always managed to vote against it. I think they knew that if they went on strike the place would close. Everything was getting smaller, because when the Bates started it started off with one mill and then you went up to I think it was right around four or five mills. And then all of a sudden, through the owners, they started selling off and everything started getting smaller and smaller. They, I think their biggest mistake was that they wasn't putting (*unintelligible word*) back into the company, instead they were making themselves set and then get out of the, you know, sell it to somebody else.

AL: The owners, the ones who bought it?

CH: Yeah, the owners, yeah.

AL: Was that the Tang brothers?

CH: The last ones that really hit it big, yeah, that was the Tangs, they bought it and they, we used to generate our own power, they got rid of that. So that was a pretty good loss right there, because that was more income. They made their money back from buying it, yes, but then they got out of it, and without putting money back into the company the machinery was wearing out, couldn't afford the newer modern stuff, so it hurt, it hurt big time.

AL: What role did the union play during the time you were here? From your perspective, was it good, or difficult?

CH: It was there to help some, but as you must know now, unions are almost a thing of the past now. The companies that have wised up, they, you got this, where you hire what they call scabs, you know, so the company can keep right on going. So you can go on strike, you'd just be without a job, you know, so a lot of people are realizing that. But yeah, it helped some, it got us some raises and whatnot. But it more or less reinforced the idea of your seniority. If you wanted to bid on a job or something, the company wasn't going to say, no, you can't have it, we're going to go get somebody else on the outside. It had to hire within. Yeah, it had its good points and its bad. I'm not a believer in unions, so I'm not a good one to ask that question, not really.

AL: Were there, I know you said in the later years the people who bought the company didn't invest in operating things.

CH: They didn't seem to have put enough back into the company.

AL: But when you first started, from the time you started, from 1970 to 2000, were there points at all where there were upgrades or changes in technology?

CH: Well, they started in, they, what was it, probably in the late or middle eighties I think they started getting new looms to try and keep up. But as looms go, you can buy one, say, this year and five years, it's obsolete. So it's, yeah, they did keep up some. They cut out a lot of practices. Instead of, like starting from the raw cotton, they'd buy their own yarn from different places which saved them money in the long run. Because the company can just, it's going to just manufacture just yarn, can do it for a lot less than what you can buy the cotton and go through the process of doing it.

AL: So it must have cut out some jobs as well?

CH: Oh, it cut out a lot of jobs.

AL: I guess one of the questions I had about your job and when you were fixing things is what some of the most common things were that you had to fix. What was the system?

CH: Let's see, the washers would break down for a little bit, and the drying range used to break down a lot, so those were the ones that were the biggest headache. But eventually they, the big drying range they did away with because that was, it was falling apart. You could fix and fix, but once everything's rotted out there's no more fixing. So they went to different ways of doing it, the drying, they went to more or less like regular dryers. And those worked pretty good, but it slowed down the process. So it started making stuff more expensive to make.

AL: And were you in a position, your job, that depended on other people getting their work done?

CH: Oh yeah, you have to try and keep the, all the machines going. If it's down, then you're getting behind on production and you had a quota to meet, so, orders had to get out so you had to keep the machines going no matter what. If it meant overtime, you were there, you stayed until the machine got running so the person could keep right on going.

AL: Were the mills open and running 24/7 during that time?

CH: Yes. Not, when I first started there was some 7 days a week, but that started slowing down. But -

AL: Three shifts?

CH: Three shift, oh yeah, because I was on third shift. I hated Sunday nights.

AL: Third shift is eleven to seven?

CH: Yes, yes, third shift's eleven to seven, and it's like it says, the graveyard shift. Because you get out in the morning, you got all that daylight, you hate to waste it, and then it comes time to come back into work you're tired because you stayed up all day.

AL: My uncle worked at Ford Motor Company on third shift for many years, almost 20 years, and he said it was hard.

CH: Yeah, well everybody else is out doing stuff so you want to get in on it, see? Like I said, you just don't get enough sleep.

AL: Now, you talked about your dad being a cabinetmaker. That, you don't see many of those businesses any more, those custom businesses. He must have been almost the last generation to do that sort of thing.

CH: Well, you still have some around but they're a lot smaller. I don't even know whether that company is in business any more or not. If I remember right, I think I had heard that that had gotten sold

out about ten years ago. At least that, yeah.

AL: What company was that?

CH: Scammon's, it's over on, over behind the hospital there on one of them streets, Holland Street I believe. I don't know whether they're still in business or not. Yeah, it's too bad, a lot of people are gone, or going I should say, because after a while it was hard to get young people to come in and work and really care about their product. So, but most of the old timers, they cared about the product. They produced something, that was nice, they put their heart into it. Like nowadays, most of the kids, from what I've seen even where I work now, they come in, all they want is a paycheck, they don't want to work. So you're not getting a good product, which hurts.

AL: Now, in the earlier years of the mill, people talk about there being lots of social activities that were sort of sponsored by the mill, like bowling leagues. Did you have -?

CH: They had a bowling league, they had a softball league. I didn't belong to them, but I know some of the ones that did and they really had a good time.

AL: It sounded to me like it made the place more connected.

CH: Oh yeah, it gave you some entertainment along with the work. It made sure you had some fun time so it wasn't all business, you come in, you do your work and then, like on the weekends or during the week in the evenings they'd have a game or something (*unintelligible phrase*). It was entertainment. Like one guy that I know that bowled, he just looked forward to it all the time the season was going. So yeah, it was good. Eventually the company couldn't afford it I guess, or not enough people went into it, one or the other. It's too bad, because a lot of businesses like the bowling, they had bowling leagues, because I remember my wife belonged on one. She enjoyed it, every Friday night, oh yeah, she looked forward to it in the winter time. Get's you out.

AL: Did she work in the mill as well?

CH: No, she worked in the shoe shop, which, that's long gone, too.

AL: Yeah, there's a lot of interest in history about the shoe shops, too.

CH: Yeah, she worked in that. It's too bad, imports are really doing a number. But there's nothing really you can do about it, it's normal for people to go for something that is cheaper. Everybody does it.
AL: Now, in terms of your social circle, what you would do on weekends and such, was it usually with the people you worked with in the mill or did you have friends outside of that?

CH: I had friends outside, because I was in, still am, into hunting and fishing primarily. But I usually work most of the time, pick up part time jobs here and there. I'm just not that much of a socializer. But yeah, I had one boss, my last one there, we used to go hunting a lot. He was a pretty good boss, he knew everything. I don't mean that sarcastically, but.

AL: No, no, I know what you mean.

CH: He picked up the work and did the machines real quick. Real smart.

AL: And what was his name?

CH: Roland Clavet. He's still around.

AL: Oh, is he?

CH: Yeah.

AL: He might, do you think he'd be willing to talk?

(*Taping paused.*)

AL: And before we end today I wanted to ask you if there was anything that I hadn't asked you about your time working in the mills that you wanted to add. I don't want to miss anything that you find is important.

CH: No, I think we covered really most of it. It's just something that you have to have gone through to, you forget a lot, eventually down the road sometimes things do pop up that you remember. You look in the obituary, you see a name, yeah, okay, I remember that person, what he did and whatnot. So yeah, it was a good place to work. It wasn't that bad. I've worked in a lot worse.

AL: Thank you very much.

CH: You're welcome.

End of Interview
herrick.int.wpd