

**MILL WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE**

Nancy Higgins
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

MWOH# 006
August 22, 2005

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Nancy Higgins at, what is the address here?

Nancy Higgins: Two Cedar Street.

AL: Two Cedar Street, in Lewiston, Maine on August 22nd, the year 2005. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu and this is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History Project. Could I start just by having you give me your full name and spell it?

NH: Nancy J. Higgins, N-A-N-C-Y, J, H-I-G-G-I-N-S.

AL: And where and when were you born?

NH: In Lewiston, Maine, October 8th, 1955.

AL: And did you grow up in this area?

NH: Yes.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

NH: My mother's name was Bertha Jane Rideout, and my father's name was Merle Parker.

AL: And what did they do for work?

NH: Can you pause this for a second?

AL: And did you have relatives that worked in the mills when you grew up?

NH: Yes, I did. My great uncle and my godfather, he worked at Bates Mill for many years.

AL: And what did they do in the mill?

NH: He was in the weave room, he was a superintendent in the weave room. And his wife, my aunt, she was in the shoe, worked in the shoe business, the shoe factories around town. But my uncle worked in the mill.

AL: And was the shoe factory mostly women, did they tend to go there rather than -?

NH: I'm not sure. I think that they were mostly women. We had quite a few shoe shops in town at one time.

AL: What year, was it in the '70s that they started closing?

NH: Oh, I think probably in the '60s, some of them.

AL: So what led you to go into the mill? Because you had relatives?

NH: No, initially I started in October and I was going to work just for a few months because I wanted some extra money for Christmas. Thirty one years later, I'm still here. So I just continued. I started as a stitcher in the finishing room at Bates, and it was piece work, made very good money. And then a few years later I was given the opportunity to go into management, become a supervisor, and I did do that.

AL: What was it like to work in the stitch room, what was a stitcher?

NH: Very dusty. We would have to stitch so many a day, because it was piece work, we had to meet the quota. At the time I was stitching about six hundred bedspreads per shift, in the eight hour shift. That's a lot of bedspreads.

AL: That is a lot. They were eight hour shifts?

NH: Yes.

AL: Were they rotating shifts, twenty four hours a day, or was it eight to four?

NH: Bates did operate three shifts. In my department we only ran the two shifts, first and second, and I started out in second shift and then went on to days later.

AL: And how, was there a lot of pressure to meet your quota? How did that work?

NH: They would train the stitchers, and it takes quite a while to train a stitcher to get up to piece work. And they were good, though, about it, and they would give you, you know, you have to increase every week until finally you were able to go on piece work. They would have other stitchers train. I don't know what else to tell you. I liked it, made good money. The people were great. We'd get two ten minute breaks, and a twenty minute lunch break per shift.

AL: And so your supervisors were good? Did they help you, or what, I guess I'm asking if someone was having a hard time meeting their quota, what sort of things did they do to help them get up to speed?

NH: More training, find out what's going on. Is it the operator, is it the material that you're working with, is it the equipment, you know, why aren't you getting, meeting your quota. Not all jobs were piece work, though. Some were just by the hour.

AL: And so then you went into a supervisory position. How did that come about?

NH: One of the supervisors was getting done, and so they approached people, I was the only female supervisor there, they were all men. But I applied for the position, I had to take all kinds of tests, these psychological tests that they put me through, it was unbelievable. Like nine hundred questions. There was three of us, I think, that applied for the position, and I got it. I actually took a cut in pay when I became a supervisor, took a cut in pay. But I was okay with that, I had another income in the house, I was married at the time and so it was all right. And I didn't really want to stitch the rest of my life, you know, piece work can be tough. So it was a great opportunity for me. And I had at one point I think it was about a hundred people working for me.

AL: Now, do you have a perspective on what it was like to be the only woman supervisor?

NH: Yes, most of the time it was okay. Had no problem with most of the men, that was all right. I thought I'd have a hard time with that, but I didn't. It was really all right, yeah, everyone, everybody was really pretty good. After a while though, work started slowing down and they didn't need me as a supervisor, because they were laying off people whatever. The executive secretary in the finishing room

gave her notice, so I took that position and I worked there for quite a few years. And then, the owners at the time were the two Tangs, two Chinese brothers, they were opening up an electric blanket factory, up on the top floor at Bates, and they asked if I would go up there along with Howard Ashby and get that started. So we did. So technically we left Bates at that point, and opened up that new factory. Casco Belton, it was called. And I worked there, we had over a hundred people working for us there. That was hot, up on that floor, up on the fifth floor. Oh, it was just incredibly hot.

AL: No air conditioning.

NH: No air conditioning, no air conditioning at all, no.

AL: Over the years working for the mill, what are some of the things that stand out in your memory as events or experiences that you had, that stay with you today?

NH: The people in general were very nice, nice group of people to work with. Always been very happy about the quality of the product that Bates did, you know, Bates is known for their quality. That was important. Bates did an awful lot for the community. Of course they were the largest employer in the State for a number of years, and then BIW I think surpassed them. It gave a lot of people in this area a good income for many years.

AL: And a large portion of the mill workers were Franco-American.

NH: Yes, and Irish.

AL: Did they tend to work in departments together, or were they just spread out throughout the mill?

NH: Spread out throughout the mill, when I was there, yeah. Because when I started at Bates, you would apply for a position and you, so, like I wanted to be a stitcher. And you can sign for other jobs throughout the mill, so if I wanted to change and go to be a folder, I could have. So it's really a blend, it wasn't, you know, segregated in any way.

AL: I heard about the French and Irish rivalries?

NH: Yes.

AL: Was that earlier than your time?

NH: Yes, much earlier I believe. Because I started in '74.

AL: So you were sort of the last wave of workers.

NH: Yeah.

AL: Were there some that had been working there a long time that you worked with during your time, and did they have stories of what it was like? Maybe someone I can no longer interview that you remember?

NH: I don't know, did you get to interview Lucille Barrett? She was the president of the union.

AL: Yes, yes, yes I have.

NH: And Fred Lebel?

AL: He's on my list.

NH: Okay, yeah, because he's just a wealth of information. I'm trying to think who else. Dot Hollands passed away now. She would have been great. Quite a lot of these people are passing away. She was industrial engineer department, she used to be the time study, she would come over and time us to adjust the rates to the piece work. Sometimes, you know, she would cut the rates and we weren't too happy with her, sometimes she'd give us a little increase. But she would figure out how much per bedspread I would have, get paid, so you get paid by the bedspread. So it might be five cents, ten cents, whatever, depended on the style that you were working on.

AL: And how difficult it was to stitch and all that?

NH: Rights.

AL: And what was her name again?

NH: Dot Holland, wonderful lady. Smart. I thought a lot of her, she was like my mentor.

AL: Was she?

NH: Yeah.

AL: Did she help train people as well?

NH: Not really train, no, no. Most of the time like it would be another stitcher that would teach you how to stitch, or a folder who'd help, you know, teach you how to fold.

AL: So you were there when they started downsizing, is the term we use today.

NH: Yes.

AL: What was the feeling like in the mills when that started to happen?

NH: It was sad, it really was sad, because we're seeing so many people leaving. Of course, a lot of people were just retiring. Some of the younger ones, they could see it coming so they went and tried to find other work before it actually happened, before it closed. I ended up, when we closed the electric blanket factory they sent me down to the mill store to work, so that's when I went down there. And I'm still here at the mill store.

AL: So who owns this now, this is the, what is left of the original?

NH: Fred Lebel, yes, he owns it. And he also opened up a new factory called Maine Heritage Weavers, and they're manufacturing the same type of bedspreads that Bates was doing, and same quality.

AL: Just on a smaller scale?

NH: Much smaller scale, but the same quality. Beautiful products. So he's keeping it going. I don't know how many people he has working for him now, maybe fifteen, I'm not sure. But it's small but growing. And the product, like I said, it's still there and the quality's still there, which is great.

AL: So, when you were in your supervisory capacity at the mill, what sorts of things were you responsible for?

NH: To see that the work was, ran smoothly, through all the different operations. Make sure that everyone had enough work, especially like the piece workers, you'd have to make sure that, I had cables ready for those stitchers to stitch. If not, they would some upset, because that's their money. Just really, it's been so long since I've been in that capacity, but just make sure that everything runs smoothly, hours are accounted for, make sure that everyone's in, safety issues, all things like that.

AL: So you had people who, who their job was to fix equipment if it broke down, were those people that you'd supervise as well?

NH: Yes, yeah, like we had, in our department we had a sewing machine fixer. At one time we had like maybe three or four of them, but as they downsized of course they did, too, so we only ended up having I think two of them, and then one. There was maintenance men, there was people that ran the washers and the dryers and the cutting tables, folders, inspectors, they all worked for me, that was all part of the finishing room. Then after the finishing room, once they were folded, it went to the packing room, packing and shipping, and that was a different department. I did work out there often, like if there was vacation, people wanting to take vacation time, some of the supervisors, I'd go work out there and fill in. Finishing room was, though, that was my main job. It was union, so I was both part of the union when I was a stitcher, and then non-union when I went into management.

AL: How did that feel? Were there people who, did you feel loyalty to the union even though you were now management?

NH: I was okay with it, and I think everyone else was, too. I'd say, yes, it was all right. The union used to be very, very strong at Bates, and I'm going to say it was right up until the end.

AL: Did you work with Denny Blais at all?

NH: No, he was before, well, he was there when I started. Is he the one that had the heart attack?

AL: I don't know.

NH: Okay. Is he still alive, do you know? Okay, no, then it's not the one I'm thinking of. There was another one, Marcel Cloutier, is it, I think he was there. But then Lucille Barrett was president of the union. She was president when I was supervisor.

AL: And did you have to work with her in terms of negotiating?

NH: I wasn't on the negotiating committee, no. There was only one time, when I was a supervisor I had a problem with one person that I worked with, it was a man. And he just would not do what I'd tell him to do, absolutely not, completely would just ignore me. So I went to my supervisor, and he was the superintendent of the finishing room, and I said, you got to do something about this because I can't have this. You know, if I start in letting him have his way, next thing you know all hundred people that work for me will be walking all over me. So anyways, he went and spoke to him, this kid still wouldn't do it. So he was brought up to the union, well it ended up he got fired. Insubordination.

So he got fired and he tried to get his job back, and Lucille Barrett had, we had a meeting and everything, but he never did get it back. But he was the only one that really gave me a hard time. He threatened to kill me and my supervisor, it was that bad. That, I was scared but I said, no, I can't back down because if I do I'll never have any respect from anyone in that finishing room, so I stood up to him. And a lot of people were glad. He was the only one, though. The union, like I said, they were, it was very strong. Of course Lucille had to go to bat for him, that's her job as a union president, but it didn't get him anywhere.

AL: In terms of the mills eventually closing, did you have a sense of where people went to work after that? I know you said some retired, but some must have been pretty young still. Were there other industries that seemed to segue?

NH: Well, a lot of them did go back to school. They had that program available when Bates closed, and they went to school. Fred pulled quite a few of them over to his place. Well, not quite a few but probably about fifteen of them, when he opened up that factory. The other ones, I kind of lost touch, I don't see them.

AL: Well, I think the reunion last year -

NH: That was fantastic.

AL: Was an indication that a lot of people still felt connected.

NH: Yes, oh, that was beautiful. And, like the Festival de Joie that was, just happened here a few weeks ago, again, I saw so many people from the mill days, you know, it was wonderful.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think is important to talk about in terms of the history of the mills and your time there?

NH: Not really. If you have any other questions. I don't know. My uncle, my great uncle, he was superintendent in the weave room over at Bates, and he made a good living there, he worked there many, many years. I have this pin that he has, I have, oh yeah, got all his memorabilia from the mill. I'm trying to think what else. I know when I was a little girl we'd always come walking down to church every Sunday, down here, and we'd go by the canal, and it always amazed me because they'd drain the canal quite often back then, and it was just, the workmanship in a canal, I mean, it doesn't sound too exciting but it really and truly is. If you take the time and look at all that workmanship. It's something. It's all kinds of interlocking, underneath tunnels. I think most of them are closed up now, but all these mills used to be connected at one time, underground tunnels. Fascinating. I'd love to go inside some of them, but I don't think they'd let me, I don't think it's too safe.

AL: But when you were growing up in Lewiston, what neighborhood did you live in?

NH: I lived off of, on Sherbrooke Avenue off of Montello Street, and my uncle lived right down here on Canal Street, used to walk to work.

AL: I heard a lot of the older generation was close enough to walk.

NH: Yes. He did have a car, but he walked to work, it was so close. They used to have tenement houses across the street from the mill. Those are all gone now, those are all torn down. I remember those. I'm showing my age now. I remember the big brick buildings that housed a lot of the workers.

AL: Was it owned by the mills or was it owned privately, do you know?

NH: I think at the beginning it was owned by the mill, but then it went into private hands.

AL: And I have a note on here that you did your college thesis on the mill, the Bates Mill?

NH: Yes, I did. Do you have a copy of it? I have a copy.

AL: No, I'd love to have to have a copy.

NH: I'll give you one. In fact, think I have one here. Yeah, I was proud of that, I did a lot of research on it.

AL: Were you working at the mill when you were in college?

NH: Yes, yup.

AL: Oh great, thank you.

NH: You must have seen this before, from 1950. I think that Rachel House has left the museum.

AL: I guess she probably has, yeah.

NH: They gave this out to the employees when Bates was a hundred years old.

AL: Well great, thank you very much.

NH: You're welcome.

End of Interview

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