

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

Ed Koss
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

SWOH #046
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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is April 23rd, 2010, and I'm at the home of Ed Koss in Lewiston, Maine, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Ed, could you start just by giving me your full name?

Ed Koss: Edward Lester Koss.

AL: And where and when were you born?

EK: Lewiston, Maine.

AL: And when?

EK: November 30th, 1933.

AL: And is Lewiston where you grew up?

EK: Yes.

AL: What was Lewiston like back in the late thirties and the forties, in terms of -?

EK: It was a shoe town, all the way through, and -

AL: Were the mills still open at that time?

EK: The mills were in the process of closing, and the shoe factories were basically going good, until we ran into what was called the Chinese.

AL: And was that later in the eighties, seventies?

EK: I would say in the sixties, the late sixties, the imports started to come in. They just opened the doors and that was the starting of the end of the shoe industry in Maine.

AL: And what was downtown Lewiston like, did you spend time downtown as a family, or socially?

EK: Not really. We used to go shopping in Portland a lot, for clothes and everything, and my mother would take us when we were small and then we would, downtown Auburn, I used to go to a Cobb-Watson Store and get my clothes there. We never really went downtown that much. Going back, my father came into here a lot earlier than we, well he wasn't even married, and he had a factory with the old Morphy Shoe they called it, it was behind the Strand Theater, and he started making women's shoes there with a partner, he had a partner, Joe Goodman, a junior partner, and -

AL: And your dad's name was Joe, too.

EK: Yeah, Joseph Koss. He lost that during the Depression, and he lost it to Knapp Shoe, and today I think it's a, where the operating rooms are, the CMMC's heart thing. And that's how he got started, and then he went into the gully, we called it the gully, in Auburn.

AL: What's that?

EK: That was his other factory that he started after the Depression, he bought a house on Elm Street, right above it, and we used to go walk down to work all the time, right by Edward Little High School, the old Edward Little High School. And there, I learned most of my stuff from Jerry Feinstein, I would say I learned eighty, ninety percent of it from him.

AL: So he was -

EK: He was a superintendent, the general manager, he was a very, very, very good shoemaker, and a very, very, I don't know how you put it but like a perfectionist. Yeah, he didn't trust anybody for doing anything. I think he trusted me more than anybody else, you know, because he said you're going to do it my way or I'm not going to bother with you. And so I did it his way ninety percent of the time.

AL: And it worked.

EK: Buying, or making shoes, if someone was out in the factory I would go, whether it was the making room or the lasting room and go over and take over in there until they came, or someone was hurt, I used to go all around the factory looking at the shoes all the time. My father would look at it, he had a knack of finding something that wasn't there. He had a very good eye to find out if anything was wrong, and Jerry and I used to sit and laugh, but he would make a lot of noise.

AL: And he was your older cousin, is that right?

EK: Yeah, he's older than me. Today, well I'm seventy-seven, and he's got to be ninety-three, something right in there. He came up as a young gentleman, well he came right out of, he was one year in college somewhere and then he came up here, or

high school, and from there he just went in, and he had an excellent relationship with my father, believe it or not, and he was tough in the factory.

AL: Your dad?

EK: No-no, no, Jerry was tougher than him. He was tough. He was a good, good shoemaker. If he'd tell me to do something, then he'd go, he used to double check me a lot, and he never did it in front of anybody, he'd pull me aside and just say, listen, see the mess you started, and I says, yeah, okay. Just clean it up, and that's all he would say, and I would clean it up. He was excellent, my father taught him well, and he taught himself well, he was self-taught. I know when he come to my father and he was going into business with our sales manager and they wanted my father to go in as partners, and then Jerry offered me the same thing, you know. And I said, nah, it's my father, I got to stick with him, really.

I could feel and see the end coming, because my father had trust in me and my brother, but yet he didn't have the trust that, well, I don't know how to put it, he only trusted himself really, he used to sleep with one eye open. And even with Jerry, he trusted him to a certain extent but he wanted to call the shots, and he was getting old. And finally he come to me one day and he says, I think I've had enough, how about you, and I said, yes, it's tough over here, really, now it's tough. Everybody's gone to China, so what do you want to do. And I said, well, I got a friend in the Dominican Republic by the name of Bill Chase who had factories, big factories, and he was closing out and he said to me, would you like to do anything and go down there with me, he said, I'm opening up factories. And he opened up, he had a big factory going and he said, I need some backing and this and that, and we got Saul Feldman who owned Poland Spring involved, and I would watch his end and then they gave me a percentage. And before we were done, we were the largest ones on the island, we had three factories. But even that lasted maybe four or five years.

AL: And was that in the late sixties?

EK: Seventies, that my father closed down, he sold the mill, and then I took all the machinery, most of the machinery from him and bought some more, and then we went in on our own down in the Dominican Republic. And we were very successful while it lasted, and then they hopped from here to Haiti so we were going to go to Haiti, and it's the poorest country I've ever seen and I said I don't want to go in there, Billy. And he said, well, you're the shoemaker, and so I said, what do you want to do?

And this, it was an era in the late sixties where everybody was wearing these camp mocs with beads, the kids were wearing them, you know, the Indian type stuff, they were all hippies, and we made thousands of pairs over there. So I used to go into Haiti and have them beaded over there, we had a beading factory in Haiti, and you could make a lot of money because them people work for nothing. You know, the government

took everything they had. And the same with the Dominicans, they took most of it, it happened in the Dominican Republic. And what happened in the Dominican Republic is, the people become baseball players, the young ones, and they become millionaires overnight. It's a huge Americanized island now, and the Americans used to come down there and buy these condos and everything, and this is what happened. And we outgrew it down there, we left there and I said, boy, I'm getting old, I want to stay home. You know, because we used to go down there for like maybe three, four, five months at a shot, you couldn't fly back and forth and everything, you had to be at the factories all the time. And that's where I was, and today I work as a consultant for a few people and help people get rid of stuff, and I buy some shoes myself just to keep active.

AL: Now, as a consultant, what do you consult on?

EK: They show me shoes, the people that I work for, which I would rather not say, but they show me shoes, are they made right, what can they do if they're not right, where can we get rid of them. And I still have maybe eight or ten or twelve good active accounts, and there is a lot of people that buy stuff that shouldn't buy it, shoes that aren't made right coming in from overseas, sometimes it's the horrors.

AL: Right, the quality?

EK: Quality is not there, quality is not there. That's why everybody's leaving China now.

AL: Oh, they are?

EK: They're going to Vietnam, they're going all over, they're running all over, they're going to Brazil, Italy. The women's shoes, the quality is much better over in Europe.

AL: Do you ever see it coming back to the U.S.?

EK: I think it's coming back now. I think it's coming back now. It's very hard to get labor. This is a shoe town, but -

AL: I mean, there were very particular skills that were learned over time, like the hand sewers and such, is that base still out there?

EK: No, you have to break them in now, see. Don't forget, there's only the one factory that was left in town, that closed, and then Mike Rancourt took it over. It's the old Allen-Edmond Shoe factory, used to be a chicken coop, Dave Mendelson. But it's still very hard to get labor. And if you go to Eveready Label over there, I mean they take, if you get ten dollars an hour, you're only going to come home with like maybe seven, you know, and today it's very hard to get sewers. I mean in the old days I know we had a lot of hand sewers, and we started making handsewns too after my cousin

Jerry left, my brother and myself, and we made a better grade handsewn, leather lined, leather soles, and that was an era where that stuff was selling.

And it's coming back. There's nobody around to make them anymore. To open a factory, I mean you'd have to go to the government and get all kinds of deals to train people, you know, this is basically what happens. And then you tell them you want to go in and do a dirty job like hand sewing, I mean it's not a dirty job but I mean it's very hard on you when you pull. Your arms are going, and the strings, that's why they all put all kinds of stuff over their fingers, because the strings are sharp. And it's hard to break a sewer in, too. I know, we broke a lot of them in.

AL: Do you remember the process of breaking in a hand sewer, what did you do? How did that work?

EK: The first thing is, you have to set the shoe up yourself. It's usually a two-piece shoe, or maybe even a one -, yeah, two-piece shoe, and they would have to set it up on a last, you know, they pull it over. It's all handmade. And then they would start sewing it, and they'd have an awl, which is a thing with a sharp thing on, they have to crisscross the sole and bring it through and sew all around, and straighten it out if it was crooked, and then bone it and everything. It was a whole process, it really was. The sewers used to make very good money. If you were a good sewer you could make yourself seven, eight hundred dollars a week. But they worked, they earned it. They'd come in early in the morning, set everything up. You know, we'd have to put the uppers the night before in an oven to mull them, to get the soft so they could handle the leather.

It's hard today. There's a few gold shoe factories that opened up in Massachusetts, or were bought and then opened up again. But everything that was in Maine - I think they're opening one up in Bangor now, a hand sewing place, making better grade shoes, I heard. And how true it is, you don't know, I don't know. It's a lost industry, that's what it is. And we had a lot of good help, I mean we had some help that were there a long time, that worked for my father. In fact, one of them is Jerry Poulin, I guess he's helping out down there. Very, very knowledgeable guy. With machines he's like a little genius. You give him anything and he can figure it out, just stay away from him, give him a little time, he can figure it out. He's good, he was good.

AL: Yeah, that's hard to find, that sort of natural -

EK: It is, you can't find them anymore, you just can't find them. I mean, people would rather stay home and get unemployment and get food stamps and everything, they'd rather stay home today, instead of going to work. And I mean, what's the minimum today, \$7.25, something like that, \$7.50, and that's what you sign them off at. And you try to feed a family on \$7.50 an hour, I mean you can't do it. They can go out and be a flag man or something, make more money.

AL: If you were talking to young people today, what sort of thing do you think you'd tell them about working in the shoe industry?

EK: Don't get into it. Don't get into it, really, because it changes so fast, and people don't want to pay. Everybody's looking to have something done for nothing. Okay, I went through both ends, that's why I went to the Dominican Republic, because we paid nothing for labor. No insurance on people, nothing.

AL: And was there somebody in your shop that worked with buying leather, learned about the leather? I understand that was important to the quality.

EK: Yeah, I used to buy a lot of the leather. My father would go in, we'd go in every other week or every week, into the market, into Boston, and he did most of the buying of the leather, and then he let me buy it and then a lot of time times I didn't have time, after my cousin Jerry left to run another factory, and my brother would buy some leather. It's not that hard, you either buy two, three, four, five ounce leather, you know, in colors. It depends on what shoe you made, and there were different kinds of leathers, heavy leather for handsewn, light leather for shoes like this, and then there was heavy leather for boots, which we never made.

The shoe industry was big here in the state of Maine, really big, I mean big, at one time. But it's gone. That would probably be one of the last things I'd ever want to do, is open a factory. I mean, I think there is money to be made in like the work shoes, the heavier shoes, because there's so much construction today. And we made, one of the finest work boots in the world were made right here in Maine. The stuff coming in from overseas don't turn me on at all, I know, we did a lot of business overseas with Timberland, did a lot of business. I can't really see too many people open factories up today, unless they have an outlet for the shoes, I mean a big outlet. You can go into any one of these places and say, well, look what's here, look what's there, it's like Lamey Wellehan, with Jimmy. He got ninety percent of the shoes from his brother, Danny, yeah, he got ninety percent of the shoes. And take a look at him today, he hasn't got a shoe made in the United States there, nothing.

San Antonia Shoe just closed a big factory up here about six months ago, up in Norridgewock, and he, that's Lou Hayden, very friendly with him, he just shrunk right down. He had a four, five hundred million dollar business, he just shrunk it right down. But this is what's happened today, everybody's going for price, overseas, overseas. I mean, you go in and look at your clothes today, you go looking at clothes, ninety percent of it's made overseas, and this is what the shoes are, ninety percent of the shoes today are made overseas. I'd say more than that even.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about the shoe industry or your own family business that you think is important to add?

EK: Well, it's funny when you say that, and you say the shoe industry, because behind the shoe industry came all these other jobs. Like, to make a shoe you'd say, well, you need finings, which are thread, tacks, and all this stuff, leather, was all made here in New England. This is what it was, the tanneries were in New England. And it was huge. The box factories were there, anything the shoe went into. And the president just cut us right out, just kissed us, just like they kissed the mills goodbye. But it was bigger when he kissed the shoe industry goodbye, because we supported a lot of people. You take a shoe apart, everything that goes in there, you got the sole, you got the shank, you got the welt if it's a welt shoe, and all these different shoes are made and it's takes different things.

And really, it devastated the area. I mean, you take Brockton, New Bedford, you take Massachusetts, New Hampshire, there were a lot of factories here. There were over ninety to a hundred and twenty factories here, in just New England. And it just devastated the whole area. Just like all these mills are empty, when they ran out of here, the mills were empty. And then the shoe factories filled them up. And this is what happened, I mean they, you know, Nixon just kissed us goodbye, he opened the door up for the Chinese, he gave them helicopters, he gave them everything, he gave them, put it on a flight. And this was his thing, I opened China up. But he wasn't worried about the people who fell down. He could see all them millions of people, and oh, they're all going to buy this, they're going to buy that. You need money to buy it. They didn't have the money.

And so we sold our soul, that's what we did, that's what they did to us, they sold us down the river, really. You know, you listen to some people, yeah, I was bitter. I put three kids through college on a factory, but I did it on another factory, not mine, because mine was gone. It's really hard, you know. What people don't understand is, there are people that are never going to go to college that have to make a living and have to work. And my father would tell me, you got to have feelings for them, you got to have feelings, not everybody in this world's going to become a lawyer or a doctor. And these people had to make a living, and Nixon, he just, whoop, goodbye.

And this is what they did to the mills before him. I mean, don't forget, you go up and down this whole state of Maine, you look at these big, big mills. I mean you take Bob Roy, he was like a savior for most of these people. He got these mills all for nothing and then fixed them up, and he put someone in there and people working in there. And you take the mills, you take Biddeford, Saco, that town was devastated. I had a small factory down in Biddeford, you know. And Biddeford, Saco, Ogunquit, they all had big, big, they had factories and they just, they wiped us out so fast we never knew what hit us, like he gave everything to China. We weren't even getting any duty. Because we taking shoes in from China. I said to my brother, he and I went partners and that lasted about maybe three or four years and they went to other countries. And this is basically what happened.

My wife, we had a store, had that store over in Auburn, did very, very well, and I used to get work shoes from all over the place and this and that, and before you know it, everything was foreign. There was nothing left. You take Marden's today, they scramble to get shoes and stuff, decent stuff. I know those guys, I know them very well, very, very well, we used to do big business with his father Mickey. But like they say, that's history.

AL: Great, thank you so much.

End of Interview
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