

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

Doris Labbe
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

MWOH# 007
September 26, 2005

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History Project. The date is September 26, 2005. Today we're interviewing Doris Labbe, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could I have you start just by giving me your full name, including your maiden name?

Doris Labbe: Doris Ouellette Labbe.

AL: And that's O-U-E-L-L-E-T-T-E?

DL: Right.

AL: And Labbe is L-A-B-B-E?

DL: Right.

AL: And where and when were you born?

DL: I was born in Lewiston.

AL: And your birth date?

DL: November 15, 1923, so that would make me close to eighty two.

AL: And is Lewiston where you grew up?

DL: Yes, yes.

AL: So you were born in the '20s, and so what was the Lewiston community like at that time, in terms of social activities?

DL: Well it was really Depression, 1923, so I was a baby then. And then growing up I went to school, to Holy Cross School, which I was the last one, the last member of the family, youngest, and graduated from

Holy Cross School. And that's it, that's as far as I went, I didn't go to high school or anything, because we were too far out to travel. There was no way of commuting, there was no busses, no lines, so, and I lived on River Road then, so. And that's a long time ago, but that's about it.

And then I started working at Bates, that was during the war, 1941, and I worked there for forty three years. I retired in 1984, and they gave me a watch for my, when I retired. And I don't know what else.

AL: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

DL: I had three brothers, yup, three brothers, and we were four girls.

AL: You were the youngest?

DL: I was the youngest.

AL: And did a lot of families do things around the church and religion, was that a strong piece of the community?

DL: We were quite, living, we weren't too much of a neighborhood, there was only a few houses. And way out there, at the time. And then it started to grow, but the rest, when I was a teenager, and I used to go to a lot, did a lot with my girlfriends, but that's about it. And then when I first started to work at the mill, that's where I met my husband. He worked there also, he was a truck driver, after the war. He went to war, so I started in '41 while he was away, but when he came back, that's where I met him. Because they were allowed to have their job back after the service. So he came back, and so we got, he started working the yard, and he was a truck driver for the Bates Mill.

And I was, I started working at the mill, I was, let's see, 1941, I was what, eighteen? And I was, and then I started on the cutting table, and then I went to, on the sewing, then I was a sewer, I used to stitch on the blankets, well, the big George Washington and Martha Washington. And then I went to the regular, where they did the regular bedspreads, and then I stitch on the drapes, draperies. I was there for a while, for quite a while.

AL: Was there one job that you liked more than another?

DL: I liked stitching, sewing, you know. Well, it was kind of interesting, because you, different things, you know. So anyway, of course there was a lot stitching in those days, it was a good, before it closed.

And I was joking, I said, maybe it's closed because we weren't there. But no, it's, so, and his family worked there all the time, all of them.

AL: All your husband's family?

DL: Oh yeah, yeah, the father and the mother, and the sisters and the brothers, they all worked there. And me, I had my sister-in-law that worked there, and my son. My son, he worked in the office. So, what else? I, it's not very interesting.

AL: I have a question about wages. Did you automatically get a raise every year, or could you make, depending on how much you stitched, how did it -?

DL: Yeah, it was piece work. And at the beginning, when we were stitching was making, we were making seventy nine dollars a week. A week. And that was a big, oh, big thing. And you were paid in cash in those days. And after a while, you know, the, we got the checks, a long time after. The paycheck girl would come and would be all envelopes and all, everything written on it, and the change, you know, whatever it was. At the beginning, I should have kept it. I kept it a long time ago, a long time, and I says, oh, what am I going to use that for? But you never know, eh? You know? Seventy nine dollars we were making, and that was a lot in those days.

And then, well, after that, well of course when we worked piecework, the more you made the more, sometimes we would stitch, it depends on the thickness of the, when it was ripplette, like, it's light, they used to use that in the hospitals, you know, the bed, not the bedspread, but that, we used to stitch about two hundred and fifty an hour. Both sides. One side, then you pull, and then you get the other side and then it goes. And the folders would pick it up at the end, and they would fold it at the same time.

And of course the wages increased after a while. But I don't, I don't remember how much we used to make a day, as far as wages. It depends, because there was different rates for different styles and different, so, it's a little complicated in a way. For a while.

AL: Were there any social activities that were associated with the mills?

DL: Yes, there, well yes, because there, sometimes they would, a long time after that, they had reunion, they had parties, and we went to see Maurice Chevalier at the Lewiston Armory. Yeah, almost forgot, that's a long time ago. And, well, and then there was the, oh, I have a picture here that they took when I was taking first aid at the nurse's station. If you're interested in the picture, I have it. And there used to be, well of course dinners every time that some people would retire, you know, they'd have big parties

and all that. That's about all I can think of.

AL: You said your parents worked in the Androscoggin Mill for a time?

DL: Yes.

AL: Was that through their career, or just for, yeah?

DL: Yeah, yeah, it was, he was a loom fixer, and my mother was a loom girl, in the weave room.

AL: And what were their names?

DL: My father's name was Demetrius Ouellette, and my mother was Marie Robitaille Ouelette. So, yeah, they were there for quite a while. As far as I can remember, they were on the second shift.

AL: Is that three to eleven?

DL: Yes.

AL: So how, I'm interested to know how they raised seven kids, and juggled the shifts and things.

DL: Yeah, well, as far as I, I was the youngest one, and through the Depression, well, everybody was home, and they didn't have too much to eat except (*unintelligible word*), but we never went without, you know, but nothing fancy or anything. But everybody was there. I was young, the youngest one, and my brother, well, my brother went to college in Canada, and then he got in the service and he took a, well he went to school for, in Boston. And I was the youngest one, the other ones were married, or they had left the house, you know.

So, and then, well my grandfather used to live with us, and I used, when I'd come home from school I used to give him his meal, because I was the youngest one and they were working at night, my mother and my father. So, well my father was, died, he was only fifty years old, and my mother was working. So I was the only one -

(Gap in taping.)

AL: Well, in the stitching room, did you become friends with any of the other stitchers?

DL: Oh yeah, oh yes, we were all, we all knew each other and we were all friends. And we used to have gatherings on weekends, and go in somebody's house and have a party or things like that. And my sister-in-law, they had, well my brother, they had a camp at Sabattus and we went there and we had a good time, you know. All the girls from the mill.

AL: And you said as a teenager you would go to Old Orchard?

DL: Yes.

AL: Now how, that seems like a long ways away.

DL: Yeah.

AL: In the 19-, late 1930s or early '40s.

DL: Yeah, oh yeah, no, I was just fifteen, sixteen or something. We took the bus.

AL: You took a bus?

DL: Yeah, and rented a room, and we were like two or three girls, you know. Yeah, it was, we had, (*unintelligible phrase*) a little bit over there, you know. We had fun.

AL: When you were working at the mills, were there ever strikes that occurred?

DL: Yeah, one time, yeah. There was a strike. I had two children then, and boy, I don't remember the year.

AL: That's okay.

DL: I don't remember the year, but I remember that. I don't know how long, I don't remember how long it lasted. But I was, we had a strike, yeah.

AL: So you were one of the people who didn't go to work?

DL: Right.

AL: Was it over wages? Do you remember that?

DL: I was a mixture of something I guess, you know, wages and insurance and benefits, something in that, I'm not quite sure what. But it could have been something like this, yeah, for, must be for wages also.

AL: Now, if you look back over the years that you were at the mill, do you have recollections of any times that stick out in your mind? Did people ever play pranks or, you know, or was it very serious?

DL: No, when people would get married sometimes, there was big baskets where the blankets would get in there, you know, those that weren't, well they had to be processed or something to, you know, either mending or something, and they put them in big baskets. And they would empty the basket, and they would give the bride-to-be a ride. And then they, we all chipped in for a gift, you know, and so, and people would laugh and have a good time, you know. Some people would bring in goodies. So, that I remember, yeah, every, some girls that got married had a ride in one of those. It was fun, yeah, we used to have fun. Only half an hour, but we did quite, sometimes we'd skip anyway, you know, we started a little earlier, or later (*unintelligible word*). So, I don't know what else, except those dinners that retired people (*unintelligible phrase*).

But we were all friendly, we were all, you know, we knew each other. Almost the same class people, the same class of people. And everybody liked each other, there was no friction over anything, no.

AL: Did you go to the mill workers reunion last fall?

DL: Yes, yes, I did.

AL: Who were some of the people that you saw?

DL: Well, quite a few. But there's a lot that didn't show up, didn't go, or they were gone, you know, they left us already. Quite a few. A lot of them. Yup, so, life goes on.

AL: So you retired before the mills really started closing down?

DL: Yes, yes, I was sixty years old then. And we moved to California, my son and I, so I, but I was sixty years old so I was able to get, we used to have a pension from the mill, we had a small pension from the mill. Small, okay? And, but when you were a widow, I could collect on Social Security, and that's what I did. So I, at sixty years old, well, I retired and we moved to California and stayed there for ten years.

AL: And then came back to Maine.

DL: Yes, because of the earthquake. We were really, it was scary, it was really scary. Of course, we weren't that bad off, but some, a little bit, broken dishes and stuff on the furniture, you know. But, being compared to some, you know. So, what else?

AL: I think I've asked all the questions I had. I just wonder if there's anything that I haven't asked you that you feel is important to talk about before we end.

DL: Not, I can't think of anything right now. Maybe after you leave I'll think I should have said that.

AL: Did you get a sense that, did your parents like their jobs in the mill?

DL: Yes, yes. Well, that was about, that's what people did around here in those days is work in mills, you know. And my father-in-law and mother-in-law, and everybody worked there, all the Labbe family. And so, like I said, it was all the same class of people, you know, so everybody was the same, no, nothing, not that I can recall anyway.

AL: Okay, thank you very much.

DL: You're welcome.

End of Interview
labbedoris.int.wpd