

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

Bert Mathieu
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

SWOH #017
January 17, 2009

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is January 17, 2009, and I'm at the home of Bert, can you pronounce your last name?

BM: Mathieu.

AL: Mathieu, yes, in Lewiston, Maine, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and this is an oral history for Museum L-A. Bert, could you just start by giving me your full name?

BM: My full name is Bertrand David Mathieu.

AL: Where and when were you born?

BM: I was born in 1922 on Reservoir Avenue in Lewiston.

AL: And that is not too far from here.

BM: I can see my home, where I was born, from here, about six hundred feet away.

AL: And we are on Webster Street right now.

BM: Yes, we're on 391 Webster Street.

AL: So, is this where you grew up, in the house on Reservoir?

BM: All but five years when I was in the military.

AL: Talk to me about your family, and how many children were there?

BM: Well, we were five children, two boys and three girls. The girls are all passed away. My brother still survives. He is fifteen years younger than I am. My parents both died at the age of eight-five, so I guess longevity is in my life. They all graduated high school, all but me. I quit school when I was fourteen years of age, and I went to work in the shoe industry at that time, which was 1936. My first job was at where the Barker Arms is today, in Auburn. It was Venus Shoe and Lown Shoe, were there. I worked in both. Then when Lown Shoe moved to where the barn is today, in Auburn, then I was

put on a machine for the first time, because I was sixteen years of age then.

AL: You had to be sixteen to be on a machine?

BM: To be on a machine you had to be sixteen years of age. And when I started, at the age of fourteen at Venus, I was making a lot of money, fifteen cents an hour.

AL: And what were you doing for work?

BM: Working all over the floor, chasing around for different shoes, parts of shoes or whatever. If I saw a machinist working somewhere on a machine, I'd sneak up and watch him to try and learn the trade, which I did. And in 1939 I joined the Maine National Guards who, in 1941 we were called into active duty, Maine Guards. We went to Camp Blanding in Jacksonville, Florida, from there we went to Camp Shelby, Mississippi. From there I got transferred out to Camp Maxey, Texas to the 32nd Calvary Reconnaissance Squadron, which is where I finished my four and a half years there. Last week actually was an anniversary, in a way. Sixty-four years ago we were in the Battle of the Bulge, January 1st of 1945, is when General Patton came up and freed us troops, and we went back to Paris. That was my last day of combat, January 1, 1945. Good way to start the year. From there we went to Camp Lucky Strike in LaHavre, France, where we went on to a troop ship, came home, and we got discharged on points, although the war was still going on. From there I went back to the shoe district, on my old job, but they made me a foreman, which was big money then, a dollar twenty-five cents and hour.

AL: Was this at Lown Shoe?

BM: Lown Shoe, yes. While there, a company from Waltham, Mass, approached me. They wanted me to go on the road for them, as a salesman and instructor. Compo Shoe Machinery is where I worked for forty-two years. I was the district manager for the state of Maine. I had fourteen men under my wing. Silverstien Shoe Machinery, and all the factories in the state, which at that time was one hundred eighty-three shoe factories. They depleted pretty fast.

AL: So, there were one hundred and eighty-three.

BM: When I started in 1947, yes. They went down very fast. And then from there, of course I got my, 1946, had two girls, they're both nurses, their pictures are there. My first wife, of fifty one years, passed away in 1997. I remarried a young lady from across the street, who was a widow. That lasted about six years. She too passed away. She passed away in 2004. But my career has been the shoe industry. But from 1949 until I turned eighty, I also repaired televisions on the side. That was, paid the girls' schooling. Other than that, there's not much else to say.

AL: Well tell me about your, you went to war, and you came back, and you became a foreman. How did you become a foreman so quickly?

BM: He was watching me going around. If an operator's machine would break down, I would go to the operator and fix it for him. And they noticed that I was operating all the machines as I fixed them. So they said, well heck, if I can operate them, then I can also teach. And this is how the company from Waltham came to hire me. The name of the company was Compo Shoe Machinery, from Waltham, Mass.

AL: And would you go around to all the different shoe shops to fix things?

BM: In the state of Maine, yes. I was put in charge of the Maine office, which actually was right off Canal Street, in the Hill Building. There's a little building in the courtyard there, right in front of where Museum L-A used to be, upstairs. That little building there, if you see pictures there, you'll see my sign, Compo Shoe Machinery, in the pictures at Museum L-A, I've seen it there. That was a pretty good job. I had fourteen men reporting to me. Some lived in Kennebunkport, one lived in Sanford, one in Winterport, one in Belfast, one in Old Town. These men all reported to me by phone.

AL: So they were distributed around the state geographically.

BM: Yeah, and they would report to me. And the manufacturers would call them, but if they couldn't be satisfied from their work, then they would call me, then I would shoot it up and see if I could work with them. It was my job to train. Some of them taught me a lot, I learned from them. But it was a good career. A lot of people used to turn their nose down at the shoe industry. They called it the, as low as you could go, actually. To me, it was good. I had no education. I quit school, started the eighth grade, that was it. Never graduated. My education's been that big dictionary right there. Every time I'd hear a word I would look it up. And also, listening to people speak. This company I worked for had the best chemists in the world, because in the shoe industry there are a lot of toxic chemicals. And these chemists would come down to help with problems, and I'd be right with them. I would ask them questions, they gave me the answers I wanted, so I learned. Mechanics is the same way. The electricians, in time I became a licenced electrician, because of their help, which was good.

Of course, I built my first home because of the knowledge I had, down the road. And I built this one in '62, where I am today. And also, in the chair where you are now sitting, in the evenings, there's another young lady that sits there. She's quite a bit older than you, but a bit younger than I, and we get along famously together. We love to sing and dance, and music. So I've had a good career, a good life. I married two beautiful women, beautiful inside and out, and this young lady I'm with now is the same way. And I'll be eighty-seven in two weeks. As I say, I've had a terrific life. My health is good. I have two steel knees and a steel shoulder, but other than that, it's okay. The steel knees dance well, that's all that matters.

AL: Tell me how the downturn in the shoe industry affected your job.

BM: Back in 1979 or '80, the gentleman who owned Compo Shoe Machinery, which was started by his grandfather in 1902, then his father took it over and passed it on to him, and he started to notice the decline and these factories, they were going overseas. The first ones that went overseas started under the Reagan program, President Reagan, and every year we'd lose two or three. Pennsylvania would lose some, Texas lost a lot, Arkansas lost all their shoe factories overseas. And ours kept going down also. The ones that stayed with us to the end was Old Town Shoe, New Balance, which is still in Skowhegan, Norridgewok, and Norway, they're still here. And of course we had the Edmond Allen's, where the chicken factory was, they're still here but they're leaving, sometime within three months. We also have Falcon Shoe, in the old Cornell Mill, and they're leaving this year.

AL: They are?

BM: They've already started to ship machinery out. This will be the end of Lewiston and Auburn area, or the state of Maine, other than New Balance. Going back to Henry Hardy, in 1983 he noticed it was going real bad. Then the first '84, these machinists, who were all making big money, said, we're all going on strike. He told them, you go on strike, and I'll padlock the door. So they accepted the union, they did go on strike. They said, we now strike, and this is what we want. He said, I hold the key in my hands, and I'm locking the doors. This is the end of Compo Shoe. It started in 1902, and he locked the door, April 30, 1984. I was sixty-two, retirement age, so I went out, I retired, early retirement. But they were good to me, they kept me in a company car until I turned sixty-five, and they kept me on the Blue Cross insurance until I turned sixty-five. So they were good to me.

But that was the reason for it. Factories are going down fast. Plus, when they brought in the union they finished it for us, at Compo. United Shoe Machinery, which were bigger than us, they went out before we did, because they knew it was coming. I have worked in the shoe business in a way. I worked for Pamco Shoe Machinery, after I retired. They're in Railroad Park, where L-A Museum would be. Right in back of there, in their new building, pretty quick. And I worked there eleven years, part time, in the machine shop. And he still supplies to all the machinery overseas. The Dominican Republic, China, Japan, you name it, and the factories are there, and he still supplies them. He is now the biggest, I believe, in the United States, selling used machines parts to the shoe industry. He rebuilds machinery, sells them as reconditioned. He's doing very well. He employees fourteen men right here in Lewiston.

AL: And what's his name?

RT: Morris Cody, and the company name is Pamco Shoe Machinery. Very nice kid. He's young. Compared to me he's young. He's fifty-seven.

AL: So that piece of the industry survived.

RT: Oh yes, it's still going to be there for a long while. These factories overseas need the parts. But what Bush started to do, but didn't finish, I wish he had, he was going to start charging the manufacturers on the income. The taxes for bringing the shoes into the States, he was going to charge them more royalties. He never followed through. If someone would tell them, you have to pay more, they would start coming back and that's what someone has to do, it would bring a lot more jobs. And believe me, in Maine, a lot of shoe factory jobs could be filled easily, because they're all shoe makers. We could probably train some of these Somalians to be shoe makers, I don't know. There's a lot of people. I just bought some shoes by mail, the one's I'm wearing now. They come from Japan.

AL: And I know that, I mean, a lot of the hand sewers are getting older.

BM: They're all gone.

AL: And how are we going to, how will a new generation know.

BM: We'll have to train new people. And the new people are just not interested in learning anything new. All they can think of is being programmers for computers and stuff. That's all they want to do. If you'll notice, I don't have a TV on here. You won't see no computer. I had my cable disconnected, so I don't watch TV. To me it's a waste of time. I'd rather be working with my hands. And I do a lot of work with my hands.

AL: What do you do? Do you have hobbies?

BM: Well, that lighthouse up there, I built ten of those.

AL: Oh, wow.

BM: Yeah, they all light up, and they do go around. Bird houses, I build a lot of them. I give them away to get rid of them right now. You need a bird house, I'll give you one. I'm trying to get rid of some. I build anything out of wood. Towel racks, paper towel, the dispensers that you put your paper towels on, you name it, out of wood, and I'll make it.

AL: It sounds like you were just very naturally talented in terms of building, and mechanics.

BM: Yes. If anything breaks, I fix it.

AL: Did anybody teach you the mechanics, or you're just self learned?

BM: I'm just snoopy. I've been lucky. A lot of people would say, well hell, I went the hard way, you go out and learn the hard way. But no, they'd answer my questions, and I learned. As I say, to be an electrician, you have to know more than what I learned in school, but learned from the electricians and engineers from Compo Industry. Then I went to Augusta to apply for my license, and no problem, I got it right away. So I had the ability to learn. Today I don't. I don't retain what I read anymore. I'm too old. What I used to read once, I have to read ten times to retain it now. But as you get old, things change.

AL: Is there anything I haven't asked you about your time in the shoe industry that you think is important to add?

BM: No, in the shoe industry, a lot of people are not aware, but don't even think they were getting this, we had very good medical insurances, the employees, all over. The first one to bring that in was Shapiro Brother's Shoe Company. They were there where the Denny's, the restaurant, is today, that's where they were. And Arthur Shapiro said, I'm going to take care of my help. He brought in the, I forget the name of the insurance outfit, they were from Augusta. But the people were well taken care of, medically. You had no insurance at death, that's another thing. Then Lown Shoe, Phil Lown, was very good also. He brought in the good insurance, who used to be my boss originally, years ago. Now Phil Lown and Harold Alfonso in the Dexter factories, they gave out a lot to the industry, colleges and stuff. Harold Alfonso actually almost built Maine, (*unintelligible*). Phil Lown gave thousand and thousand of dollars to Bates College. His two boys were there of course, that's the reason for it. And of course Phil Lown's brother, we just named a bridge after him, Dr. Lown.

AL: Oh, they were brothers.

BM: They were all in the shoe industry. They were good, very good. In my case, when my girls were in nursing school, they had to have nurses shoes. I never had to buy any. They were made for me buy Belgrade Shoe Company. They used to be on Hotel Road in Auburn. That's gone. And of course, I never bought shoes for myself or any member of my family anyway. The last two years I've had to buy some, darn it. The shoe industry has been very good. It's been good for the city of Lewiston, and Auburn. Also the state of Maine. But imports, that's what killed us. Would I go back to the shoe industry, knowing what I know today? Yes, I would go back.

AL: You liked it.

BM: It was challenging. A lot of them just stayed at one machine day in and day out. I wanted to roam. I learned different machines, I learned everything. Everything but stitching. That there was out of my department. I like to stitch stuff with my machine downstairs, but not in the shoe industry. Although, I used to go in there to help them fix their machines. Lown Shoe was good to me in this respect, they let me travel all through the factory, when I came back from the service, to learn whatever I wanted to

learn. I would go back to the industry today if they needed help. At my age, I would go back.

AL: Well great, thank you so much.

End of Interview

swoh017.mathieu.bert.wpd