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1965

My name is David Dancourt 35 years old  
I was a handworker at Bostonian shoe in  
Freeport, Maine. Oscar Munkert had a  
company that did Handwork for a factory. He  
asked me to start a handworking to add to his  
line. We had a contract from Ross Shoe and  
Dexter Shoe. We started with a few handworkers  
part-time. In three years we had forty  
to fifty handworkers employed. Not long after that  
Mr. Munkert died. I purchased the handworking  
line from Mr. Munkert. I called my company

1968

Dave's (Mr-Moc). I kept on with the contracts  
with Ross and Dexter Shoe. I added a new  
line of handwork moccasins which I sold to  
Buddy Moccasin in Portland. 3 years after I  
started Dave's (Mr-Moc). Then Buddy sold the  
company to R. G. Barry Corp. of Columbus, Ohio. They  
kind me to be in charge of the manufacturing  
only. I convinced R. G. Barry to move the company  
to Auburn where they rented the Sever Shoe  
building. Within three years we had manufacturing,  
wholesale and retail in the building. We had  
65 to 70 employees in manufacturing.

1983

After 12 yrs I decided to start my own  
business in the old Sepporell mill. It was called  
Dawn-Cost Footwear. After 6 months I brought my

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son, Michael Goulet, in to purchase and sell.  
In no time he learned the shoe business.  
At the time you had 60 to 70 employees. After  
several years we sold the company to Cole-Hearn  
of Freetown, Me. We made expensive handmade shoes  
for them in our factory. I worked for them  
3 years, it was time for me to retire. My son  
I helped my son start his own factory called  
Maine Shoes.

1990

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

**Dave Rancourt**  
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

**SWOH #052**  
June 15, 2010

**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is June 15th, 2010, and I'm at the home of Dave Rancourt in Sabattus, Maine. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Dave, could you start just by giving me your full name?

**Dave Rancourt:** My name is David R. Rancourt.

**AL:** And where and when were you born?

**DR:** I was born in Canada.

**AL:** What part of Canada?

**DR:** I was born around Sherbrooke, Canada, Martinville, Canada, it's about fifteen miles from Sherbrooke.

**AL:** And how many years did you live -?

**DR:** Oh, I've been in (*unintelligible*) all my life, my dad, my folks brought me over when I was only eighteen months old.

**AL:** So you were a baby.

**DR:** I was a baby.

**AL:** And your parents were both from Canada. What were their names?

**DR:** Henry and Clara Rancourt.

**AL:** And do you know why they chose to come to the United States?

**DR:** Yeah, in those days in Canada, it was very poor, didn't have any jobs, so my dad brought us to Rumford, Maine.

**AL:** Oh, Rumford, yes. And how many brothers and sisters were there?

**DR:** I had five sisters and four brothers.

**AL:** So there were ten of you.

**DR:** Nine, one passed away, there were nine. Big family.

**AL:** And so what kind of work did your parents find in Rumford?

**DR:** My dad was a lumberjack, so I learned to work in the woods myself for a few years, after school.

**AL:** So when did you start in the shoe shop, was that in 1965, or earlier?

**DR:** Earlier, I was a hand sewer for about eight years, so I was doing that earlier.

**AL:** What age were you, do you remember?

**DR:** When I was twenty-five, I became a hand sewer. And I worked for Bel Moc in Lewiston-Auburn, or Lewiston, then I went and work at Bostonian out in Freeport, and Bostonian had to make a higher quality shoe, they paid more. And from Bostonian, then I started, and a few years after that I became, Oscar Marchand called me over to start a hand sewing factory, so I went with Oscar Marchand.

**AL:** Okay, and you had written some things down that you wanted me to read, and it begins around 1965. And I'll read it as it is: *(Reads)*

"My name is David Rancourt. Thirty-five years old, I was a hand sewer at Bostonian Shoe in Freeport, Maine. Oscar Marchand had a company that did hand whip for a factory."

Hand whip shoes?

**DR:** Yeah, hand whip shoes for a factory.

**AL:** And can you talk a little bit about what the difference is between the hand whip and the hand -?

**DR:** A hand whip, you take one thread and you just go around the hole to put the shoe together, you don't need a last at all. A hand sewn shoe is, you put the leather on the shoe, tack it all around, and you take a needle and then you hand sew it, with both hands.

**AL:** *(Reads)* "He asked me to start a hand sewing product line to add to what he did. We had a contract from Koss Shoe and Dexter Shoe. We started with a few hand sewers part time. In those years, we had forty to fifty hand sewers employed."

That is a lot.

**DR:** Yeah, with a contract.

**AL:** (*Reads*) "Not long after that, Mr. Marchand died. I purchased the hand sewing line from Mr. Marchand, I called my company Dave New Moc. I kept on with the contracts with Koss and Dexter Shoe. I added a new line of hand sewn moccasins which I sold to Quoddy Moccasin in Portland three years after I started Dave's New Moc. Then Quoddy sold the company to R. J. Barry -?"

**DR:** R. J. Barry, Columbus, Ohio.

**AL:** "Of Columbus, Ohio. They hired me to be in charge of the manufacturing only. I convinced R. J. Barry to move the company to Auburn when they -"

**DR:** They had some high, high skill, they had skilled labor in the Auburn area, Lewiston-Auburn area.

**AL:** Okay. "They rented the Lown Shoe building. Within three years we had manufacturing, wholesale and retail in the building, we had sixty-five to seventy employees in manufacturing. After twelve years I decided to start my own business in the old Pepperill Mill. It was called Downeast Footwear."

**DR:** Downeast Casual Footwear.

**AL:** "After six months, I brought my son Michael Rancourt -"

**DR:** For sale.

**AL:** To do selling, purchase and selling? Okay. "In no time, he learned the shoe business. At the time, we had sixty to seventy employees. After seven years we sold the company to Cole Haan of Freeport, Maine. We made expensive, hand sewn shoes for them in our factory. I worked for them three years, it was time for me to retire. I helped my son start his own factory called Maine Shoe."

**DR:** That's about it.

**AL:** Well, that's a lot of hand – can you talk to me about hand sewing? Sort of describe for me what, I mean it's a skill.

**DR:** Yeah, it's a skill.

**AL:** And some people can do it and some people can't. Can you talk to me about -?"

**DR:** Some people, it's too hard for them to do it, though. We have to bring the leather on a form, they call it a last, and we tack it all the way around, and then we punch a hole with an awl, and then we put a needle on each side of the thread so, put it in the hole, and we'll pull it, we hand sew, by hand, all around the shoe.

**AL:** So did you yourself, did you take to it pretty easy?

**DR:** It was hard, it was hard, very hard work. I worked in the woods before, and to me that was just as hard to work in the woods. Well, we worked piece work all the time, so the more you, the more shoe you make in the day, the more you get. So, it was really hard work, I did it for about eight years.

**AL:** And did you train people as well?

**DR:** Oh yeah, I did, I trained many people. I used to go to a shoe show and demonstrate the art of hand sewing.

**AL:** Oh, did you?

**DR:** Yeah, yeah.

**AL:** Because, you know, that's a skill that we're going to lose.

**DR:** Oh yeah, oh yeah. It's still going on a little bit, my son, they're doing it right now. The name is Rancourt, Inc. Moccasins.

**AL:** Right, one of the few businesses left.

**DR:** One of the few. And it's only higher price shoe you can make it with, the shoe will retail from two hundred to five hundred dollars a pair.

**AL:** So, I mean the hand sewers were an interesting group of workers.

**DR:** Well, they were hard to get along with. Of course, I was hand sewer myself, so I knew how to deal with them. One time, I used to pay them on Friday noon, and only half of them came back in the afternoon, to work, they used to go and have a few glass of beer and then didn't want to come back. So I changed my hour, then I worked four and a half days a week. Well, I added an hour each day, so we were close to forty-eight hours, but at noon time I used to pay them off, I'd say good bye, have a good weekend.

**AL:** Because you knew they wouldn't be back.

**DR:** They wouldn't be back. Plus, the ladies were like that also, the ladies that did

stitching, you know, and the cutting, all kinds of stuff, the ladies liked that because they had a long weekend. And a few factories had the same line of work I did, the same hours.

**AL:** Right, so that worked well.

**DR:** That worked well.

**AL:** Was there a time when it was hard to find hand sewers, to have enough of them?

**DR:** Yes, it was. One time for Downeast, we were working for Cole Haan, we started another factory in East Corinna (*sounds like*), and there were some hand sewers up there, we had a small factory up there, so we couldn't have enough hand sewers around here. And then the business slacked off, then we had enough hand sewers.

**AL:** So up and down.

**DR:** It was up and down, oh yeah, up and down.

**AL:** What year was it when you saw the shoe shops really starting to decline?

**DR:** It was in my later years, when I was, about '83, '83 to '90 it slacked off quite a bit.

**AL:** And some of the shops started closing?

**DR:** Yeah, some of the shops started closing. But it happened before that, when I started, when I was contracting with Marchand, it started going down. And then, that's why I started my factory. A few years later – he said, Dave, you know, you're kind of crazy to start to start a factory, and then a few years later it picked right up. I borrowed some money, I was paying seventeen percent interest, when I started Downeast. I was making a deficit on the shoes. People said, hey, you know, you're kind of crazy to start up a factory. But I made it, I made a few dollars.

**AL:** Now, I don't know the name Mr. Marchand, can you talk about him a little bit? Who was he?

**DR:** Oscar Marchand had a cobbler shop on Lincoln Street, and he knew a few people in the shoe factory so he contracted, he started contracting hand working. He used to give the leather, to take the shoe home, and people used to go up his cobbler shop and they used to get the work from him, they used to take it home and do it at home, hand work at home.

**AL:** And then they'd bring it back and get paid.

**DR:** And then they'd bring it back, the shoe factory would take it back and they slip a last into it and they shaped the shoe.

**AL:** Oh, okay, so shape them after.

**DR:** Yeah, shape them after it was sewn. I forgot to mention my wife, my wife helped me a lot. She worked in the office, in the moccasin, for many years.

**AL:** And so Dave's New Moc, did you sell that, or did it stay Dave's New Moc until you retired?

**DR:** I sold it to R. J. Barry.

**AL:** Oh, that's right, you sold it, and then you worked for them.

**DR:** Yeah, I became part of Quoddy and R. J. Barry.

**AL:** And was it a totally different type of shoe that you were making with Quoddy?

**DR:** No, it was basically, we added a lot on the line, we added loafers, finished loafers, and moccasins. There was a number of lines we had. But we had quite a few people employed there. But that factory, at Lown Shoe, they must have had over a hundred people employed there. It's a good thing (*unintelligible*).

**AL:** And so you became a supervisor and then -

**DR:** And then owner of a shoe factory.

**AL:** Right, right. What were some of the challenges that you faced in those positions?

**DR:** The most challenges that I faced were faced in workmen's comp.

**AL:** Oh, for some of the employees?

**DR:** For the employees. Some people, I hate to say that, but they complained that their hand hurt, (*unintelligible*), and they went home, they were doing all kind of work at home but they couldn't work. So workmen's comp in those days was very easy to get, so that was my biggest problem. That's why I sold up.

**AL:** Is that what?



**DR:** Yeah, that's why I sold to Cole Haan. Couldn't afford to pay all the premium on workmen's comp. But now it's not quite as bad as it used to be.

**AL:** It's better now?

**DR:** It's better now.

**AL:** They have better -

**DR:** The system. But they cut down. McKernan was governor at that time, and he changed the system a little bit. It helped.

**AL:** Can you talk about how Lewiston, Lewiston and Auburn have changed over the years? Can you give me a picture of what it was like when you were first here and how it's different now? I mean, Lisbon Street was really, that area was very busy and vibrant.

**DR:** Busy, oh yeah, Lisbon Street was very busy. It's changed quite a bit. But for me it didn't change – I spend six months in Florida now, you know, for the past thirteen, fourteen years, and six months in Maine. And then as you get older, you're not with the same crowd so it's hard for me to say.

**AL:** Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think is important to add, something about the shoe industry, or the business atmosphere in the area?

**DR:** The only one that can survive in the hand sewing is the one that's making high price shoes, those high price loafer or high price moccasin. My son, he was working for Allen-Edmond, and Allen-Edmond decided to stop manufacturing (*unintelligible*) so much and then it started over again, and a shoe will retail for two hundred dollars a pair, or more. But a low priced shoe won't survive, because there's too many shoes coming in from China, everywhere, low priced shoe. High price will survive, or the small market, a high priced shoe will survive. I hope so, my son's still in business.

**AL:** That's great. Thank you very much.

**DR:** You're welcome.

*End of Interview*

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