

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

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Ray Tibault
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

SWOH #018
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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 January 23rd, 2009, and I'm at the home of Ray Tibault and his wife Rita in New Auburn, Maine, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Ray, could you just start by giving me your full name?

RT: Raymond F. Tibault.

AL: And where and when were you born?

RT: I was born in Auburn, November 10th, 1926.

AL: And did you grow up in Auburn?

RT: My whole life, I've lived here in Auburn.

AL: You have. And what were your parents' names?

RT: My mother's name was Ida, and my father's name was Alfonse.

AL: And were they both from Auburn, or had they come from somewhere else?

RT: My mother was born in Lewiston, in Little Canada, my father was born in (name) Canada, came here at the age of six months.

AL: And so, you have a strong French background.

RT: That's true. You can tell by my accent.

AL: And what did they do for work in Auburn?

RT: My father, when he was old enough, he was a mill worker. Then he went into the shoe industry, and he also was barber. My mother worked also in the shoe industry.

AL: What did they do?

RT: My mother was a fancy stitcher in the shoe industry. My father was a Goodyear stitcher, and a, what do they call it, a puller. And in the mill he was an overseer, when

Barker Arm was here in New Auburn years ago, that's where he was an overseer. When that closed, that's when he went into the shoe industry.

AL: What companies did he work for, the shoe companies?

RT: He worked mostly for Maine Shoe and Clark Shoe.

AL: That was at Clark, was Clark fairly big amongst the shoe shops?

RT: Yeah, Maine and Clark were both big factories. And also Shapiro, he worked. My mother also worked at Shapiro. And she worked at the Venus here first, in Auburn, at the Venus.

AL: And what year did you say you were born?

RT: Nineteen twenty-six, I'm 82.

AL: So were they, at the time, in 1937, were they in the shoe industry? Were they involved in the strike?

RT: Oh yes, my dad was, I remember that. I was young, but I remember that. I remember the big strike.

AL: Do you remember how your parents dealt with that strike?

RT: Well, they were out on strike, of course. If you'd go work, you know, something would happen to your house, and they were very afraid so they stayed home.

AL: But that must have been hard on them economically.

RT: Oh yeah, it was, but my father was a barber too, so he did that, you know, he used to do barbering on Friday nights and Saturday all day. And when the strike, he did barbering all week.

AL: Okay, yeah, that's good. So what was it like growing up in Auburn? Was it New Auburn that you grew up in?

RT: Well, New Auburn was called New Auburn after the Auburn fire in 1933. That was a big fire. This place didn't burn, but everything down below, Auburn, down, you probably never heard of that.

AL: No.

RT: The whole New Auburn, Auburn, down that end, burned down. Then when they rebuilt, everything had to be rebuilt in the apartment house, three stories or more, had to be rebuilt in brick. That's why you see now, coming in off the South Bridge here, well the Lown Bridge now, it was, you see these brick blocks, they were built after the fire in 1936. Then we had a big flood. But I grew up in Auburn, went to school here in Auburn, went to school here at St. Louis School, and then at Walton, then E.L., and I didn't graduate from E.L, I left E.L. in my second year and went in the Navy.

AL: Okay, because that was during WWII. So near the end of WWII?

RT: Yeah, it was in 1944, it was two and a half years. In 1946, they signed the peace In 1946, the end of '46. I was only in two and a half years, in the Navy.

AL: Did they send you overseas?

RT: No, I was a lucky one, I stayed in the States. I was in the Navel Air Corp, and I was in Corpus Christi, Texas, when we used to fly PBYS, Catalinas, and I used to fly from Corpus Christi to Pensacola, Florida. And I was getting paid, to fly over the Gulf of Mexico I was getting paid sea pay, plus flight pay. And it was good duty and I enjoyed, I volunteered six times to go to out to sea and they never let me go. So hey, I was meant to be here, took care of the girls in the States instead.

AL: And so after that time in the service, you came back to Auburn?

RT: Yes, well I wasn't married then, I was only seventeen. I got married young, I got married at twenty, and we've been married sixty-one years already. And I lived at the end of the street, on Gill Street. This is Fourth, Fourth and Gill, right at the end, that's where I lived. I went for a test this morning. And I've lived here all my life. I bought this place here, oh, we had been married about six years I think. I've been here almost fifty-one years now, this place here.

AL: So you're comfortable, you're settled in. That's wonderful. And so at twenty you got married. What were you doing for work at that time?

RT: At that time I was working at that Pepperill Manufacturing Company, which is the Bleachery in Lewiston, I worked there, and they closed, they went down south. So that's when, my wife was working at Bel Moc, Bel Moc in Lewiston, Bel Moc Incorporated, and she says to me, she says, well, wouldn't you like to come to work in the shoe? I said, my parents were in the shoe industry and that's no, you work so many months a year and you loaf so many months. I don't want that, I want something that I can work steadily. Well, she says - .

Rita: I went in one morning to work, and the owner, Mr. Izzy Viner (*sounds like*),

thought I looked sad. We'd just been married, you know, and I did I guess. And he asked me why, and I says, well my husband just lost his job and we've just been married, and he says, well tell him to come and see me. I says, I don't know, he doesn't really want to work in the shoe factory. He says, tell him to come and see me and we'll discuss it. So that's how he got into the shoe business. And he went to see Mr. Viner, and from then it's - .

RT: So I went to see Mr. Viner, and he says to me, he says, do you want to come and work for me. Well, I says, I haven't got no experience. He says, I'll tell you, at that time they were hiring a lot of young fellows like me to work on the G.I. Bill. So he says, come and work on the G.I., and he says, I'll train you, I'll start you off on hand sewing, start you in the beginning. So I says, well, you know, the reason I don't want to come, I don't want to work six months and go six months. Come and work for me Ray, you'll work year round. Fine, I'll take your word for it. So I did. And it was true. I started hand sewing, after hand sewing for a year, then he promoted me to a job in the factory, which was getting all the work, it was a production clerk, in other words. And after awhile he says to me, he says, how would you like to learn to be a pattern maker. I said, I'd love to. Fine. So, he took me down to the pattern shop and I started learning to be a pattern maker.

AL: And what does that entail?

RT: Pattern making is, that is where the shoe will start. You cut up, you style the shoes, you design shoes, and from then you have what you call, more or less like a paper cutter, and you have to draft a last, in other words to make a pattern, so it will be right. And of course you have a picture, you make a picture of the shoe that you're going to make, or they order, or they want, they'll send you pictures, and you have to design that shoe, and make it. And a lot of these shoes, well they have patents, that are patented in Washington D.C. that you can't do the same. You take a little bit off, and that's all you need, but still it's the same shoe. Nobody knows but you and who owns the patent.

And then you'll cut the paper, you'll engineer the whole thing and you cut the paper, every piece of a shoe. They take that paper, you bring it up into the, what they call the cutting room, and there they'll put that paper on leather and they'll cut that leather, you know, from that paper, they'll cut, and then they'll give it into the stitching room, then the girls will stitch it together. They make one shoe, that's a trial. From that trial, once it's all done, you look at it, and we make whatever has to be, you know, a lot of times you'll have to correct a lot of things on it, it's not perfect the first time. There's nobody that good that will make, at first shot, will make a shoe perfect. But after you've had the thing corrected, well then you'll buy what they call dies. Dies are to cut the leather, they're steel, and they put them on what they call a clicker, which is a cutting machine. They put this on leather, they hit it, and it cuts a piece of leather. Every little piece that I've

had designed and have cut in paper, will be cut with different dies.

Rita: What I used to have to do is to find out how they could pay a stitcher to stitch that shoe together, how much. So I had to decide on the vamp, on the back stay, and all this, all those parts that he's talking about, had a name, okay. And those names, say a stitcher was a back stay stitcher, from there you have to decide how much they can afford to pay a back stay stitcher.

RT: It was all piece work in the shoe industry, it was all piece work. So they get paid by the piece.

AL: So you had to figure out how much to pay them per each shoe.

Rita: Yes, well I would figure it approximately, and then the owners would get together and they would decide what they actually wanted to pay. I didn't have the last decision on that. But I came pretty close every time. But sometimes they thought it was too much money, for instance, that usually was the thing. Of course, they have to know how much they can spend to make a shoe, so that they can afford to sell it at so much. So that's where I came in. That's about the size of it.

RT: Well anyway, I worked there, at Bel Moc, I became pattern maker, I became head pattern maker, and after that I became superintendent of the factory. And then, we also had two factories in Puerto Rico, I used to get a pattern going, and I used to go down to Puerto Rico for a couple of weeks and start them off on that shoe, and then come back home. I'd go down to Puerto Rico about three times a year to start a new shoe, because down there they had nobody that really, I mean they had good stitchers, but nobody to okay that they were stitching it right. And then after thirty years, I could see that they were closing down in Puerto Rico, and I could see that things weren't upsy-dupsy there. So, I was offered another job at Arno Moc in Lewiston, and Mr. Fleisher really wanted me and I could see that, but Mr. Viner didn't want to let me go. He says Ray, don't leave me, he says, I'm telling you. I says, look, we used to call him Mr. I. I says, look Mr. I, this is going down and you know it. No, no, no, it's not, don't worry about it, everything is going to be okay, you'll see. Well, I says, look, I says, I've committed myself already and I have to, you know, I have to go. Well, he says, it's all right, you won't be there a month, you'll be back. I never went back. He closed two months later. And then I went to work for Arnold Fleisher, and I was with him for twelve years.

AL: And you did the same type of thing?

RT: There I went in as pattern maker and superintendent, both right away. Because he needed a superintendent, and they needed a pattern maker bad. And after Arnold closed, about twelve years later, I opened a – I went to work for Crest Shoe for about

six months, they wanted me there for pattern making also. Then I had an offer to open a factory here in Lewiston, the Frye Company from Pennsylvania wanted to open a hand sewn factory here on Lincoln Street, nice little factory. I had probably eighty-nine workers working for me in all, it was a nice little place. And that went well, that went very good. And I worked there for two years, and they sold to this other, to the Rigger Company. And I hate to say this, but I couldn't stand the owner. And I was at an age I could retire, so I was nice, I gave him a good notice and I kissed them goodbye, I says, that's it. He says, why you leaving me, he says, you know, if I knew you were going to leave me I never would have bought this place. I says, if I knew what you paid for this place, I would have bought it. Because he really stole it, he had it for peanuts. And he didn't but a year after, too.

AL: Were there many shops left by the time you retired, or were they closing all around you?

RT: Well see, I've been retired twenty years already, and there was quite a few who left, quite a few.

AL: So that was the late eighties.

RT: Yup, it's been, in fact next week, not next week, in two weeks, I retired the first week of February, and I was sixty-two. And you know, in the shoe industry it's, everything they want is yesterday. Not tomorrow, but yesterday. And in fact, after I came out, I had to go for full bypass, so I was, you know, my doctor said he couldn't understand why I wasn't getting a heart attack or a stroke. So it was time for me to retire, it was too much pressure. But I enjoyed every minute of it.

Rita: But you did some freelancing.

RT: After that, yeah, I did some freelancing for myself. I have everything downstairs here in my cellar. In fact, Arnold gave me my old desk I had. I did a little freelancing, which was nice. And after I reached sixty-five, I figured that was enough.

AL: And the freelancing, would it be like, the owners might call you and say could you work on a pattern for us?

RT: Yeah, they'll call me, they'll give me a shoe and they'll say, Ray, could you make a pattern for this shoe, and that was freelancing, different factories around. But I didn't do too, too much, but it was just enough to keep me out of mischief.

AL: Now Rita, can you talk to me a little bit about where you were born and grew up?

Rita: Well, I was born in Lewiston. I grew up, I stayed in Lewiston til I got married. After I got married, I moved to Auburn. We've been here sixty-one years, fifty years in

this building.

AL: What was your maiden name?

Rita: My maiden name was Bouchard.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

Rita: My father's name was Louie Bouchard, he was a carpenter, finish carpenter. Mom was Mary Dumont, she – in fact, I got a picture that Rachel wants – she worked in the mill til she retired, in Bates Mill, she worked.

AL: What did she do at the Bates Mill?

Rita: At the Bates Mill, she worked in the finishing room. They were making like the Martha Washingtons and Queen Elizabeths, and that's all we had on our beds at home. Actually I'd like to have one now.

AL: They were nice, weren't they?

Rita: Oh yeah, they were terrific. We all had one. And she worked there for years, and I remember she used to work from six to six. And then, well it went down, but that's what she did.

AL: And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

Rita: I had one brother that died, one brother and sister were born in Fort Kent, Maine, and the brother died at three months during the influenza at Fort Kent. And I was born in Lewiston with, my baby sister and myself, so we were three girls, I was the middle one. But when I graduated from high school, the first place I had to work was the shoe shop, in the office. And I had a lady, it was just that lady, her name was Alice Miller, she was the office manager, but there was just the two of us. And boy, she was strict. I had to file just right. She showed me the best way to work in a shoe shop office. And then I went, I worked there at the beginning, and then I went to Bel Moc, and I worked there for many years, for, until the girls came, my oldest one was born in '53. And after that I didn't work any more, I stayed home with the girls til my baby was in school. Then I went to be an optometric assistant, and I worked for an optometrist for two years.

AL: How did you get the opportunity to go into the shoe shop, in the office?

Rita: I left high school, and they was asking for people to go work in the shoe shop office, and I tried. And there was a lot of girls that went, and I'm the only one that did I guess go to work for Alice Miller. She was a nice lady, I really loved her, because not

many girls would have taken with attitude to show me things the way she did, but I learned, and I learned the right way. And then when I became office manager, they used to call me the whip, because I learned from Alice Miller in the shoe shop office that you do things right or you don't do them at all, and that's how I trained my girls. And my best friend today is a girl that worked for me for ten years, so I couldn't have been that bad, you know?

AL: Right. So how many years did you work at Bel Moc?

Rita: Oh, not too many. It's hard to say. I graduated in '46, and then I worked til Pat was born, from '46 to '53.

AL: So seven years, about.

Rita: Yeah, and one of the Mr. Viners used to bring me an orange every morning when I was pregnant. Not Mr. Izzy Viner, but his brother. I don't know why. One day he saw me eat an orange, I guess he thought I was craving oranges, which I wasn't, I've never craved anything. But he'd bring me these beautiful big oranges. And the other girls in the office would say, well how do you rate. But just because I was pregnant, and he liked me so much, because I was pregnant. He was a nice man too. That's how I got in there. And from one shoe shop to the other. And I got friendly with the office manager, and we'd go out together, her husband and I, her husband and Ray and I.

RT: Her husband was a packing room foreman also.

Rita: We was like one happy family.

AL: So you made friends in the shoe shops as well.

Rita: Yes, oh yes, a lot of friends, a lot of friends.

RT: I've known a lot of people, but I forget names, that's my problem.

Rita: But like Bert Matthews - .

RT: Oh, Bert Matthews, we was very friendly with Bert Matthews.

Rita: We went out with them for quite few years, well, til his wife died.

RT: And Norm Demers was very -

Rita: Well, I knew his wife very, very well.

RT: His wife worked for me, Norm Demers' wife. And Norm, I knew he was also a superintendent in the shoe industry, in Richmond Shoe, he worked there, then he started his own business.

Rita: He was a leather person, wasn't he?

RT: Well, he was foreman of the cutting, he was a cutter, he started as a cutter.

Rita: But didn't he sell leather when he came out of the - .

AL: Yeah, yes, yeah.

Rita: He made out very well. They got a beautiful home.

AL: Are there any stories or recollections that you have from your time in the shoe shops that would kind of illustrate what it was like to work there?

RT: Well, once I started in the shoe industry I enjoyed working in there, you know, I loved working in the shoe industry. And once I started in pattern making, that I really enjoyed, you know, it was something better than anything else, you know what I mean.

Rita: He made good money.

RT: I made very good money. We lived well.

Rita: Enough to - .

RT: To bring three girls through college.

Rita: And weddings, and braces.

RT: I enjoyed my life in the shoe industry, very much so.

Rita: One time we went to a shoe show in Massachusetts with a couple that owned a shoe store. Okay, so we go to this shoe show, and this young, handsome fellow comes to talk to me. And I said to him, I said gee, what do you do in the shoe business? Well, he says, I'm a shoe engineer. Oh, that's nice, that must pay good. He says, well yes. And I says, I asked him where he worked. Some place in Massachusetts, he told me. And I says, what does it entail to be a shoe engineer. He says, first you have to cut the paper, and then you have them cut some leather so they can make the shoe. Oh, I says, I call my husband a paper doll cutter.

RT: He's a shoe engineer. After that I called myself a shoe engineer.

Rita: And you know, we always called him a paper doll cutter, because he has this special paper – do you have any more of that paper?

RT: Oh yeah.

Rita: He had this paper, and when the girls got old enough – oh, another thing that's quite interesting I think, that our daughters, I was kind of a strict mother, and I said that they should get a little job in the summer. So my oldest daughter, she definitely knew she wanted to be an R.N. So Ray says, I'll give you a job in, did she work for you (*unintelligible*)?

RT: Yeah, she had a job in the stitching room. She wasn't stitching, she was putting pieces together but not stitching them.

Rita: He says, I'll give you a job, so he gave her a job in the shoe factory. And she'd come home every night, if anybody thinks I'm going to make that my life's ambition.

RT: That was good.

Rita: So he had big plans for her, but she was determined she was going to be an R.N. anyways. Here comes the second one, and they, at the factory had passed a law that people - .

RT: You couldn't hire people from your immediate family, because there was too much friction, and so I got here a job at Falcon Shoe, my second daughter. And she was a very good -

Rita: She's an artist.

RT: Well, she's a graphic designer, and she was going to college to be a graphic designer. And in the summer I had her going to Falcon, and they put her in the pattern shop, to design shoes.

Rita: She had it made.

RT: She had it made, she loved it there. But she says, I still don't want to stay there. She didn't like the smell of leather, which I did. And my third one, well she didn't - .

Rita: Was the baby, we spoiled her.

AL: You didn't make her go.

Rita: What did she do in the summer? She didn't do anything in the summer.

RT: No, I think she stayed home.

Rita: Well anyway, the other two worked in the shoe shop. But that was a good experience, but they didn't want to do that for the rest of their life.. But Louise, she had it made, she started in the factory I guess, and Bob was the boss and you knew him, and he knew that you were a pattern maker. They had her cut up things or something.

RT: She liked it, but not enough to make that a career.

AL: Right. Is there anything else that I haven't asked you that you think is important to add?

RT: All I can say, we better never go to war with China because we'll go barefooted. All the factories are all in China now. It's unreal, unreal. We have a few left here, but you know, what's left here is - .

Rita: I know that – I probably shouldn't say that on the mic – Rachel would like to have his tools.

AL: Well yes, the museum is collecting whatever they can.

RT: Like I told her husband, they came here once, for Christmas. And I says, when I die, I said, I'll make sure that my tools are donated to you people.

Rita: But til then, he won't.

AL: Til then, don't part with them.

RT: I want them. And I have all kinds of patterns too, and everything, I've got hundreds of patterns.

Rita: He's got drawers full of them downstairs, he's got lasts and -

RT: I got everything, but I threw away shoes.

Rita: What Rachel wanted. Well, we didn't know.

RT: That, I didn't know. I would have given them to her. I had all kinds of shoes, different makes. All I had was the right foot, because that's all we make as a trial, the right foot, and I think I had about a hundred a hundred and fifty right foot. So one day, I wanted to clean my shop downstairs, on top of my desk. I says to my wife, I think I'm

going to get rid of this, I don't need them anyway. I mean, it's obsolete. So I put them all in a big box, and Friday morning I put them to the trash outside, they pick up the trash on Friday. These guys come and pick up, they see that, they took every shoe out, they're trying to match. They spent probably twenty minutes trying to match them. And I happened to look in the window and I saw them, they were trying to match, you know, and none of them matched, they were all the right foot. So after they smartened up, they realized they were all right foot, I opened the door, I says guys, you'll never match them. Why didn't you tell us that before.

Rita: I think, there must be some hospital, probably had people with just one foot.

RT: Oh, I put them in the trash anyway.

Rita: Now that Rachel knows that, she's upset.

RT: Yeah, Rachel said, why didn't you keep them. Well then, it was before that was started.

AL: Right, right, it's hard to think of those things that far ahead, but yeah. Well great, thank you so much.

RT: You're welcome. I appreciate talking with you.

End of Interview
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