

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

**Cecile Brodeur**  
(Interviewer: Amelia Larsen)

**SMWOH #07**  
March 14, 2005

**Amelia Larsen:** . . . March 14th, 2005 in Lewiston, Maine. I'm Amelia Larsen interviewing. Could you please state your full name, including your maiden name?

**Cecile Brodeur:** Well, my name is Cecile, my maiden name, Lebrun, L-E-B-R-U-N, Brodeur, Cecile Lebrun Brodeur.

**AL:** Okay, and what is your place and date of birth?

**CB:** I was born in Lewiston, and my date is, I was born August 4th, 1934.

**AL:** So you grew up in Lewiston?

**CB:** Yes.

**AL:** What was the community like at that time, the social, religious and political?

**CB:** Oh, the social thing was like, we went out dancing a lot, ballroom dancing, that was our thing. And as for the, we were brought up, I was brought up very strict, my parents didn't let us out too, too much. Go to the movie. And as for politics, I don't know, I'm not into politics, I don't know too much about that.

**AL:** What were your parents' names?

**CB:** My mother's name was Imelda Labonte, and my father's name was Joseph Lebrun.

**AL:** And what was their ethnic background?

**CB:** My father came from Canada, but he, he was, I guess he came here as a young man, and then they went to work in the mills and, you know, that's when they all came over here, and it was called Little Canada where we stayed. And people were, most people were working in the mill, but my father didn't work in the mill, he worked, he made brooms. And my mother was a homemaker because we were eleven children. That's why we grew up and went to work. That's what we did, you know, went to -

**AL:** Did most of your siblings work in the mills, too?

**CB:** Yes, all my sisters work in the mill, and I have, I think two of my brothers, one of my brother work in the mill, but others, no, didn't. One brother, and I had like, one, two, three, four sisters that work in the mill. But the youngest one, she was spoiled, her, so she went to school, she didn't do much. So.

**AL:** Was it the, did you guys all kind of have the same kind of jobs, the girls first, or the guys?

**CB:** Well, yes and no, because my older sisters, they used to work at the Continental, the Continental Mill, that was more in Little Canada. And they work in, I don't know what they did, I think spinning, in the spinning room. I worked in the card room, which was a very dirty, and hard work over there. But my other sister, more my age, she works in the spinning room, too. But my other two sister, I don't know what they did, I don't know where they work.

**AL:** What did you actually do in the card room?

**CB:** I did, gee, there was like frames. It used to be like this cotton, we used to come and we used to, they used to take it from there and they'd put it like in a comber, they call it a comber. It would comb the cotton to make it finer, and then it would go to another process. It was just the beginning of the process, where I was working. It was just a piece of cotton they, you know, like big cotton, it was dirty, and this is the beginning of making those bedspread.

**AL:** Oh, that's what you were making.

**CB:** Yeah, the bedspreads, you know, they were making like Queen Elizabeth and all those bedspreads. And I also work in the, I had an accident when I was working in the card room, and I cut one of my fingers.

**AL:** Oh, wow.

**CB:** And, yeah, I caught it in one of the machines. So if there was no work, they didn't lay me off, they put me here and there in all kinds of room. I went to work in the packing room, I went to work in the stitching room down there, but it was, you used to cut those bedspread, thin like that, I was afraid of that knife. And I also work in the packing room? That was it, I guess, yeah. So whenever there was no work, they'd put me somewhere else.

**AL:** Were the working conditions not very safe?

**CB:** They were, and they were not. It was not like today. I don't think, to me, like, like a lot of those machines used to break, and there was like what you call those fixer, and sometimes they were busy, or it's like, you know, they wouldn't come and fix the machine right away, because they had a lot of machines to take care of, to fix. But they were safe enough, but I don't think it would be like today. I think, to me today, the condition was not as safe as it would be today.

**AL:** Were there any conflicts between ethnic groups in the workplace?

**CB:** No, we didn't have too many, it was mostly, we didn't have any people like today, you know, you're all mixed up, the black and the people. We, most of the people working in there were French Canadian.

**AL:** Yeah, so it was never -

**CB:** That was all there was, so we weren't, you know, we didn't have no conflict with nobody, because we were all the same.

**AL:** What kind of things did you do to socialize? Between the mills?

**CB:** Oh, between the mill? Well, we couldn't wait, went dancing, went dancing, dancing, dancing. Every, the minute we were out of there, we'd go dancing. I mean, and then of course there was Elvis, too. And I remember taking time off from work just to go see Elvis movie.

**AL:** Elvis Presley?

**CB:** Yeah, take a day off to go see Elvis Presley, the movie, yeah, yeah. But we, that was our thing, movies and dancing, we did a lot of that, yeah.

**AL:** How did you get your job?

**CB:** How did I get my job.

**AL:** Was it through your dad?

**CB:** No, I just went and applied. Just went over there, fill an application, and they

hired me. Because I guess I had, I started to work, I was fifteen, I was a waitress, and I worked until I was eight-, old enough, they didn't take you before you were eighteen. So when I was eighteen years old I applied there, and I had good records, so they took me right away.

**AL:** Were there ways of getting favorite jobs?

**CB:** No, no, not in those days, no.

**AL:** Just whatever you applied for?

**CB:** Yeah, yeah. No, I don't think so. I didn't see anybody getting any favoritism to get, no, there was none of that.

**AL:** This we kind of touched upon, about the safety, but, oh, was it good to have connections, and how did you get them to get favors or better working conditions, but you pretty much said that didn't (*unintelligible phrase*).

**CB:** Well, I think we had a Teamster, I think we had the, a un-, I don't know if it was Teamster or, it was some kind of a union we had in there, we had a union, too. And that was our way, if we didn't get, you know, like if there was something that we were, had problem with, we'd go see, we had like a steward, we used to call it steward, and we'd go see him and he would fix things up for us. So we had sort of like a union.

**AL:** Were most people part of the union?

**CB:** A lot of people liked it, and people were against it. And I can't even remember if we had to belong to the union. But they charge us so much, you know, they took so much out of our pay. And I can't remember if you only belong, I think, to the union if you wanted to. And I think it was good, because the union was good, because if there was

anything wrong, I mean if you applied for a job and you wanted it and somebody else would apply for it and he had like you say favoritism or seniority, then the union would step in. So it was a good thing.

**AL:** Who got what jobs, and who was admired or looked down upon?

**CB:** Who got what jobs. I don't think, I was so young, I don't think anybody, see with me is, I was young and, they put me all over the place over there, I learned most of those job in the card room. If they needed me downstairs, I would go. So I don't think that we applied for jobs. Like I say, they would put it like on a board or something and people applied, but there was no, there was no problem there either, you know, no conflict of any kind. Anybody got the job they applied for, and it went by seniority.

**AL:** So whoever was older got the job?

**CB:** Yeah, whoever had been there working longer got the job, didn't matter how old you were as long as you had been working. So it's like whoever applied for a job, as long as they had been there.

**AL:** Yeah, with a background.

**CB:** Yeah, yeah, and somebody would show them the job. But it went by seniority.

**AL:** Who was more inventive, piece workers, bosses, or salaried people, people with salaries?

**CB:** I think most people were on piece work, because it, you know, like inventive, yeah, you were there to make money, and that's all it was, the people that were there. Most of the people were on piece work, except there used to be like helpers who used to come sometimes, that would come and help out. I remember when I was young they

used to have these big frame and they'd have these big bobbins, and whenever they would, I can't even remember how to say it, whenever the machine was ready for the stuff to come out and put new bobbins in there, they had these bunch of kids who used to come in and help them out. And most of those people were college, people who went to college, and they'd come in in the summer and work there to help out.

**AL:** So the college kids came in just for the summer?

**CB:** (*Unintelligible word*), too, yeah, I met nice cute guys there.

**AL:** Dance with them?

**CB:** Yeah, I went out with them, yeah.

**AL:** Do you think that the workers were overworked?

**CB:** No, no, because I went to work in a shoe shop after that, and I think with the mill is like, with the mill it's once you learn the job, it's like you could have free time, because it's like the machine, as long as you got your machine running you could sit and read. Because as long as kept feeding those machine, you got your machine all done, then you had plenty of time, you know, like, well not plenty of time but four, five minutes. And you worked, you had to eat while you were working because you worked from, I worked from three to eleven, so it's like there was no time in between, those machine work twenty four hours a day.

And I, after I left, after my kids, I left when my kids, I had my kids, and the after my kids got older I went to work in the shoe shop. Very different. Because over there the machine runs you, and in the machine you run the, there's no machine but you run, you know, you do the work. Over there, it's the machine run you, as long you get your machine, you're all set. I didn't think people were overworked. I thought that maybe

when I left and they started probably adding more work to the people. But I don't think people were overworked there. As a matter, I like the mill better than the shoe shop.

**AL:** So you'd just start the machine and then it would just run?

**CB:** Well, we'd fix the machine, you know, get the machine, fed them and fix them, and then it's like, you know, you waited for the, it was all piece work and like whenever something would happen, we'll say something would break, the machine stops. So you go and fix it, and you start it up again, see. So as long as you kept your machine well fed in the back, and that you take out your empties in the front, you're all set.

**AL:** Were you standing that whole entire time, or were you sitting down?

**CB:** Well, no, I was walking around. No, you didn't stand, you walk around. It's like I had these frames, and then I had these big, I don't even remember what they were called, these big things that I used to make for the comber. And that was four machine, three machine there and another one there, and I walked around, I didn't stand around, we kept walking around. But once in a while I'd sit and watch, you know, or I'd eat a sandwich or read. As long as the machine were going.

**AL:** Do you know of any illegal discharges into the river in those days?

**CB:** Illegal discharges. You mean people throwing stuff?

**AL:** Yeah.

**CB:** Oh, I imagine they probably did. It wasn't like today. I mean even if people would throw stuff in there, nobody cared, you know. Like today, they go a lot for that. No, I'm sure people did, their lunches they didn't eat or whatever, I'm sure they did.



**AL:** They just weren't conscious of the environment.

**CB:** No, not like today, we didn't look at stuff like that, like today, no.

**AL:** And who really took care of the money and organizing the family?

**CB:** Who took care of my money?

**AL:** Yeah, the money, just the -

**CB:** The money I made?

**AL:** Yeah.

**CB:** Well, see, it's like when I was, when I was working I was single, I used to take my, well, in those days, you know, like we're eleven children so it's like we used to come home and give my father, I don't think kids today would do that, give my father, I'd cash my check and give my father so much money a week. It was like paying, you have to pay room and board. So I'd pay my room and board, and then whatever was left was mine. So he was like pretty reasonable. In those days we made, what, forty dollars a week? Probably give him like fifteen. The rest was us to do with what we wanted to, you know. But after I got married, I don't know who handled the money. I think I did, yeah.

**AL:** So when you were younger your father pretty much organized the family, the money?

**CB:** Oh yeah, yeah, my mother was a stay-at-home, and my father worked and he was the one who was most like-, I don't know, today, like today, he was like the boss I guess you would say. Men in those days, they were like from the old school, I'm the

boss.

**AL:** That's all for the L-A questions. And I have just a few questions for my class about gender. Well, first of all, do you have any favorite memories about working at the mill?

**CB:** No, not really. Except that I had a lot of fun. I mean, you know, it's like I made a few friends in there, because, but the people in there were all older than I was, you understand? I went to work in there, I was only eighteen. And it's like, the people they were older women and, you know, where I was working anyway, they were older women. And I made a few friends, but most of the friends that I made was the people, the young people who would come in and work. And then we'd go out or whatever.

But the memory I think, it was the memory, is like in the summer when those college kids used to come in. That's when I had fun. They used to come in, and it's like I say, you know, we have a few minutes, we have time to go down there, talk to the boys. So that's my memory, I think of the mill, is like when I couldn't wait for summer because I knew these college kids would come in. That's my memory of the mill.

**AL:** Did you have gender roles. Like when the college kids came in did they, like did the guys take different roles from the women, or like sewing, was that more of a woman's job all the time?

**CB:** Yeah, well no, they, they, well yeah, down in the sewing room there, whatever they called it, that room, there was no men sewing. The men were doing the labor, like they would wash those big bedspread and put them in the dryers and stuff, and the woman would be the one who be the sewing, you know. In those days, women did women work, and men was more like the heavy stuff.

**AL:** So in the card room where you worked, was it mostly women or was it -?

**CB:** Well, we, it was, there was men, the men was used to do the cards, where they were doing the cards. That was big, those big machines. And then the women would do like the, what I was doing there, like the frames. And then on one part, which was ano-, I don't know what this machine was called, there was men and women doing that. So in there, there was no difference there in running those. I think it's draw frame they call them. And I think that, there was no, there was men and women running that. But what I did was just women. And the card was just men doing that, because it was too big. Women couldn't have lifted those things, they were so big.

**AL:** Now, during, well you didn't really get a break, right? Is that true?

**CB:** No, we took our own break. We, because I used to smoke. Can you imagine? Used to smoke.

**AL:** So you could just leave whenever?

**CB:** And there was like a little cabin that they had made, right in the middle there of the floor. Can you imagine how dangerous that was.

**AL:** Right in the middle of the room?

**CB:** Yes, in the middle of the room, there was like a little cabin there and we used to go in there. Can you imagine that? We used to go, take a break and go in there, sit and smoke and talk. And I mean, it's full of smoke in there, with that cotton. How dangerous that must have been. We used to smoke right there.

**AL:** Yeah, it does sound pretty dangerous.

**CB:** Yeah, but before then, we weren't allowed to smoke in there. I remember I used to work on the third shift at one point, and it was on the fourth floor, people used to go

on the roof.

**AL:** To smoke?

**CB:** (*Unintelligible phrase*), yeah. And you couldn't get caught, though, you know, you weren't supposed to do that. But with the little, then they made those little cabin there, people used to smoke in there. Can you imagine?

**AL:** What about like going to the bathroom, did you just take (*unintelligible phrase*)?

**CB:** Oh, you just did that whenever you wanted, you know. And they had like these things that you, you could even cook. They didn't have microwave then, but they had like these little oven, you could put your food in there. We used to bring jar and cook our own food. Oh yeah, you see people walking around all the time, because you took a break whenever your machine was going. So it wasn't that bad, I don't think, mill work, it wasn't that bad.

**AL:** Did you ever have any women that were pregnant working?

**CB:** I got pregnant, I was working. And when I got pregnant for my oldest, I think I was laid off, I was about five months pregnant when I was laid off, because there was no more work, so they laid me off a little bit. And then when I came back I was seven months, and the super came over and says, you know, like he says, it wasn't that, you know, he says, I think you should go down there and tell them that you should quit, because you're seven months pregnant. And see, he says, like if, those things that I lifted, it wasn't too bad like this, but when you go up like this, I don't want you to hurt yourself.

So I says, but I was about six and a half month, and I says, but I'm not seven months. Because the insurance wouldn't have paid. He says, just tell them you're

seven months. And when the baby come, you could be late. The heck with that, he says, I don't want you to get hurt. So it's like, I was pregnant. They let you work up til seven months.

**AL:** And then they gave you some type of insurance?

**CB:** That, we were insured, they paid for our hospital and, you know, the baby. And then I think they gave you up to six weeks to come back. But I never went back.

**AL:** You never went back after your first (*unintelligible word*)?

**CB:** No, I stayed home, took care of my kids.

**AL:** Do you have any difficult or hard memories of working?

**CB:** Yeah, my finger, I lost my finger. That was my thing with that, you know, that was my hardship, just losing my finger.

**AL:** Did they give you any (*unintelligible phrase*)?

**CB:** Yes, they gave me comp. And they kept me because they had this plaque, no accident, that they wanted to, and I went in there and I did like, I couldn't do my work, so what I did, they put me downstairs on a bobbin machine, they said, work when you want. So it's like, if I didn't want to work I just walk around, did what I want. And then they gave me comp for that, too. Yeah, yeah, they were pretty good about that.

**AL:** And did the supervisors treat men differently from women?

**CB:** No, no. We had bet-, well for myself, I had a very good supervisor. I still remember that man, he was a very, very nice man. So he'd treat everybody the same.

**AL:** That's it. Thank you.

**CB:** You're welcome.

*End of Interview*

*brodeur.cecile.smwoh.wpd*

Smoot: 007

✓  
Longley  
NO

**MUSEUM L-A**  
**35 CANAL STREET, BOX A7**  
**LEWISTON, MAINE 04240**

**NARRATOR INFORMATION FORM**

Date 2/26/05

Munday @  
12

Name Brodeur, Gail

Phone Number 783-5052

Address 2 Hartley St, Lew \* off Sabathus St.  
right turn

Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_  
Sams Stearn  
grey building  
C. Brodeur

Mill worked at Bates

Position held Card Room Yrs 10

Special activities involved in (i.e.-union activity, sports, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_

Briefly describe any special experiences during the time you worked at the mills (i.e.-war time, strikes, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_

Where were you living then? Anything special about that? \_\_\_\_\_

Can you suggest someone else to be interviewed? Please give name, address and phone number, or how we might reach the person. \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer will be \_\_\_\_\_

SMW04#007

**MUSEUM L-A**  
**PHOTOS, DOCUMENTS, ARTIFACTS AVAILABLE**

Name of Narrator/Lender/Donor Cecile Brodeur

Address 7 Hartley St, Lewiston MS 04240

Phone Number (207) 783-5052

Name of Interviewer Amelia Larsen

Materials Available \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

When material should be picked up \_\_\_\_\_

X Signature of Narrator/Lender/Donor Cecile Brodeur

Date 3/14/05

Signature of Volunteer picking up items Amelia Larsen

Date 3/14/05