SHOE WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE

Barney Charest
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu) April 4, 2007

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Barney Charest, on April 4, 2007, and this is an oral history interview, the very first one, for the Shoemakers Oral History Project, for shoe workers, maybe is a better word, I'm not sure. You can talk about that a little bit. So I want to start by asking you to give me your full name.

Barney Charest: Bernard Gerard Charest.

AL: And where and when were you born?

BC: I was born in Lewiston, October 12, 1946.

AL: And did you grow up in the Lewiston community?

BC: Yeah, actually a good part of my life was, I grew up in little Canada, right across the street from the shoe shop where I finally worked in.

AL: And which shoe shop was that?

BC: It was Commonwealth Shoe, that was in the early '60s. How I started in the shoe industry actually is I got a job, I was fifteen years old, in a place called Maine Stamping, which was in the basement of Koss Shoe in Auburn, and it belonged to Mr. Koss, that owned Koss Shoe, his son-in-law's business. And I used to die leather by hand in the hand cut *(unintelligible word)* stuff for our biggest customer, which was Koss Shoe. And upstairs in the loading dock, there's a Mr. David Rancourt, and I believe his partner's name was Marchand, I'm not sure, but they owned, they had a small hand sewing factory they opened on the loading dock. And I used to go up on break time and stuff and watch and I was amazed, you know, it was just, to me it was just so cool, you know, to start with two chunks of leather and come out with something really pretty. I asked David Rancourt if he would teach me how to sew, and he told me that at the time that he couldn't afford, and I told him, I'll do it for free, on my time off and stuff like that, if you want to teach me how to sew, I'll sew your shoes. And he said okay, we'll go for it. And it was really easy for me, and I don't know why, but it, he told me, he says, I'm amazed, he says, I've never seen this before. So then he and Mr. Marchand went their own ways, and David went and opened up a company called Downeast Casual, and I went

to work for him full time as a hand sewer. I want to make sure that I'm not skipping anything in there. Oh yeah, that little factory there, that was on the loading dock, was actually horrible. There was no heat, the shoes used to freeze, actually freeze, and the toilet would freeze, we'd have to suffer with, we'd take gloves and cut the fingers off, so, but you had to start someplace.

AL: So at that time, in the early '60s is the time period we're talking about, were there lots of shoe shops in the Lewiston Auburn area?

BC: Oh yes, oh yes. At one time in Lewiston and Auburn there was over ten thousand hand sewers. Now there's maybe, working hand sewers, maybe forty. Now there was, oh, we can go down there, just in the Continental Building, across the street from the Saint Mary's Church, there was Commonwealth Shoe where I worked, there was two hundred, two hundred twenty five hand sewers. Upstairs there was Village Shoe, they had a couple of hundred hand sewers. There was two or three smaller shoe factories, and to my mind, they had maybe a couple of hundred hand sewers. So you were talking about five, six hundred hand sewers in the same building. And then there was Goulet Moccasin, and these, these, I'm talking about hand sewers now, how there was Downeast, Goulet Moccasin, Commonwealth Shoe, Billing, Arno Mocassin, these were all, Timberland was another one, LL Bean's was another one, they were fairly large companies. And then just the next building on down was, you had a lot of traditional footwear that was made. There was, what was it they made in the company? They made patent leather shoes, they were like king of the world of kids' tap dancing shoes and things like that, and that was a fairly large factory. I never really got into a lot of the traditional shoemakers until later on in my career, where I had to work with a lot of them for the job that I did, but there was Lounge Shoe and Falcon Shoe, there was Dexter, there was, companies made, right there by Dexter, their thing was Norwegian, for many, many, many, many years, the regular men's weejuns. LL Bean's, when they got into making most of their shoes, for casual shoes, boat shoes and things like that. Commonwealth Shoe, Billings Shoe, things were, Billings Shoe was more like WalMart, Commonwealth Shoe was more like Macy's.

The downfall of both of these was actually, one of the biggest reasons there wasn't direct competition from overseas back then, because we didn't have any. Every shoe we sewed was already sold. But back in the middle '60s or so, the women in the United States got feminized, because a hand sewn shoe is a casual shoe, and for many, many years, like the penny loafer, every girl in the United States wore a penny loafer, and then all of a sudden they were out of style. The imports that were coming in at that time, and the companies that were developing new shoes, were giving them a little class, making them pretty, and so the penny loafer went out. And we're talking hundreds of millions of pairs of shoes. So the weejuns, the hand sewn weejuns, the dress shoes, the Brazilians, when they started putting them on the market, Brazil, Columbia, a few factories started putting on the market nice fancy dress shoes. So, the hand sewns went from a dress shoe to a casual, in the large, large part of the market. So we just starved ourselves out of business. And then when these other countries

bought into the business of making shoes, they were brand new companies, so all of the equipment that they had was all brand new, state of the art stuff, and we were trying to compete with hundred year old equipment, and there's a lot of things we couldn't do that the newer equipment could, you know, the new machinery. So it was just a combination of a whole bunch of things that, and actually we priced ourselves out of the market, as far labor goes, as hand sewers.

In the early '60s, we made big money. I can remember bringing home three hundred, three hundred fifty dollars a week after taxes. Now in 1960, '61, '62, that was a lot of money. The average shoe worker was making forty dollars a week. A dollar an hour was the minimum wage, seventy five cents, eighty cents an hour was the minimum wage when I started, and I used to make five dollars an hour, six dollars an hour, depending. It was a really neat occupation, because if I wanted a raise, let's say if I needed some money next week, I'd shut my mouth, put my earphones on and sew more shoes. We actually controlled, you know -.

AL: Self motivation.

BC: Yeah, on a good day, if I really just did what I was supposed to do, work, instead of talking about fishing, hunting, women, all kinds of stuff, and sewed in between, if I went in, in the morning, and put my earphones on, I could sew forty five, fifty pairs a day, and which was way above average. The average was about thirty pairs a day for a hand sewer. But if, let's say I wanted to buy a new fishing pole, well first I had to talk my wife into it, she'd say no because we can't afford it, so I'd go make a little more money. All I had to do is just clam up and do it. It was really interesting, the person that really taught me, there's two guys who taught me how to sew. There was Dick McBride, which was probably at the time one of the best hand sewers in the world, he really was, he was good. And Marcel Grondin was one of the fastest hand sewers I've ever seen in my life.

AL: Were they both from this community?

BC: Yes. Sadly, Marcel Grondin died, he was mid-thirties, of a heart attack, and Dick McBride died just a couple of years ago, and he was in his seventies. But Marcel told me one time, he says, you can be fast and good, I'll teach you how to do that. And I did, I became a reasonably fast hand sewer, but probably one that, not to pat myself on the back, probably one of the best in the world, and I've been all over.

AL: And so you learned from some of the best?

BC: Oh, yeah.

AL: Can you talk about what it was about how they taught you that?

BC: Yeah, well the whole thing about hand sewing is hand coordination and depth perception. And Marcel was really good with, if you want to become fast at anything,

you have to eliminate all the wasted movement, and that's how Marcel taught me how to become a fairly decent fast, a fast hand sewer, is that every movement that I need accomplished. So you start knocking down the movement, if you start speeding up the time. And Dick was, taught me how to read the leather, how to feel it, how to, every piece of leather is different, it's a living thing, and he taught me how the leather talks to you, tells you what it wants to do, or how it's going to come out well. So by then we did a lot of the stuff by hand, like this guy fingering *(unintelligible phrase)*, a lot of that was done by hand. When you sew two pieces of leather together, they both, both pieces are at a forty five degree angle, and when you sew it together, it's supposed to make a really nice seam. Well, when you last the shoe up and you close it up, part of the vamp, what's called a vamp, the bottom part of the top part is called a plug, but you may have part of the vamp that's going to stretch more than the other part, because it is a living thing, so you have to, you over last it, you look at it and you feel it and everything, and you may have to cut some off this side, or purposely last it a little crooked, but there's things that you need to do that you've got to be careful, because leather has a memory. You put it on the last, you sew it up real nice and everything, and if you didn't do it right, you pull it off with a laster, it's called warp, the shoe's going to look awful, and you going say, oh well. So you have to learn how to, to listen to the leather, to what it's telling you, and you can make pairs of shoes that last forever. They're really, and the way that you punch with your awl, pull your stitches together, how closely they are together, the rule of thumb was five stitches to the inch, I mean, depending on what kind of leather that you use and stuff. If I was sewing some exotic alligator hides or something like that, five stitches to the inch, you'd be playing with fire, because the seam wouldn't be very, very strong. That leather had a tendency to dry up.

But gee, I remember back in the early '60s, some shoes were selling for two or three hundred dollars a pair. That was horrendous amount of money for a pair of shoes back then, you know, but they were alligator and crocodile and all kinds of stuff. And then, well I hate to say it this way, but the tree huggers and all them got into that, couldn't kill snakes and lizards anymore to make shoes.

But it went through an evolution process, it was basically fairly rough hand sewing when I first started, and then as we got better at what we did, we made more money. And the fact that the shoes were all sold already and there was little competition, they had to pay us well. But it's not somebody that you can take off of the street, put him on a bench and say, sew me fifty pairs of shoes today. First of all, I used to, later on in my career I was a, a trainer for Cole Haan, and *(unintelligible phrase)*, and we used to train all of the operations in the factory, but mine was more the hand sewing and stuff. And then another person was the making room, another person was the finishing room, and we had *(unintelligible word)*, and a *(unintelligible word)* that was the stitching. And the really good success rate of training a person to hand sew and having them stay would be like forty percent, that was really good. It's a really physically demanding job and it takes a lot of discipline. Some think they like it, and some people don't have it. You could teach them for the rest of their lives and they're going to sew crooked seams and make ugly shoes, because they don't see. You have to be able to see in your head, you know, in your mind's eye of what it's supposed to look like. You

also have to be the type of person to say, if I'm going to spend fifty bucks on a pair of shoes, I want it to be a good pair of shoes, not just get by. And you have to take some pride in what you're doing. So you can't just yank somebody off the street. It takes time, it takes weeks. If you get a hand sewer *(unintelligible word)* trained in ten, twelve weeks, you're doing well, but you got to pay him while you're doing it, he's not making you any money, you know, that's the company's viewpoint.

So we, Timberland was, back in the middle '60s these people, the guys who worked at Timberland, we were making four hundred or five hundred dollars a week, in the '60s, and we decided that weren't enough. It came contract time, we said, we're walking out. So we walked out and the guy that owned us, the owner, he says, I can't give you any more money, I'm right at the limit, don't, don't push it. And we said, oh, he's got all kinds of money. We walked out, he put a lock on the door, brought everything to an end, *(unintelligible phrase)*, we were out of a job, and we brought that on ourselves, we really did. It was a good company, they treated us well, and they paid us well. We just got greedy, just got greedy.

But it was like working at a circus too. I mean we had, like out of two hundred and twenty five hand sewers, I would bet there was one hundred and fifty of them that were between the ages of eighteen and twenty two. So come Friday afternoons when we got paid, oh my god, the bars and the clubs in town and things, it was a real circus, it was. And not all the guys could get along, you know, we'd see fist fights and all kinds of stuff, right at work. Because it was a really neat period. I used to drink a little back then, well, actually more than I should have. Commonwealth fired me like two or three times, and they'd call me up the next day. I got fired from Commonwealth one time, ten o'clock in the morning, at quarter past ten, I was working at Billings. It was like that.

AL: Because of your talent?

BC: Oh, yeah, I had it because of the availability of the job. See, they, they needed hand sewers, everybody needed hand sewers, and it's not something that you, so that, that, you're not going to hire, like I said, off the street, unless you luck out to have some guy that you know. And because I had that drink or two more than I should have on Fridays or whatever, that didn't make any difference to them, they had ninety more guys just like me. Oh, the vultures would come over to the club and get us Friday afternoons. Can you guys please come back to work, please? It was, it was a really neat job because you were like your own boss. I could, all of us, we could go in nine o'clock in the morning, or we could go one in the afternoon, and nobody would say a word, as long as you sewed your, let's say the shops said okay, the minimum we want is twenty four pairs a day, and I could do twenty four pairs in four hours, so once my twenty four pairs were done, if I left, I left, there's nothing they could say, because I'd done what I was supposed to. And when there was a lot, a lot of work, they used to say, come on, try eight hours, it doesn't hurt that much. But we'd be working and say, I had a friend of mine, *(unintelligible phrase)* dead fisherman, and he'd look out the window and say, it's too nice to work today, and out we go, we'd go fishing for the day. It was like owning your own *(unintelligible word)*, if you did your job, you did it well, and you did what they

asked. As the company started putting the screws on the hand sewers and the employees, other employees, because hand sewing was not the only good paying job. Factories were, the shoe industry was good to the city. We had nicer looking cars and toys than the guys that worked at the bank. Oh, we had a parking lot that Commonwealth and Billing and all that were filled up with muscle cars towing stuff. Like one of first cars I, I had a nice car, I bought it, I'd use a Charger, RT six pack, four hundred and ten flat head motor, a six thousand dollar car, but I paid eleven thousand dollars for my house back then. So six thousand dollars for a car was an awful lot of money, but it was *(unintelligible word)*.

But slow but sure, they all left for a variety of reasons. If you get into, like I said, LL Bean's made real, really nice casual shoes, and they were a small company, they were thirty five, forty hand sewers. And the Quaddy Moc was a huge company. Commonwealth I think was the biggest one. Commonwealth Shoe actually was Bostonians, and they branched off from the hand sewing and went to, they tried cordovan type leather and stuff, and artificial, breathable leathers and things, and, and that technology improved. Because I think they had the financial resources to do it, where a lot of companies here were small, smaller, well, they were a large shoe company, but they were started by people right here, like David Rancourt. He started Downeast Casual Footwear, which ended up eventually, ended up Cole Haan, which eventually was bought by Nike for like $130 million. You're talking a long ways for a little guy that, that started off in a shoe shop.

George Denny, that owned Commonwealth, that owned the Cole Haan, believe it or not, used to be a cutter at Augusta Shoe. And what happened with those, how that started was back in the 1920s and '30s, there was a company called Cole Haan in Chicago that made a really high end shoe. Now either Mr. Cole or Mr. Haan, one of them kicked the bucket before the other one did, and the other carried on. I believe Mr. Cole died first. Then Mr. Haan carried on until he became too old to do it, or didn't want to do it or whatever, and his family had nothing, they didn't want anything to do with it. So it just died out. They made a really high end product. I mean their shoes were really expensive, well made. So what George did, he did, was he bought the rights to the Cole Haan name for like two thousand dollars. And he used to cut shoes. Now there's an interesting part of my career, I mean, one of the best parts is that George used to cut the leather in the samples, and I used to work at a little shoe shop in Greene, and I worked for Danny Byron and his father, Roger. We were only about fifteen hand sewers. And George used to bring us his samples, and I would sew them, and Keith Hanson and this guy called Skip, Skips Lyons, used to do the finish work on them, and then George would receive and go sell his shoes, but he didn't go to WalMart or places that he would have never made, he went to Macy's and Saks and things like that and sold really high end calfskin shoes and things like that, nice stuff. And within a matter of fifteen, twenty years, he sold it for $120 million dollars. And I can remember lending George twenty bucks to put his gas in his car to get, to make it to the airport. And he looked so tired all the time. He's such a nice man. I used to tell him, I'd say George, can you pay me before you leave, you look like you're going to die here. He worked really hard, very intelligent man, very, but a nice man.

So, and that's how I was part of Downeast for many years, and then Cole Haan for many years, because as they progressed, they brought, I went with them. I'd say I probably sewed, sewed maybe fifty, see, at least fifty percent of all the samples he ever sold. He always treated me well, the company treated us well. They just, when the factories, when the bigger companies started going public and they had investors, then you have to answer to the investors, and the only way to do that is to stay on the black line. A perfect example of that is the Cole Haan factory in Livermore Falls. There's a style of shoe called a *(unintelligible word)*, a regular man's *(unintelligible word)*. If a hand sewer in Livermore Falls sewed fifty pairs a day, and there were a few that could, he would make roughly between a hundred and eighty, two hundred dollars a day. So the same shoe, the exact same shoe, we were sewing it when I was down in Mexico working in a factory called Corelli's, there they were sewing Cole Haan shoes, the exact same shoe, if a hand sewer sewed fifty pairs, same quality and everything, he was making about seventy, eighty dollars a week, and up here we were given nine hundred, a thousand for the exact same product. There's no way you can say no to a deal like that because, I hate to admit it, the quality that was coming out of the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, a lot of these places, actually the quality was better than what we were putting out, or equal. And when the quality that was bad is because you were paying four dollars for those shoes. But Brazilians, oh, they made beautiful shoes, Italians. It's hard to compete, at those prices you can't. And then of course, for us, in the shoe industry, took a wicked beating from the environmental protection people. They changed a lot of the tanning, because it was just polluting.

AL: *(Unintelligible phrase)*

BC: No, it's horribly, it's horrible, I mean they're using all kinds of heavy metals and stuff to, to process all of this, like the tanneries. So the Environmental Protection Agency says, you can't use chrome in there anymore, you can't use mercury in that anymore, you can't do this, you can't do that. So they had to change all the tanning processes, and as they were doing this they made a lot of not so good leather, if you want to put it that way. So the companies, self preservation for LL Bean's and all of these others, they decided to buy their leathers overseas, and before our tanneries caught up and all of that, and even then there's product that we had to let go completely. There was a kind of a leather that was, it was called chrome, then they'd stop, it wore like iron, they had to take it, they, they had to stop it completely. Because the thing was, I guess you could almost use that as one of these mass weapons of mass destruction or whatever, because it was that bad, actually to the point where sometimes it would make the people sick, the people that wore them because it had been lea-, leach into their pores, so it's understandably off of the market. But all of these, it takes years and years and years to develop tanning process, because you don't develop them tomorrow, and they fluctuate so much because of, you may believe it or not, if you buy your hides that come from a bunch of cows from Argentina, or you buy your hides from a bunch of cows in Texas, they're not going to react the same in the tannery. Your cows from Texas will be much easier to, to tan the hides, and you'll

come out with a better product, because they're better fed, their environment, there's all kind of stuff. Where they get brush cows from Africa, where they pick them up there when they can barely walk anymore, and then, and then you get leathers don't work well, they don't, like I said, it's, it's a living thing, it talks to you, it reacts to its environment and everything as it's coming along, because it's actually a living part of your product to a certain point, and then somebody *(unintelligible word)* and skins it, and then it ends up material. But it's, it's an amazing process all the way around.

The shoe industry in Lewiston and Auburn, though they was, once again, there was all of these big factories, but there was some really interesting characters in there too.

AL: I'd like you to talk about them, if you could.

BC: Well, *(name)* Feinstein, he was, he was an amazing man, and sadly to say, he's, he was Jewish and there was a lot of people back then, and even now *(unintelligible phrase)*, but there was a lot of people back then that, that were prejudiced, so they didn't like Jewish people. But he owned Arno Moc, which was, it was kind of a, I don't know if you're old enough to remember, but there used to be these little women's moccasins that you'd buy in like the Dollar Store and things like that, they were made out of cowhide and they had like little Indian beads on them. Okay, now ninety nine percent of these moccasins were sewn at home by women. They would stop by the factory, pick up their cases of shoes, and my mother did that for a long time, they'd pick up a case of shoes and bring them home, because by then working mothers, there wasn't that many. Mothers would stay home, feed the kids in the morning, send them off to school, and then she laced her moccasins all day. But what was amazing about Arno Moccasin was he was a prisoner in one of the Nazi camps, he even had the numbers on his arm, he was about that close to being dead for about a good part of his life, and yet he was still good natured, he was a kind man, he really was. One of the guys that we used to work with, his house burned down one time, they had nothing left. There was him and his wife and three kids, and nothing. All they had was his car. He was staying at his mother-in-law's house, and one night, knock, knock on the door, and the door opens, it's Arno and he had an envelope, and he told Roland, he says here, this is for you, if anybody asks you where you got it, don't say a word, he says. So he opened up the envelope, Arno gave him five thousand dollars, just gave it to him. And Roland says, you know, I can't pay this back. He said, I didn't ask you, did I? Which was really, really nice. But he didn't want anybody to know, because he was afraid that they were going to hurt his reputation.

And Mr. Koss, oh, he did a couple of things, but he was horrible. He used to go to the factory, now this is a five story factory, he had like eight hundred employees, and he'd stop at a rack and take off his suit coat, and he'd undo his tie, and roll his sleeves up, and pull tacks and do all, oh, he was horrible. And he'd jump right in there with everybody. One time it was so funny, he fired the Coke man. This guy come in and then he was delivering the Coke in the machine, right? And, and after he filled his machine and everything, and he's leaning against, all he had on was a t-shirt and jeans.

He's leaning against the wall, and he's watching us working. Mr. Koss walks by, looks at him and says, what the hell are you doing? And the guy says, watching. He says, I don't pay you for that, get out of here. So the guy says, cool. So once the guy left, I told Mr. Koss, I says, you know what? He says, what? I says, you just fired the Coke guy. He looks at me, says, I don't want him hanging around my factory anyway. He used to go, he used to go around picking up elastics, and then bitch at everybody that threw the elastics on the floor. And that factory was a golden factory until Mr. Koss got ill and his son Herbie took over. His son Herbie, sadly to say was, his interests were the strippers, the Holly, and horse racing and playing cards, and he burned it, and he gave that factory away at the card table, at the racetrack, eventually it closed. Koss Shoe made a lot of children's shoes, tons and tons and tons and tons of kids' shoes. They weren't expensive but they were well made. And he was another one, an immigrant from Europe, that came over during the second World War, because they were blowing away his country. And these people had lived hard lives, and they came over here and started growing businesses out of just sweat equity, they didn't have any money. They'd start off with little, tiny shoe factories, then the first thing you know they're *(unintelligible word)*. So Mr. Koss was really an example, David Rancourt was another one *(unintelligible word)*. You know this thing about that Frenchman doesn't hold water, not at all. Some of these guys were pretty smart.

At Commonwealth Shoe, I think probably the biggest influence on my *(unintelligible word)* and the other hand sewers was Mr. Bill Salinger. Now he's, oh, maybe in his eighties, and lives in Litchfield on a big old farm. But, can you imagine trying to take care of two hundred and twenty five kids? Actually, that's what we were. The work wasn't really what interested us. Bottom line to ninety percent of the guys was to have enough money to go out and chase women, and drink, and play cards, and have a good time.

AL: So it was more like a life style thing?

BC: Oh, completely.

AL: Could you talk about that?

BC: Completely, like okay, there used to be a guy like, this was a hand sewers week, Monday, I would come in, and a lot of them, ten o'clock or so, and by twelve thirty I was going *(unintelligible word)*, you know, hard weekend. It wasn't, it wasn't rare to get out of work Friday and not go to bed until Sunday night, you'd party all the time. So Fridays, used to be a little restaurant across the street from the, it was called Cedar Street Lunch. First of all, where the Good Shepherd building is on the corner of Lincoln Street now, okay, there used to be a gentleman that would go there, this was so cool, and he'd have his big briefcase full of money and his bodyguard, and this guy was like six feet nine, must have weighed three hundred pounds, had a big scar, I mean he was scary. But this guy used to cash our paychecks, because you didn't have time to leave the shop for the bank, do all this and all that, and a lot of guys didn't want a bank

account. So they didn't want to pay like twenty five dollars or twenty dollars or whatever it was to open an one up and go there and all that, and I mean, just, just cash my check. So this guy used to cash our checks, he'd charge us a buck. So we'd go and, and he'd cash a lot of checks, so we'd go and cash our check, give him his dollar, and then go to Cedar Street Lunch and have something, fried clams or something, and a couple of beers. And then inevitably we'd end up, there was the Hotel Holly, there was the Royal Hotel, the Holly had the sleaziest dancers you have ever seen in your life. And then one of the prerequisites for a girl to dance there was she had to be fat and ugly, and we went anyway. There was the Hotel Royal, and then there was all the clubs.

AL: The social clubs?

BC: Along lower Lisbon Street and on Lincoln Street, there used to be, where the fire station is on Lincoln Street now, right across the street there used to be a bar joint called Little, Little Tiny's, and then there was the Hurricane Club, and the Lewiston Social, and of course there was the Manoir, the sleaziest bar in the state of Maine. There, every, every tough guy -.

AL: What was it called?

BC: The Manoir. Every tough guy in the state of Maine would go to the Manoir just to prove how tough he was. There were fights there all the time, but it was a really neat place to pick up girls. And girls used to come from all over, I'd say from all over, girls would come from Turner and Hartford and *(name)* and all of that and everything, because you had a lot of young men with a lot of money. These, these guys were all beer drinking and dancing and having a good time, got a couple, three hundred dollars in their pocket.

AL: And was the South End Club there *(unintelligible word)*?

BC: Oh yeah, the South End Club was there, but there was a lot of places there that don't exist anymore. There was like Gary's Tavern, and there was Lucky's, all of these little bars and stuff. Simone's Hot Dog Stand was always full of hand sewers, because George was, was a really neat guy, George Simone.

AL: Yeah, he was.

BC: Oh yeah, and he took care of a lot of us, he really did, because sometimes some of the kids would get to drinking more than they should and their world would fall apart, and they needed a hand. Babe Melanson, in the Manoir, I don't know how many paid, how many, his mother used to run the hotel part, I don't know how many young men she'd let stay, give them a room for a week or two and not even charge them. It was like that back then. There was 7-Eleven Pool, that used to have a lot of hand sewers. There used to be hand sewers that get out of work at night, no weekends, they'd go

over to 7-Eleven Pool and start these games of nine ball, where you could really make a lot of money, or lose a lot of money. And these games would start like Friday afternoon at twelve, one o'clock, and last until Monday morning, and when one guy go broke, another guy would jump in. But then, in card games, Lewiston Social, I've seen card games where these guys would be betting a thousand dollars and things like that.

So it was a really interesting time of life, because what a lot of people don't understand about the shoe industry, it's not just the shoe industry that it was, it was important, but the shoe industry made the city of Lewiston. For every hand sewer there was, there was at least six or seven people that worked in affiliated businesses. You'd take like, you got stitching at Commonwealth Shoe that has two hundred machines, you need somebody to take care of those two hundred machines. You need someplace to buy the parts. You need someplace to buy some new ones. You need the people that supply you the thread. You need the people, you know, it just goes on and on and on and on. You have, like let's say Lounge Shoe, okay? They made women's high heels and things like that. And then you had Maine Heel that made the heels for Lounge Shoe, and then you had Maine Stamping that cut the leather and everything and assembled the heels for Maine Heel that sold to Lounge Shoe that, and it just kept going on and on and on like that. So for every shoe shop job there was, there was maybe five other jobs out there that were depending on this. And that is what really hurt cities of Lewiston and Auburn was the global effect. You know, you can say okay, we just laid off two hundred hand sewers, the factory's closed, you lost two hundred jobs. You didn't lose two hundred jobs, you lost six, eight hundred jobs.

That's, that's like, I've got some people that you need to meet and to talk to that's going to be really interesting for you. Because you take like a Morris Cote, he's been in the shoe industry since like the '50s, early '60s, but in the supply part, sewing machines, equipment, hand sewing tools, everything, and that's a person that you would need to talk to. Other people, Dick *(name)* was a hand sewer, probably one of the fastest hand sewers that ever lived, he was the Wayne Gretzky of hand sewing. There was ten thousand hand sewers, and everybody knew who he was, and right, and now he's a very, very wealthy man that runs a big business. He'll be able to let you in. He, he's going to be able to take you from being a lowly hand sewer to how hand sewing allowed him to be where he is now.

AL: And what's his name?

BC: Dick *(name)*, his name's actually Frenchie, and he owns Modern Woodsmen.

AL: Yes, okay.

BC: Here in town, and they're what? Eight, ten financial advisors, and a million dollar business. And other people, like David Rancourt is someone that you really need to meet. The people, like Edmund Allen, now he hung on the longest though. You say how the shoe industry here, how it impacted here, there used to be eighteen hundred shoe factories in the United States. With the closing of this one, there's thirty four left.

Now if you take ten of those eighteen hundred, figure a certain average of employees, and multiply that times six or seven, you know how many people lost their jobs in the market in general, and in the business itself. It's unbelievable, it's just really a sad thing, because hand sewn shoes are the best made shoes in the world. If they're sewed right, they'll outlast any other product that you put on the market. But as far as here goes, here in Lewiston, I can say Commonwealth was owned by Bostonian, which was eventually one of the General Dynamics companies, which is big, okay? There was Timberland, which is also very big. But you had companies, I mean *(unintelligible word)* companies here in town, like Knapp Shoe. Knapp Shoe made the best workboots in the world, and it was a huge factory, and eventually they just lost to foreign competition. I kind of hate to put it all on foreign competition, because it's an easy out, it really is. You have to sometimes look in the mirror and say, hey look, it's my fault, it really is. The state of Maine in general was very hostile to the shoe industry.

AL: In what ways?

BC: Not, not, not intentionally, okay? Electricity, why couldn't, why couldn't the state of Maine say, okay, shoe factories, you charge them so much and that's it? But they're paying the highest power rates in the country, they're paying the highest heating rates in the country. Everything is more expensive here in Maine to begin with. If they would have given these people a break, that's what I never understood, see, they had existing factories that were working well and didn't give them a hand, and yet they want to bring in a new, new company, and they give them tax breaks and subsidies and things like that. It seems to me like they bit the hand the fed, that fed them. My grandfather used to say, if you don't want to get hit by a car, don't lay down in the road. That's basically what they did is, is they let themselves get hit.

AL: I'm going to pause right there and flip the tape over.
End of Side A
Side B

AL: We are now on side B of the interview of Barney Charest, and the date is still April 4, 2007, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. And Barney, we were talking during the break about what we're going to talk about next, and sort of take it from your perspective, where you started and where you went throughout the years, so take it away.

BC: Oh, it's going to be a cool trip. Like I said, I learned how to hand sew at, from Dave Rancourt, in the little shop on the loading dock at Koss Shoe is where I started. There was an ad in the newspaper, Commonwealth was looking for hand sewers, so I went there and applied for a job and got hired, where I got adopted by a guy named, Dick McBride and another guy named Marcel Grondin, where they thought that my natural ability was rare. And the fact is, they said I was very good. And I think, maybe for their own ego or to really help me out is always been a question for me, I think that

they felt that if they could be involved in teaching somebody that they thought could really go somewhere, was important to them in their careers. But they both did an excellent job, they were both really nice men. And I worked for, I was working for Commonwealth, I worked for them for, let's see, about three and half, four years. And in that time I went from regular hand sewer to a sample sewer, where most of my job for the whole day was just product development, sewing new shoes and things like that. And then I came home one day, had a letter from the Department of the Army to get drafted, and I ended up, I spent a little over two years in the army.

AL: What years were those?

BC: Sixty eight, '69. I did, actually, almost two tours of duty in Vietnam. Then when I came home, I went to work for a little factory in Bowdoinham, called Sir-Gal. We were only about twenty hand sewers or so, and I'd been out of hand sewing for awhile, and they hired me the day I applied for the job, I sewed a couple of shoes, they said, you're in, start today if you want.

AL: How do you spell Sir-Gal?

BC: It was S-I-R dash G-A-L. The main product for them was boat shoes, and that was kind of a neat product, it was a washable boat shoe. You could take it, throw it in the washing machine, and clean it all up nice. And it was, like I said, a small factory, it was owned by a gentleman and his wife in Massachusetts, as I think it was just a pastime for them, or whatever. From Sir-Gal, Sir-Gal was probably run by the youngest plant manager that I ever worked for, his name was Keith Hanson. We became very, very good friends, fishing buddies. Keith was, or still is, one of the nicest guys you could ever know, but also really smart, I mean intimidating smart. So we, we were kind of a mix, where a kid who dropped out of high school ended up with a guy who talked about quantum physics and stuff, even before they thought it existed. But as far as managerial capability, the guy was great. And from Sir-Gal, I went to work at Downeast, for Rancourt again, Dave Rancourt. I got tired of the traveling to Bowdoinham and everything, and the work was slowing down a little bit, and I called Dave and he said come in tomorrow. So I went to work for him, and I worked for him for about eight years. Now, during those eight years, before it became Cole Haan, is, I went from starting off in the *(unintelligible word)* factory as a hand sewer, to the hand sewing foreman, the foreman of the hand sewing department, and product development, I worked with them, a lot, a lot, a lot. It was kind of funny too, because other companies used to borrow me. Dexter for one sent me, they borrowed me a number of times. The first time I went to work for Dexter, they sent me to England, and I spent about two months in England, sewing at different stores.

And then I went back to Downeast, and they had decided while I was gone that they were going to, they sent me to school in Virginia, with a company called Curtain *(name)* Associates, which is a very prestigious engineering firm. There they had this teaching method, where you learn how, how to teach a person in increments. The

NAAC method of teaching is that you teach a job in increments, and every time you learn one increment a hundred percent, eventually you know the whole thing a hundred percent, and it's much faster to learn. It's like if I was teaching, okay, we're going to fix a car engine today, this is the muffler system, this is the carburetor, this is the intake, this is the radiator, this is, it gets very confusing. But if I say, this is the radiator, this is how it works. Tomorrow, this is the carburetor, this is how this works. And you break it up like that, it is a much, much faster learning process. It's been around since the 1940s. We opened up a training vestibule at Cole Haan. I was the teacher for the hand sewing and that end of the thing, and there was a gentleman from New Jersey, Angelo, that was in charge of teaching the making jobs, the ORL stitching, and the eagle seat and all of that. And then there was Connie Brown, she was in charge of the stitching teaching. So we had to set up this whole training vestibule and everything, and we did really well, because we had over a ninety percent success rate and the retention rate was really up there, which was hard. That's why they opened up this school in the first place, is that people were just leaving. This OJT stuff doesn't always work, because it depends on who you get as a, as a teacher. If you get a person that's really willing to help you out and teach you, it's one thing. If you get somebody that says, I'm not going to teach you my job, the hell with that.

So, and then this was the time when the Kanban system of, of manufacturing came in, which was, which changed the shoe industry completely, was that, before you had the piecework operators that had their job, and let's say that you as a back stay stitcher, that was your job in the stitching room, well the person in front of you closed the backs and then you would get the case and you would put the back stays on. If that person hit a knot, something happened, machine broke down or whatever or, you would stop. It's not coming to you. Where the Kanban system was, every operator, we had to teach them the job that preceded their job and the job that followed their job, so they could either help to pull to the work down the line or help push it down the line. So it upped production. But every person had to know at least three operations, and that means that you can do the same amount of work with less people. So a lot of people lost their jobs in the Kanban system, but it is a very efficient system. It was developed by the Japanese, maybe in the, oh, the late '60s, early '70s, was when they started getting into this stuff. They were very more time efficient than we are, than we were back then anyway, because then, the nature of the beast back then was that you had a lot of people that had a lot of experience that grew up in a certain type of an environment, which wasn't being timed on their jobs and everything. Coming in when they wanted to and leaving when they wanted to was out of the question, because then, it still remained piecework, which was always to me a sad thing, because when you're young and strong and you do a lot, we really didn't know what we were doing, and then as we got older and got better, we also got slower, so you actually got paid less for doing the better job, which didn't, never made sense to me, but.

So anyway, from the training vestibule, and I would get lent out, and I went to England, the second time I went to England they had a, the big thing was New England would, a New England Christmas, Harrod's, which was quite an experience, and I spent I think six weeks there, sewing in their shoe department exhibition. They had made it

really nice, like log cabin, and I had a sit down bench, and I sat down and sewed, and people would stop and talk to me and ask me questions and see how it was done. And then once in a while, I'd talk one of them into trying it, and that's where I met Omar Sharif, was at Harrod's, *(unintelligible phrase)* doing his teeth and that smile, and it was really, really a nice gentleman. But it gave the people a chance to see really what hand sewing shoes were about. Because you get very, very little components to a hand sewn shoe, it's how it's assembled that really makes the difference. You go through, I'd say simply there's a lot of processes, like the saddles, collars, your back stays, and all that, they all need to be cut and split to a certain weight, and then you, then you, your vamping, your plug, which is the meat of the shoe, have to be a certain way and they have to be scarved and beveled, and it's a, if I remember right, the basic hand sewn shoe has like twenty one processes, twenty one different operations to finish, depending on the style. You can get them very ornate shoe with a lot of fancy stuff on it and everything would take more, and you can have a basic shoe that's only like three pieces, four pieces.

So I went from the training vestibule, and then they'd lend me out, and things like that. And then they said okay, they needed someone in Mexico. There was a factory, a satellite factory that, called Corelli's, *(name)*, Mexico. They was having a really hard time, really hard time, so they asked me, they said, would you go down for a couple of weeks and see if you can give them a hand. So I became, what they did was they made me quality assurance technical support person, an expatriate. So I went down there, and the factory was a mess, it really was, it was the making lines, and the sequencing and the making lines and things like that was bad. The hand sewing tools and everything they had was bad. They had nobody to teach the hand sewers. So I went down there and we got the factory going in the right direction, where a year later, which my three to six weeks turned into four years, but a year later we were making, the hand sewers and the factory workers were making forty percent more than when I got there. We never gave them a raise. We were making three times the shoes they were making and we didn't hire anybody, we just, rearranging the making lines, things like that.

So I spent six weeks there and I went back to Cole Haan in Livermore. They had closed the Lewiston factory then and I had, and they had transferred me from Lewiston to Livermore, and we opened up the training vestibule there, when then they send me Mexico, I came back, I was back two weeks, and Mr. Corelli called up from Mexico, said send Barney back, send him back now. So they asked me, they said, do you want to go back? I said, how long? Who knows? And I ended up spending a little over four years there. While I was there, we opened up two other factories. I trained a little over a hundred hand sewers, from knowing nothing to being a productive hand sewer within three months, and the retention rate was just great. But there was no place else to go, so I can't pat myself on the back for that. But there's a little factory we opened up in Las Staca, where we ended up with thirty, thirty five hand sewers, that was, they said that they wanted two thousand pairs of shoes a week for the first year or something like that, and then we ended up, we were given, within in six months, seven thousands pairs a week of acceptable shoes, so they were all tickled pink.

There are some interesting stories behind the happening in Las Staca. It was in an area that was very dangerous for me, and Nike even. By then, Cole Haan had been sold to Nike, and Nike made me sign a release where they weren't responsible for me after work, if I didn't play by the rules. I had a motorcycle, I put a little over ten thousand miles on that motorcycle in Mexico, and I would be out like in the middle of nowhere at eleven o'clock at night. There's a lot of stockholders near a town called, *(name)*, where the population of *(name)* would go from twenty thousand people to fifty thousand people within a couple of weeks, but those thirty thousand people were all migrant workers, and some of them were some tough cookies, dangerous people. So that was an interesting project.

I had also, was borrowed by Dexter. I went to England a second time, and sewed at a whole bunch of different stores for this gentleman named, Nickels, Walter Nickels. He owned, I guess it would be the equivalent of, of Payless for him, and so he had exhibitions in a whole bunch of stores. And it was fun because they were quaint little shops, in old England. It was really nice. But I think my strength was that I connected well with the people. It wasn't just, it wasn't just mechanics. I think it showed that I enjoyed what I did, and, and it made it interesting for the people.

I got sent to Japan, which they were amazed at this. It was a private showing, and this was really fancy, big stuff. I mean I went to the penthouse club and all of that. They took us to a restaurant one day that was like a hundred tables, and we were the only people there. They rented the whole restaurant just for us. We were treated like kings. But it was a special showing for companies that sold shoes. It would be like I was sewing for the shoe buyers from Sears, the shoe buyers from Macy's, the shoe buyers from all of these different companies, and I had a really nice setup there. These Japanese people, this was in Tokyo, and then, then these, all of these Japanese men were all surrounding me and watching me sew, and all of that. It's a fallacy that these are all little people. Some of these guys were big men, let me tell you. But they were really, really into it, it was almost like paparazzi, the pictures that they took, unreal. But they asked a lot of questions, almost every single one of them ended up trying it and all of that. But after ten days, they had taken a little over $4.5 million in orders, so they said that my trip was very successful, very successful, so they kept borrowing me. And, which was really neat for me because I had a chance like, like when I was at Harrod's, right across the street is the Museum of Natural History, just down the street a little bit is the queen's castle and all of that. There were some funny things that happened. I asked one of the Beefeaters guards if I could see the queen. He explained to me that she was out, because the flag was half down, but he said, I'll be back, and when he came back, he gave me an invitation to see the queen. I thought it was so cool.

But to get back to *(unintelligible word)*, they sent me basically as shows go, Florida, Texas, California. There was an opening for a whole bunch of stores, what the hell were they named? I can't remember, that was a long time ago. They had big shopping centers and stuff that opened up, in like Denver, Colorado, Napa Valley, Silicon Valley, places like that, then I would go sew at these openings and stuff. I got sent all over the place. The expatriate thing I ended up, I worked in the Dominican Republic. Now, they sent us to the Dominican Republic basically as technical support,

quality assurance. Quality is a funny word, it all depends on how bad they need the product. If there's a lot of orders, then the shoes have got to go. The quality fluctuates no matter where, no matter what product it is. Well, you'd say, well these normally don't go, but get out of here, you. It was mostly not understanding the concepts of, of, of workflow, a decent workflow. You had some of these factories that, that they'd have, like the shoes would go down the line, and then all of a sudden they'd be coming back this way, and then they're that way, and you're wondering, why are you doing this. Or, in especially South America, Mexico, the making lines and the manufacturing is where we really hurt ourselves up here. They work hard down there, and they do the best they can, but they needed to be taught. That's like you giving the guy a gun for the gunfight. Once we taught them the logical sequence of the manufacturing of certain products, and how if you go from one product to another, you need to change your making process, it's actually less time consuming and will make you more money if you do change it, instead of trying to zigzag back and forth in the factory. So by teaching these people, we gave them the ammunition they need to sink our boat. But the Dominican Republic was mostly technical support and stuff. Haiti and Puerto Rico, sad to say, but my job was to close the factory, or help close the factory, because believe it or not, even at the difference money wise, even the difference between paying a person here to do it and a person there to do it, there was still somebody cheaper than the person there.

Nike can think, Nike opened up a factory, it was unbelievable, Nike, Nike opened up a factory in China, and I can't even pronounce it anymore, but anyway, I never could while I was there, but we manufactured twenty five thousand pairs of shoes, of sneakers, the first day of production, in this brand new factory, and it worked out that we were paying them thirteen cents a day. A day. And we were selling those sneakers for a hundred and forty five dollars a pair. All said and done, we could make a pair of sneakers in China, ship it to the United States, put it in the store, for nine dollars. We had to pay twelve dollars an hour here, just for the person to make it, that's not counting all the materials and everything. And in China, it's very interesting how they built the factory. They had this big nothing, and after they built the factory, huge four story thing where they got buses inside and everything, and then they go around the countryside and build, and build a city around the factory, and tell people, well you're leaving town, you're coming to work for us, and away they go. It's, it has a lot to do with the prices and the type of product and all of that stuff.

So from there, as my career started getting really interesting, interesting, is in Mexico, I became a really big part of the product development, and what Cole Haan was all about, hand sewing. We were maybe six men involved in that, but there we had the CEO, John Donnelly, very, very, very knowledgeable, nice man, that was a charm to work for. There was George *(name)*, the owner, but then down the line, as part of the overseas wing, there's myself and a few other guys that were basically, I would say, in charge, but responsible for the quality and the production and meeting the delivery dates and the materials coming in. So I being the, the physical presence down there, there was, then I inspected all the incoming materials, made sure that the leathers were all they way they were supposed to be, and had all of the stress tests and things taken, and took general health of the product. If they started getting more returns, then I'll just

find out why, maybe they're cooking them too long or whatever, because the hand sew, the hand sewn shoes all go into a dryer and you have to be, the person handling the dryer has to be pretty good. If you pull the shoes out and they're wet, when they dry, they'll warp, if they're off the lattice. If you leave them too long, the leather cooks too long and the seam won't hold, the shoe will fall apart. So you may have ten styles of shoe in there, in the dryer at the same time, they all got different types of leathers. So the person handling the dryer has to be pretty knowledgeable of, of when it's dry and when it's not. I mean there's testing meters and stuff, but you all have to take into consideration the humidity level, the temperature in the room or whatever, because the shoes, when you pull them out of the dryer, they, they will actually continue to cook until the last cools off. It's like when you're cooking something on the stove, when you shut the burner off, don't think it stops cooking. It will stop cooking when it cools off, not before. Until then, it just keeps cooking. Dryers do the same thing with the shoes.

So as, as my technical career anyways, they kind of took me along the corporate ladder type thing, which I didn't like at all. I would maybe got further if I'd did a little more backing down, but a lot of, there's a number of times where I stood up for what I believed in, even if I was in another country. This is one thing that made me always really happy about my position was that, like when I got into Mexico, *(unintelligible phrase)* the heel department, and the women using this cement to cement the heels together and there's a big skull and crossbones on the can. And it says on the can, do not use if you're pregnant or whatever and everything, and you're looking, there's like nine pregnant women in there and it's, it's telling you on the thing that they're going to make birth defects. And you're looking, there's no ventilating system, they're not wearing gloves, they're not wearing, and just, so I went in there and I told them, I said, okay, close the department, you girls go home. And they all started crying, oh, and I told them, we're going to pay you at home until we can bring you back. They're going to keep getting paid. And they said, wow, you're going to pay us to do nothing? I went, yeah, it's not your fault. And the owner of the factory came over and he says, you can't do this. I said, you want to bet, you want to bet, you're not going to subject these pregnant women to all of these chemicals and stuff, and all of these people to these vapors, you're going to put in exhaust systems, and you have to put in guards over the moving parts, and you're going to do what you have to do to make this a safe working environment, then they'll come back, not before. I was able to do that across many factories across South America, and sometimes Nike would go through the roof, and they'd say, we need the shoes. I don't care, they need their kids in good health. I'm not going to kill some baby or make him a cripple because you need an extra pair of shoes. What's the matter with you? So a lot of times we'd have confrontations, but ninety percent of the time I won. I even threatened one time, I told them, if you don't do it my way, I'm going to send it to 20-20, then they'll put it on the tv. They said, you can't do that. I said, watch me. It's a *(unintelligible word)*.

They sent me in all, I went to Italy, Milan, Italy, Florence, Italy, three times. They were very prestigious events, some of the best shoemakers in the world were there. I used go to the big shoe convention in Las Vegas every year, *(unintelligible phrase)*. And like I said, all over the United States. Some of the funny things is, I sewed, I

sewed, let's see, sets, it would be twelve pairs of hand sewn shoes for the Barnum and Bailey elephants, because when they used to walk on the street, on the tar, in the parades, they were so hot, it was too hot, so we made them some boots. I got their names and their measurements and all of that stuff, it was really cool. Also, Prime Minister Trudeau up in Canada was wearing a pair of shoes I sewed for him. Oh yeah, so it's kind of, kind of interesting that my shoes ended up in some of these people's hands.

But I was in Italy, and I was at Germany, Dusseldorf, Germany, for four months, four and a half months. They were just getting into hand sewing. The guy that was opening up this little hand sewing factory, the gentleman that was opening up, was going into custom ordered shoes, orthopedic shoes, where people would come in these various stores and they would make a plaster cast of their feet, and then from that plaster cast, they would make them a pair of custom shoes for people that had a problem with their feet, like that *(unintelligible word)*, things like that, or birth defects, or whatever. And we made some really nice shoes. And we made a pair of shoes for Arnold Palmer, the golfer. He's got one foot smaller than the other one, yeah, he does. One side, if I remember right, his left foot, his left foot is like a nine, and his right foot is like an eight and a half, or an eight. There was quite a bit of difference, and we made like ten pairs of special golf shoes for, it was Arnold Palmer. So, also while I was there, I sewed at this international trade show that they have over there. It was more like clothes and shoes, apparel, everything from sunglasses to purses to high heels to.

Anyway, it was funny because they tortured me down there. Maybe I shouldn't talk about this, but it was funny, because where, where I was working, I could see behind the curtain of the runway, where the models used to model the clothes, and I could see into the trailer, where they used to change their clothes, so I spent like two weeks of watching naked women. It was hard to concentrate, and I was working with some sharp instruments, so I had to be careful. But one day the girls came out, there was like six of them I think, they were watching me hand sew some of the models, and we were talking and everything. They invited me out to dinner with them Friday night, so I went out with six gorgeous women into a restaurant. They bought me lunch. It was, they went *(unintelligible word)*. One redhead from Australia was cute as a button, but she was the funniest person I think I'd ever met in my life. I really had a good time.

To get back to the working part, the longest stretch I did was in Mexico, four and a half years, almost. Brazil, we opened up two factories down there. They weren't big factories, but they were good factories. What, what happens is that when you start working with these people, there's where sometimes my work would get really complicated, is that these countries will allow you to build a factory in their country, give you breaks on taxes or whatever, and help you, but you have to build the factory where they tell you to put it. So they'd open up the factories in these really poor areas, these places that need the work, which necessarily, which most of the time they're not metropolitan, they're out. In Nicaragua and in Honduras, they're out in the middle of the jungle, so sometimes, during the rainy season, you've got water up your nose or whatever. Or you go to India and, and in India it's one hundred and twenty five degrees and dusty for half of the year, and the other half, you've got to swim to everywhere you

go. And then the living conditions are really bad. I spent a lot of places where you shut the light off at night and could hear the cockroaches running across the walls and scorpions and snakes, and so it, it was a little difficult. The food was bad. But I enjoyed it so much, because I could help these people out, I really could, I could make a difference in their lives, and all the time doing something that I enjoy. I always tried to get across to the people I was teaching, and for most of them it was easy, to take pride in what they did. But that led me in my career, anyway, that, further up at Cole Haan, where I started as the lowly hand sewer at Downeast in a loading dock, that I'm representing $100 million company in countries all over the world, as being borrowed by companies. That you know, it kind of bumps up your ego a little bit, sometimes.

The enjoyable part was the people that I met, the work that I did, and helping these people out and make a better living, I have oh so many stories about. When I left Mexico, they closed the factory of four hundred employees for six hours to give me a going away party, invited everybody. That is something, that is something. I was godfather to some kids, and best man at weddings, and also godfather at funerals, and things like that, the one that'll pay the casket and things, because they can't do it, they just don't have the money. I had women that worked for me at Corelli's that rode forty miles into work and forty miles back home at night in a cattle truck. And when they got home, they had eight, twelve, sixteen kids, no running water, no electricity, no, and a husband that's not going to cook supper, no, no. And these women, they're, they're thirty years old, they look like they're seventy or forty years old, they did. Oh, and I tried to make their lives easier, so when the cattle truck bit the dust, there was a bus, the factory paid for the bus, so if it was cold in the morning or because, well, they say it's cold, getting down forty degrees, fifty degrees. Fifty degrees in the back of a truck, going sixty miles per hour, is cold. So we rented a bus. It was things, like I got a doctor for the factory, used to come twice a day, a week I mean. He'd come Tuesdays and Thursdays. If anybody was sick in the factory or whatever, they'd go see the doctor for nothing. If they needed medicine, for nothing. If they needed a pair of glasses, twice a year, we'd have the guy come in, check their eyes, if they needed glasses, give them the glasses, the company would pay. In, it makes happier employees, they make a better product, but they worked as hard as the people here did. It's not their fault that the economies and things are just in a different world.

So I got to the point where they'd have these big meetings, corporate stuff and all that, and they'd invited me, they'd invite me, and I just never fit. I got along well with what I did, because I came from the same place they did, big family, working in a shoe shop. I knew where they were coming from, been there, done that. Where the company wants you to do, make all the samples, and then once you do this, once you do that, and your kids at home have got to eat. You have to meet a happy medium there someplace. So I understood them and they understood me. And once I learned the language, it was much, much easier. Once I learned how to speak Spanish, it was much, much easier.

And like I said, I probably would have done a lot better in my career if I did a little more backing down, but probably what helped me the most in my career was that I really believed in what I was doing, that hand sewing is not a job, it is an art. It's, it's like

an artist that'll paint something, or whatever. It's to take two pieces of leather and make something pretty out of it, that will last, that will make the person who bought it happy. Some of them, I think, are ridiculous. I went to South Africa. They sent me down there where the Zulus were. A man said, where are all the white people for the elections and stuff? I said, couldn't you pick a better timing? I had nothing to do with apartheid, none whatsoever, but you do what you got to do.

I finished in Mexico, my contract was up, and they wanted to send me to China again, and I told them, I said, nope, no way Jose, I'm all done. I left home, my son was ten years old, he's sixteen years old, I don't have the slightest idea of who the hell he is. It just, it was, it hadn't had its time. My daughter and my wife and my son came some places. And it was a great job in a way, because it, I had two weeks vacation every eight weeks, then they would fly my family anyplace in the world I wanted, and pay for everything, so Cancun, Acapulco, all over the place, whatever. Then my daughter went, she said, no, no more, I don't, I don't like it, dad, it's just I'd rather have you home. My son was mad at me forever, for a long time, because I was gone. Now he's married and, well he's got a girlfriend, they might as well be married, and he goes to work wherever the shipyard sends him, so he was gone to like Hawaii for three months, and down to Mississippi for four months, and Florida for this, and now he understands that sometimes a man's got to do what a man's got to do. So everything is cool with him now.

But as far as all of the shoe ind-, in fact in my life in general, it was my whole life for many, many years, and I went from making four dollars a week to fifty thousand dollars a year, which is quite a span for a guy that never finished high school. I'd go into these guys' offices and I'd see all of these diplomas on their walls and stuff, and I'd think to myself, how come they can't make shoes, they're all so smart. And, because a lot of them couldn't. We'd have these shoe designers that come in, and they had this beautiful shoe design and they'd say, this is what we're going to make. I'd tell them, good, go find me somebody that'll make you the machine to make it and we'll make it. As it is right now, it doesn't exist. What do mean, don't exist? Well, the shoe components, different shoe components, you get like ORL stitching, a little way stitching, things like that. Little way stitching is when you, you see, when you see workboots, things like that or whatever, okay, and you get the, you have the stitching that, around, around the edge of the sole, all the way around, okay, that's ORL stitching, very difficult job. If you have, if you design a shoe let's say that has ORL stitching, it's not going to be a dress shoe, it don't, because of the difficulty, everything has to be heavy duty. You'll be breaking needles and knives and, you know, if you tried to give it a, let's say, feminine look, nice shoe, a feminine look. So what they do is, they buy, you buy, it's ORL stitching, but in the ribbing. And they have a machine that just, you flick the shoe around and it will glue, it will glue it. So when you look at the shoe, it looks like it's ORL stitching, but it's not, it's a fake. So these guys here would come up with all these ideas that the machines didn't even exist, and you'd say, well gee, I'd like to help you out but, and that was my job. There would be product development, things like that, and have the hand sewing, and I have to tell them, okay. When you have cutting instructions, let's say you have two kinds of leathers in a shoe, and just your basic