MILL WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE

Constance Desjardins **MWOH# 040**
(*Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu*) April 11, 2006

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History Project. The date is April 11, 2006, this is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and I'm at the home of Constance Desjardins on Webster Street in Lewiston, Maine. Could you start just by giving me your full name, including your maiden name?

Constance Desjardins: Yes, good morning. My name is Constance Moreau Desjardins, and I'm here on Webster Street in Lewiston, and I'm glad to see you today and have an opportunity to review some of these good old times.

AL: And could you tell me your date of birth?

CD: It's April 12, 1928, and I have a birthday tomorrow.

AL: Happy birthday tomorrow.

CD: Well thank you very much.

AL: And where were you born?

CD: Right here in the city of Lewiston.

AL: And you grew up here as well?

CD: I grew up here. I had a grandfather who was a mechanic in the weave room at the, what was referred to as the Little Androscoggin Mill. Yeah, for many years he did that, and very, very proud of his work and his family.

AL: And what was his name?

CD: His name was Jean Baptiste Bosse.

AL: And did either of your parents work in the mills?

CD: My mom, yes, my mother, Aurore Bosse Levesque. She worked in the mill during the war, on a so-called victory shift, it was a partial second shift. I don't know, I, if I recall, I was going to high school at the time, and I'd come home and she'd get ready to go to work. My brothers were in the military, and it was, I don't know, four, six hour shift, something like that.

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

CD: I have two brothers, older than me. One of them has passed away, the other one is still with us.

AL: And what was it like growing up in Lewiston in the '30s and '40s?

CD: Well, the city is very different, as compared to today, and it was, it was easier to live in those days. You were close to your neighbors, you didn't have, most people didn't have a car, you walked. Didn't take the bus too often. I don't think we had busses, we had streetcars back then, and that was an experience. And, you know, people didn't lock their doors, you just went in, in and out. And all the kids were happy. And we played outdoors, because, you know, no television.

So we had a good upbringing. I went to, attended parochial school, and my brothers did, too, and that was pretty special. And it, it was easier, not as stressful as today. And everybody talked to everybody else, and it was, it was good. And you were poor, but you didn't know you were poor, so you didn't care. Didn't make any difference. Everybody was the same, you know.

AL: Now, did you do your shopping on Lisbon Street?

CD: Well, we had groceries, we had a grocery store in the neighborhood, and you went there just about every other day, because it was convenient. And another thing, you had a, the refrigeration to keep your food was so-called ice box, so your mom had to provide continuous ice, you had to buy from the local ice man traveling up and down the street with his ice truck and buy a block of ice that would fit the ice box, so-called, and keep your food refrigerated. And one of the consequences I guess, the ice melts, and you have to have a bucket to pick up the water. And do not forget to empty the bucket, because it overflows on the kitchen floor, it ruins the ceiling for the tenant below you, and you're in trouble.

So we did our shopping right locally, and yes, it was fun. You'd walk up and down Lisbon Street like you do today in the mall. You had everything you wanted down there, you had your clothing stores, you had your hardware, you had barber shops, beauty shops, a few restaurants. And you could buy sewing needles to washing machines, whatever you needed, it was there. That's why life was good, yeah. Didn't have much money to spend, but it was okay. It was okay. We just managed.

AL: And growing up in your home, was French the first language you learned?

CD: Oh yes, hm-hmm, yeah. We all spoke French, and then I learned English at the parochial school. It was St. Peter's and Paul's parochial school. And they just tore down that building there a few months ago, so that hurts. Because it was a lot of memories, and it was a nice, large building. I don't know if you had a chance to see it. And we were, oh, six, four, five hundred kids. A lot, a lot of students there. And it was convenient. You didn't have a cafeteria, you walked home for lunch, you walked home for lunch.

So that took care of the day. You'd carry a big school bag with all your books, all your papers to do your homework at night, bring it back. And everybody was, well, was at the same level. By that I mean, we had a uniform. The girls wore a little black dress, usually with a little white collar, it was referred to as smock, and the moms sewed the little black uniforms and, in September, getting ready for a new school year, you outgrow them or you hand-me-down if you had a sister, the uniform would be handed down. So everybody looked alike, there was no, hey, what's you wearing, you know, what are you going to wear tomorrow. Nothing, you just went to school and that was it.

Of course we had nuns, the teachers were all nuns. And the school was divided, the girls would be taught by the nuns, the boys and girls up to I believe was grade four, five. I could be confused. Maybe it was grade f-. Anyway, at one point they separated, the boys went to one side of the building, a wing of the school, we went the, the girls went the other. But the boys, their teachers were male, they were from, well, I don't want to say an organization but, it was the Brothers of the Sacred Heart that lived here in Lewiston that were teaching the boys. And the nuns were from the order of the Dominican nuns, they were teaching us, the girls. So it, it was interesting how things progressed as you got a little older.

AL: And what did your dad do for a living?

CD: My dad was, had a good job where, you know, his income was steady. He was, well, he was referred to as an insurance agent. He worked for the Prudential Insurance Company that sold life insurance at that time, so he was going house to house, collecting insurance, imagine that, and selling policies, and doing that in the twin cities. So there was never a lack of income because of, you know, getting laid off or a company making a change, or the Depression. So we were fortunate that way.

AL: Now, you got, did you go through high school, through the twelfth grade?

CD: Yes, I went, after the parochial school I went to, I went one year to the, well, it's the high school level, but there was no St. Dom's back then, but it was called Cours Supérieur, and the Dominican nuns were teachers. And then I went on to Lewiston High, and I graduated in 1946.

AL: And what did you do after that, before you went to the mill? You went to the mill in 1951.

CD: Between, after high school, before going to the mill, I was employed by the State of Maine at the State employment office located on Park Street back then. And I was with them, well, let's see, '46, '46 until '51. I was there about five years. And I enjoyed that.

AL: Now, what brought you to the mill?

CD: Well, when you work at the employment office, you come across all these job openings, that's the purpose of finding jobs for the unemployed. So I came across some information where they were looking for an office girl in the personnel office at the mill, and the salary was so much better than the State was at that time. At that time. So I went for an interview, and I was lucky to be hired, and I made the change. I left a good job to go to the mill because, you know, an extra fifteen dollars those days was a good step up.

AL: And so working in the personnel office, did you have contact with the president or other management people?

CD: No, I was at the Bates Division of the Bates Manufacturing Company, and the person in charge was the manager of the personnel department. So we weren't at all close to the dir-, you know, the president or the higher level of ownership or conducting business.

AL: Do you recall who the manager of the personnel department was at that time?

CD: At the time I was there, it was Martin Hastings. He's passed on now. He was our manager. And then there was another employee by the name of Mike Casey, and a third fella, Mr. Burgess, and I was the only female in that department. So we had a good group, got along very well and did our best to, you know, provide for the people seeking employment and keeping them posted on job changes or whatever needed to be done.

AL: And can you talk about what some of your duties were in the office?

CD: Well, I was a clerk, and I would mostly, as the people came in the office I would be like, act like a receptionist, I would greet them and find out their needs and try to get answers for them. And there was a lot of typing, a lot of handwritten reports, and a lot of filing. Gee, there was a lot of filing.

You see, the employees belonged to a labor organization, the Textile Workers Union, and that means that you have a lot to do with seniority and job posting. So the files were set up more or less according to that, so that besides being alphabetical by department by seniority, it involved a lot of details. So that made it interesting.

AL: And you said you did some translation as well? Can you talk about why that needed to be done?

CD: Well, there were times when the people seeking employment in a French Canadian twin cities needed a little help with, oh, maybe job titles or description of work. And in order to get a more accurate history of their background before coming to work the Bates Division, you had to know a little bit about their skills. And I was, I was asked frequently enough to sit in and translate their version of their past history to the interviewer who was putting down that information. So I found that fascinating, and I felt good that I could, you know, lend a little bit of help to a person who was sincere and needed employment.

AL: And also because some of the management people didn't speak French?

CD: Well, that was, you know, an advantage for me because I could be a big help to them for their lack of the French language. I don't say they didn't know, well, they didn't know enough to carry a conversation and get the translation between the two languages. And there was also times when the people retired, or got laid off, that I was instrumental in talking to them and explaining their benefits, which was, you know, new to, it was new information for those people and they preferred to hear it in French so they didn't get confused.

AL: Now, your time there, which was in the early half of the '50s, was the mill still very active?

CD: Oh, yes, the mill was going, well I'd say full employment, full production, and they had a lot of orders, and it was towards the, let's see, they had done away with the war emergency. Because during the war, they were fabricating cloth for the military, I believe. And that was over, and they were going into a new phase. They were doing a lot of, well, the bedspreads, which Bates is very well known for that, and they were also doing yard goods.

And the yard goods were very special, because they had come out at the time, I don't know if that was, well, invented, if the process was locally or not, but the fabric got the title of discipline, the word discipline meant it was virtually wrinkle free. And that was unheard of in those days, you didn't have to iron. If you made a dress or whatever you used the yard goods for, it was a nice cotton and it was disciplined. And it was sold here locally at the, at a store called Center's & Giroux, they used to sell those yard goods, and the people benefited in the area from that. So, found out that the, the company made money with that because it was first on the market.

AL: I understand at that period of time there were extra curricular activities that were sponsored by the mill, like bowling and hockey. Were you ever involved in the bowling league or anything?

CD: No, I don't, no, I was never in bowling. But I knew that the Bates hockey team, they sponsored hockey and that was very, very popular in the area. I never did go to hockey games. I knew one of the players, and I also recall that the team went to Europe and they played in Europe, and they were very successful. I don't know in what country, but. We used to have as employees, as a group, Christmas parties. But see, by working in the personnel office, we were only four people. But the other office in the Bates Division, the main office where Arthur Ford I believe was the manager, oh, there must have been, I hope I've got the right, they were many there. I don't know, I'll say thirty, maybe thirty ladies working in that department. So we'd go, the personnel office would join the other, called the main office at the Bates Division, and we'd have nice holiday Christmas party.

AL: And so did you get to know some of the women that way, or was there really any situation in your work life where you got to meet other women?

CD: No, I was mostly working right there in the personnel office. And everybody knew, the telephone operator, Evelyn, knew everybody and everybody knew her. She was a great lady, and very, very nice,

very informative, and good sense of humor. And I remember the nurse, too, the, can't tell you her name. Florence was it? I'm not sure. The Industrial nurse that took care of the people if you had a minor accident.

So, and there was another gentleman, Freddie, Freddie Banks, he handled payroll in the office. Again, in the office outside of personnel. And he, he was an interesting little fella. We'd always ask, what would you do if you get held up? Oh, he says, I'd give them the money, I'd give them the money, we're insured. In those days, you used, the gentleman would go to the bank, assisted by a lady, I can't think of her name, and they'd put the cash, your pay, cash, in an envelope. There were no checks. It was cash.

AL: Still when you were there.

CD: When I was there in, you know, between 1951-1955. The, I don't say the whole mill, I just know about the office people. And that got to be, you know, quite a bit of money, so they'd go to the bank and prepare that and bring it back, and then they'd come to your desk and hand you your envelope. But it was surprising, as you think of it today, to have all, go through all that cash, all the pennies in there and everything. So that was something you kind of remember.

I enjoyed the time I spent there. I was quite young, and I had a family, and you did your work, the, you know, the best of your ability, you were proud, and you come home and took care of your family and next day went back to work. And also at that time, the week of the Fourth of July, the plant would close. And most other businesses in the twin city would close for the week. That was it, that was vacation week. Take it or leave it, that was vacation week. And, you know, the barbershop closed, a lot of the small mom and pop stores, and it was very quiet in town because everyone was on vacation. So, you know, everybody went out to the beach, and every place was very, you know, packed with people. It was fun, and you just took it for granted, that's when you take your vacation, rain, shine or otherwise.

And then all the machinery would stop, and then on the Monday you came back to work, everything had to be started up again. It was unique, you know, comparing it to today. Back then it was the going thing, you accepted it and that's the way it was. But today, very different.

AL: And so what made you decide to leave your job at the mill?

CD: I left, I was transferred. After, I don't know how long, I was transferred from the personnel office to the converting office. Now, converting was a small office where you prepared the paperwork for this line that I mentioned earlier of the yard goods. The yard goods had to be sent to Rhode Island to a dye house where they, you know, put in the colors or the prints and all that, and you had to figure how much, oh what did they call it, I can't remember, of the raw product to finish the colors and the prints on the material. So I worked in that office, and at the time I left it was due to a pregnancy. And when I returned a few months later, the type of longhand work, the job I was doing, was practically eliminated. It wasn't the beginning of computers, but it was a system, I'm trying to think of the word, it was like a punch card system of sorts. And, so I stayed home for a while.

AL: And raised your family.

CD: Yeah, I have two boys, and raised the boys.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about your time at the mill that you think is important to add before we end?

CD: Well, I think we've covered a lot. Once in a while as part of my duties, I'll mention that, at the personnel office, you had to put up notices about the jobs. And I would walk through that whole mill, which is a huge building, on different floors, and I used to staple the notices on the bulletin board. And I

was five feet one, one inch, so there were times when I need a little help to get up with my stapler and put the, put up the notices on the board. So it was a little bit of a challenge, which sometimes I didn't care to do. But you remember those little things, yeah.

AL: Did your grandfather ever talk to you about his time in the mill, did he give you a sense of what it was like when he was there?

CD: No, no, no he didn't. I was just, no, I don't remember him doing that. However, before coming to Lewiston, to the mill town so-called, they lived in, my mother's family lived in Canada, and my grandfather came to the United States to find employment. And at that time he worked in Lowell, Massachusetts where they had many cotton textiles. And then he brought the family from Canada to Lowell, Massachusetts, and my mother was born in Lowell. And then they came and settled in, here in Lewiston, and that's where the, my mother was the oldest of three girls, and we've all been here in Lewiston ever since.

AL: Great, thank you very much.

CD: Well, I thank you, too, for the opportunity.

End of Interview
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