

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

Conrad Duchette
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

SWOH #039
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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at the Museum L-A. The date is January 29th, 2010, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Here today, I am interviewing Conrad Duchette. Conrad, could you start just by spelling your full name.

Conrad Duchette: C-O-N-R-A-D, for Conrad, Duchette is D-U-C-H-E-T-T-E.

AL: And where and when were you born?

CD: I was born in Lewiston, back in 1951.

AL: And did you grow up in this area?

CD: Yes, I did.

AL: You did, what were your parents' names?

CD: Cecile Duchette, she's from Canada, my father's Ludger Duchette, from Lewiston.

AL: And how does he spell his first name?

CD: L-U-D-G-E-R.

AL: Okay, and so your mother came from Canada as a young girl, or with her parents, or as she was, do you remember that far back?

CD: Not really, as far as I-

AL: But she was born in Canada?

CD: Yes, she was, yeah.

AL: And your dad was born here in Lewiston?

CD: Yes, he was, yeah.

AL: So what did your parents do for work?

CD: She used to work in one of the shoe shops, it's called Knapp Shoe, back then, and they used to make shirts in there, from what I understand, making shirts out of that building, back years ago, that's when she was working at that point, doing that (*unintelligible*)

AL: Right, and what did your father do?

CD: He used to work at a railroad station.

AL: Oh, did he have stories about that?

CD: He never told me anything about what he had done or anything. Just told me that part, he used to work at the railroad station, that was it.

AL: Oh, neat. So what was it like to grow up in Lewiston in the fifties and the sixties?

CD: We stayed in Lewiston for about, til the age of I believe ten or eleven years old, and then we moved from there to Turner and that's where I was, pretty much stayed til the rest of that time, til I grew up and got out of school, left school and came in Lewiston, found a job (*unintelligible*)

AL: Well, Turner must have been, or still is, fairly rural wasn't it, even more so than, felt like you were really out in the country, or were you -?

CD: It was, there was, you know, we had dirt road back then, and we said how many people that would go by on our street was, how many cars that would go up that way was how many, any cars, any buildings at all on the street at all whatsoever was very, very low key, more or less, that's -

AL: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

CD: Yes.

AL: How many?

CD: My father was married twice, so wasn't my mother, so total of us was twenty-five.

AL: Twenty-five.

CD: Yup.

AL: Wow.

CD: Fourteen girls in the first marriage and one boy, and ten of us in the second marriage, we had five boys and five girls.

AL: Oh, my gosh. So you had many, many sisters?

CD: Yup.

AL: So tell, I mean you sort of had your own community just at home

CD: It was busy, I can tell you that, yeah.

AL: See, I came from just having one brother. Could you talk to me about what it was like with being such a big family, in terms of meals and chores?

CD: We had, she used to make pots of food, you know, for us to eat out of, she would make bread, she would make her own bread, my father was involved with that as well, getting things done for us, yeah.

AL: Yeah, and what did you do for like social activities?

CD: We played games, yeah, we just, you know, we amused ourselves, you know, go outside. We didn't have much, because we were poor, we just played outside in the summer time, you know, whatever we could, whatever we wanted to do to play outside. We could amuse ourselves, we could go up in trees and run after each other and play hide and go seek and stuff like that, you know, to amuse ourselves.

AL: So what led you, did you -

CD: We also set a guide in the summer time that would help get the water from that, and the brook, drag it up home and, you know, they come do our guides for summer so we could have some food, something to eat from there. Help us out in that area.

AL: So you were expected to contribute -

CD: Yes, oh yeah.

AL: To help with the growing-

CD: Cutting the wood for the winter, you know, dragging it home and splitting it and cut in wood lengths for the winter and stacking it, getting it dried for the winter.

AL: Yeah, so what led you to go to the, in the shoe industry?

CD: Well, when I got out of school I was getting, I was eighteen at that point, so I knew I needed a job. I didn't want to, you know, stay home and do anything, I needed to get a job on my own pretty much, so that's what I was thinking at that point. So I came to Lewiston, then I finally got a job at Billings Shoe as my first job. And once I got the money from that job, I finally got a car, got my license, and then from there I went to Hanna Dori. I stayed there for probably about six months or so, then I went to L-A Heel, stayed there for about seven or eight months, I'm guessing, about in that area. Then after that I met my wife, got married, had my little daughter, Lucille. Left the L-A Heel area, came to Falcon, and this is where I've been ever since, for forty years.

AL: Forty years.

CD: Yeah.

AL: Wow, now did you always do the same work, or did you change what you did in the shoe industry?

CD: In the shoe industry here, I started in the motor department, running the motor machine, and running the cement as well, I was doing different part jobs, cementing, roughing, rubber making, to get me going to get the work done, keep the factory going. Once I started doing that, they were having troubles with the machines, as far as keeping it running without calling someone from the United Shoe in Boston, cutting the material. So I was watching how they were doing that, and they had problems and I was picking up a lot things that they weren't aware of that I caught on, that they saw I could do, and that's where it took off from there and I started being on maintenance, repairing machines and doing all of that, to keep it running at least, all I could do. I came on board on the fourth floor, oh boy, that was the boss back then and he told me, you can do this, so that's when it took off from that point.

AL: Oh neat, and now who was (unintelligible)?

CD: Bob (*name*), he was a plant supervisor back then.

AL: So talk to me about the work that you've done here for forty years, what does it entail, it's like you -

CD: It's electrical, like you do electrical work if it needs to be done, needs to be

moving machines, rewire it (*unintelligible*) rewiring, and once that was all done, we set the machines in place, for where they had to have it, moving the factory from one point to the other, to get it to, the floor was worked so the work would flow. But right now it's just a mess, its everywhere. And they were also (*unintelligible*) shifting machines around, breaking them down to a different location, do the same thing all over again, you know, plumbing.

AL: Right, and so somebody, having somebody on site that works for you that can do all those things.

CD: Which is very handy for them, yeah, yes, yes, that's for sure, yeah.

AL: And so then in the day-to-day stuff there's always something.

CD: Something breaking down, having to be repaired, being right there when it needs you, whenever that's broken down you're fixing that one, something else is breaking down as well, so once you're down with that one you have to go to the next one and get it going, so keep the factory flowing the way it's supposed to flow.

AL: And has the technology changed over the years so much, you needed retraining or new training, or have you just gone with the flow?

CD: We went with the flow, we learned that a machine break down, you get involved in it and try to figure it out, see what's going on, if needed questions, couldn't figure it out, they would call the agent up in Boston and they would guide you through and try to look at certain things, and once we done that and able to do so up to a point, and when we couldn't figure it out we got to call the agent to come in and to help us with that and get it going.

AL: So can you tell me any stories that you have over the years? I mean forty years is a long time.

CD: Working for Ted Johansen and Bruce Hanley, they're the best people.

AL: In what ways?

CD: Many ways, having the sharing plan for one thing.

AL: I understand that, you know, the profit sharing plan, like you just mentioned, was a really good thing. I talked to several, quite a few people about Ted Johansen and Bruce Hanley and how they made the shop feel like a family.

CD: They did.

AL: In a lot of ways.

CD: They did, yes, they did.

AL: And this place is still going when someone -

CD: It is, up to, right, right now there's about sixty people in the building right now, that we got here altogether, and we're making fire boots now. Girls' small and children shoes back then. And shoes, just walking them in, we also took over Knapp, Knapp Shoe at one point, brought them over here, once they were closing we brought them out and brought them over and got them started over here, and that brought our production up, to do something different other than just, you know, children's shoes back then as well, and that process went as well, that worked out for us too at that point.

AL: Now, you've been around for many years in the shoe industry in Lewiston, you've seen how these other shops close, and you probably had friends who worked here and there and everywhere. Could you talk about what that was like when it started to decline?

CD: It was scary, you know, seeing all these places shutting down, and we were just hanging in there at that point as well too, trying to make things happen and keep busy as far as, as far as I go, take the orders to come in, and when they keep shifting from one style to another, to get the production for me to get out for all the shoes that were selling at that point, and that's what kept us alive, two different types of work, as if called for us to do to get it done to make it happen, a lot of shifting, different machines, different, you know, styles that had to be made to keep us alive, keep us going, a little niche there to keep going. That worked great for us, still is today.

AL: Did you find that some of your friends who were at other shops, that they were able to find other work? What types of things did they, were they able to transfer their skills to something else, or did they have to, had to retrain?

CD: They had to be retrain at different jobs and different locations, but whatever they could find, able to actually do, you know. I mean shoe shops, there isn't much to do as far as working on shoes, that's all, that's all you learn as you grew up pretty much, and they wouldn't have trades out there at the moment when they could've done something, they didn't have the training to do. So the training, doing something different, that's the hardest part, learning something new again, going back to school to learn, you know, that you need your GED today, high school diploma, you know, stuff like this to get by, to get a new job. Because a lot of factories will not, new buildings and new factories will not hire

you unless you have your GED, versus back then, back then it was a lot easier to get in a building to do something.

AL: And how has Lewiston changed in all these years, with the changes, you know, the mills close and the shoe shops close. I understand it was a very vibrant downtown, probably in the early years that you were here.

CD: I don't know all that much about what happened in that part.

AL: Right, but did you see change? I mean did you, your family used to ever come into Lewiston to shop, every so often?

CD: Oh, we did, we did, of course we did that. We could go shopping, and like done that every week, like we're supposed to and stuff, to keep the food in the house and all that. But as far as, Lisbon Street changed quite a bit compared to back then, there's all kinds of bars and stores and on that street, compared to what it is today. It's like a, how can I say it, what I wanted to use, I'm trying to think of the word to use, because it's more like a ghost town compared to what it use to be back then.

AL: Right, it was still people walking and -

CD: Oh, definitely, filled right up, yeah.

AL: Now, is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think is important to add in terms of your work or the shoe shop community?

CD: I think we got through pretty much everything at this point, yeah, I can't think of anything.

AL: Okay, great, thank you so much.

CD: All right, you're welcome, thank you.

End of Interview
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