

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

Charles Poliquin
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

SWOH #053
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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. in Lewiston, Maine. The date is September 3rd, 2010, I'm here today with Charles Poliquin, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Charles, could you start just by giving me where you were born and your date of birth.

Charles Poliquin: I was born at St. Mary's, at the hospital, I'm pretty sure, or CMG, I ain't sure, either one, and 33 Prescott Street, I was formerly living.

AL: And what's your date of birth?

CP: February 22nd, 1948.

AL: And so you grew up in this community?

CP: Yeah, in Lewiston, yeah, off Main Street.

AL: Right off Main Street.

CP: Yeah, by, where John's Cleaner, right across the street from CMG Hospital, down the hill, I lived there for, what, thirty years.

AL: Right, so in the fifties and sixties and seventies. Can you talk about what the community was like then, in terms of what you did as kids?

CP: We played football, ice hockey, (*unintelligible*) on ice, we were poor. With eleven, and thirteen with my mother and father, so we didn't have much. We had to go to like St. Mary's to get a gift at Christmas time, my father was real poor, and my mother was sick all her life, she died young.

AL: And how many children were there?

CP: Well, we were eleven, and my mother and father, thirteen. We lost them both, my mother died in early '70, my father died 9/11, so a day we will never forget, 9/11.

AL: With that many children, you had a lot of built-in playmates as well.

CP: Yes, I was sleeping with five brothers, in one little bed, and all the sisters were

together almost. We slept three on the top, two on the bottom. We only had a couple bedrooms.

AL: What did your dad do for work?

CP: He was a janitor on Main Street, he did the block across the street from St. Joseph. And my mother was sick all her life.

AL: And so you must have helped with chores and the kids -

CP: Well, we lived in a city, we didn't do too much, we lived in the city, on Prescott Street all our life.

AL: And what was it like when you grew up, was it expected that you were to get a job as a teenager?

CP: Yes, that's why we got out, we all quit school at fifteen, at the age limit, on my first job, all our brothers and sisters had to quit school. We've got Paul, he owns Paul's Cleaning, he's doing good, and we got a couple that did it good, but most of us ain't done much. I can say I got maybe two, three brothers that (*unintelligible*) pretty good, I mean Paul's doing very good on Paul's Cleaning on Lisbon Street.

AL: So age sixteen, is that when you went into Lown Shoe?

CP: Lown Shoe, I loved Lown Shoe, they paid piece work, I was making good money at Lown Shoe when I was young.

AL: What did you do in the shoe shop?

CP: I (*unintelligible*) operator, side lasting with hot cement, I pounded, I scour, I did a lot on my first job at Lown Shoe, I worked there, what, twelve, thirteen years, I loved it there. I only left it because they shut down. Me, I like to stay at one place, but everywhere that I went, I worked there maybe eight, nine years and they closed. I would have never left, I'd still be at Lown. I don't like to quit, but I had to get done, to go, they all went overseas, or I would have still been at my first job. I loved the Lown.

AL: So you were really in that era when -

CP: Everyone said you can leave two minutes and get a job across the street. Where we are now, the shoe shops have gone way out, I haven't worked for a year and a half, Falcon Shoe laid me off about a year and a half. Now I'm Social Security, so I'm all set now so I don't want to go back.

AL: Now, did you end up specializing in a certain area as the years went on, or did you -?

CP: I liked lasting room, I did a lot of job in the lasting. I can (*unintelligible*), I can tie last, I can tack (*unintelligible*), I did a lot. Now at Falcon I did molding, injecting mold and put the sole on, I liked that, with liquid foam, we lock it up in a molding and (*unintelligible*) they melted it in, then we had to scour the shoe. We liked Falcon, Falcon was a nice place to work too. (*Unintelligible*) Dori, we could learn (*unintelligible*) lasting, side lasting, I did almost every, innersole tacking, I've been at Dori for a while, (*unintelligible*), (*unintelligible*) was a tall boot, fancy boot with zip on the side. That's out of style now, but that was (*unintelligible*).

AL: Can you talk a little bit in more detail about what lasting is? Doing the last, what does that mean?

CP: It means you got to put, we got a wooden last about (*unintelligible*) and you break that last in the middle, it comes loose, so you unloose, then you stick it in the toe, then you bring it back to the right shape and fit into the shoe, to keep its shape. I liked it, I liked all the jobs I had, I liked the shoe shop.

AL: Were the owners of the shoe shops people that you got to know?

CP: Yeah, (*unintelligible*), I got a lot of awards. I mean, I love work, like I said, I never take, I went about five, six years, got an award, without missing a day. They gave me a trophy. I didn't care for trophies, I worked every day. And I didn't have a car, I walked from Lewiston to Minot (*sounds like*) Avenue to go to my first job every day, Minot Avenue, a good walk but I didn't mind it. I loved the job.

AL: Every day.

CP: Every day, I went for five, six years, had the record, no one ever topped it that I know of.

AL: And where do you think you got that work ethic, to want to work every day?

CP: I don't know, I been in the grocery store, I worked at Union Market after (*unintelligible*). And I wasn't broke, we had a lot of children, we played a lot of hockey, we did everything. I don't know where I got it, but I loved it. I was one of the better ones. All my friends never kept much jobs. And me, I don't know, I had it. I don't know where I got it.

AL: And hockey, you said you liked to play hockey.

CP: Oh yeah, and I'm not allowed to skate, I like playing on a shoes, I like to be the goalie. I did pretty good catching the puck, (*unintelligible*). We had a lot of fun.

AL: Did like street hockey?

CP: Street hockey, football too, we played in the street mostly, in the field. Baseball, I'm a great Red Sox fan, I don't miss many games, I love the Red Sox. They ain't doing too good now, but -

AL: I know, me too.

CP: I like the Red Sox, I been watching them for fifty years, and my father was a great one for the Red Sox, he loved the Red Sox. Too bad, he died 9/11, never got to see them. You couldn't go see him or do nothing, he locked himself in the room when they was on, he loved the Red Sox.

AL: How has Lewiston changed in all the years that you've been here?

CP: A lot more cars, a lot more people. I'm impressed, you go in Lisbon Falls, different places, really, malls all over the place. That new mall here with Walmart and rotary. It's changed a lot, I've never seen so much of a big change.

AL: When you were growing up, would you go down on Lisbon Street, to the shops there?

CP: Yeah, I walked there a lot, yeah.

AL: Can you describe how different it is today?

CP: A lot, you had a lot more room and everything on Lisbon Street, now you barely can get by, they really filled it all up. It's a progress, it's good. Yeah, my brother liked it on Lisbon Street. I told you I ain't much of a good talker.

AL: No, you're doing great. Some of the different shoe shops specialized in different types of shoes, and so your work was different?

CP: Yeah, I mean at Dori were women's shoes, and I worked Bel Moc with men's shoes, so I worked on both, and Falcon is only on firemen boots now, so was different too. We got mostly all done at Falcon, we were in the packing room and repairing room, we repair, if a thread missing, a little hole, you put cement. I didn't care for that, I'm glad they laid me off. I'd rather do the work, but I don't like to check the boot out. It's like, I don't know anybody (*unintelligible*). Too much, we had to use thread and needle, some thread come off the fireman boot you had to, you got to paint it, you got to use chalk to cover the hole. I didn't care for that, in a way I'm glad I'm out. But I loved to do anything, but I loved the lasting room and the molding room. The packing room wasn't for me, but I worked there a couple years before they laid me off. So I really (*unintelligible*), too much, you got to find everything, check the toe, check the side, oh

boy, I was bored. Here's your needle, sew this boot, sewed the heel, sewed the toe. Too much, they'd bring them back, (*unintelligible*) a little cement, a little crack there, I don't know how anybody can do it, but mostly women, I was one of the few men there. Now I see why, maybe women got better eyesight or know what to look for. Even though I worked for forty-five years in a shoe shop, I never had to look at every little thing on it.

AL: Forty-five years.

CP: Yeah, fifteen til about last year, I worked steady, usually. All the shops went out but (*unintelligible*) the shop closed, I always had another one that called me, they all knew me.

AL: Now the people you worked with in the shoe shops, not the bosses but the people you worked beside, did you form friendships?

CP: Oh, I got along with everybody. I met my wife at Dori, yeah, I met her over there. We had a little group, we'd talk. Yeah, I get along with everybody. I love people.

AL: Were there any, I guess I'm asking, outside activities that were associated with the shoe shops, like a league, a bowling league or anything like that?

CP: They had two teams, I never, I only joined the cribbage, it was a pastime when I went, I joined the cribbage, I'm a great cribbage player. Bowling I used to be good at. I put my hand in a fan at Falcon a couple years ago, and I (*unintelligible*), I can't bend it all the way, see that. So I did that with cleaning a fan at Falcon Shoe, before they laid me off. So maybe that's the reason they might have let me go, because I couldn't, my hand was really sore, I used to cry when the cold get into it.

AL: And so the shoe shops started closing. What did that feel like to you?

CP: Yeah, I didn't think I would ever find a job. I could have gone in, I love dock work, if I went, Shaw's, I worked at Union Market, I love the store work. I can do everything in a grocery store, (*unintelligible*). But I didn't take one, they called me up right after one shop closed. I worked to make extra money, I (*unintelligible*), but I didn't want to take the time, my wife ain't asking for any extra money, so, she's getting pension, so we think we'll be all set. We got a daughter and her husband and another girl, so we found a house, so we all split all the bills and everything, so it's pretty easy. But I miss it, like I said, I loved shoe shop.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you, that you think is important to add? Some aspect of the shoe shops?

CP: Not really. Like I said, I don't talk much, I'm surprised that I'm talking this much.

Usually I'm, I'm a Witness, a Jehovah Witness, and at a meeting, I been there thirty years, they're waiting to see when I open up, they think I ain't got a tongue. I sit in the back and watch everyone come in. I like it. And I love all the Witnesses, but I barely talk to them, I can't talk. But you're easy, I don't know why.

AL: Oh, well thank you so much, and thank you for doing this, because we're trying to create a history of the shoe workers. You all were so important to the community, in building this community.

CP: Yeah, forty-six years, (*unintelligible*) Roger Nadeau. You ain't got my picture or anything? A couple years ago a woman came over and took about twenty pictures.

AL: Yes, I think you're all set on that front.

CP: I won't get to see those?

AL: Yes, thank you very much, and I'll let you know.

End of Interview
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