

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

Nicole Blouin
(Interviewer: *Dylan Macnamara*)

SMWOH #45
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Q: This is an interview project, this time with Nicole, for the Mill Workers Oral History Project on May 17th in Lewiston, Maine, and I'm Dylan doing the interviewing. So some of the questions might overlap a little bit.

A: Well, me, like I can tell you when we move here with my mom and dad, starting like that?

Q: Yeah, that would be great.

A: Yeah, we moved from St. Georges de (*name*), Quebec, with my mother and father, and we were four children that came to the United States. And we moved over here because my father wanted to better himself, and he wanted his children to learn English. He always loved the English language, and he wanted us to have both language, French and English. So my father got a job at the Hill Mill and he was always happy there, so as we were getting older, we were heading for the mills also. So I went there, I work at the Hill Mill myself when I was first married, at eighteen years old, and I work there maybe like two years. And then the children started coming, and I stop the mill.

And then I went back in 1966, and I've worked there at the Bates Mill for seven years. And my job was in the fringe department, I used to work on the twisters over there. I was the back up girl for the people that weave on the fringe.

Q: In the French department, so it was -?

A: Fringe, you know, the fringe.

Q: Oh, fringe, okay.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Okay, and just quickly, what did your father do in, back in Canada?

A: My father, in Canada he was a bread man, he baked in a bakery, bread. And then it burnt down. So then after he went to the mill, but at that mill he was like last one in, first one out, and he wanted more work. And he had one brother that lived in Lewiston and was working at the mill, and he was telling my father how we could get ahead, so that's why.

Q: And so tell me, give me some specifics on exactly like your daily routine in the mill.

A: In the mill, okay. Well me, when I worked at Bates Mill I had the second shift. So you want to know what I did during the day?

Q: Yeah.

A: Well, I had three children, and in those days, well, we didn't have no dryer, and all the con-, no dishwasher and all those commodities, so you hanged outside and all that. So I did my daily chores, and then my husband would come home. I had a babysitter that would come in in the afternoon at two o'clock, and she would

keep until four thirty when my husband came home from, my husband worked at Knapp Shoe, he was a shoe worker, and he'd come in and, and me, well I always got their meal ready so that when he came in. And then he would bring in the clothes, I had clothesline and bring that in for me. And we work as a team, we helped each other, and been married forty four years.

Q: And then, so you would go to the mill at two o'clock?

A: Well, I'd leave my house at about 2:20, you know, and I'd start at three to eleven, I worked on the second shift. And when there wasn't any work in the fringe department, I would go in the packing and shipping, and I would work in another room and I would, the bedspread, there was a bundling machine and we would wrap up the bedspread and, to deliver them, you know, there, you know?

Q: And it was, would you say it was hard work, or?

A: Well, we had to do our work. We had to, you have to furnish the machine and, but we were used to it, you know, we'd be standing up all the time, working standing up all the time. And it was sweaty in the summer, you know, we were sweating, because there was no fans and it was hot. But we were used to it, we knew we had to do it.

Q: And you enjoyed it.

A: Every day, go to work. And then when it was, the pay, we were happy, you know, get our pay and everything. Like I said, the mill has helped me a lot, because when I went in to work I needed all kinds of things, and with that good money I made we bought it, and paid cash. In those days you paid cash for everything, there was no credit cards. You bought something, you paid cash. There was no ATM and all

that.

Q: Really?

A: No-no.

Q: So like your sister, you went into the job originally because your father was there, and she had gone before you?

A: Yeah, yeah, and I knew they made good money and they were happy. And we didn't have an education, so there wasn't much. Like me before, when I was thirteen years old I was a waitress, and everybody thought I was eighteen, you know. The guys, they used to come at the restaurant and they all thought I was eighteen years old, and I was only thirteen.

Q: And that was here, in Lewiston?

A: In Lewiston, Cedar Street Lunch, I work as a waitress over there, Cedar Street Lunch. All the people from the mill, they used to come there and eat. And then after that, when I was fourteen, I went in at, the name was Marcotte Home, but now it's d'Youville Pavillion, and I worked in the big kitchen over there. And I worked there, and then laundry, then I went, at eighteen years old I got in the mill.

Q: Did you have to be eighteen to work in the mill, was that the (*unintelligible word*)?

A: You had to be eighteen, yeah, because there was all kinds of machines.

Q: It's dangerous.

A: Yeah.

Q: And then so when did you, when did you leave the mill?

A: I left the mill in 1973.

Q: Nineteen seventy three, and for, why, why did you leave?

A: I left because my kids were all in school, and I had an offer to get, to be a cook for the high school, for the school lunch program, the Lewiston school lunch program. So I went in there and I worked eighteen years, sixteen years at the lunch program. And I didn't have to pay a babysitter because I would leave with my kids in the morning, and then when I'd come home from school they'd come home, so that was a saving, you know, and the benefits were good and everything, so that's why.

Q: Would you say that you preferred one to the other, the mill or this job, or your second job?

A: Well then after, I went to Geiger Brothers and I work there twelve years, and that would be my job that I preferred the best.

Q: What's Geiger Brothers?

A: Well, Geiger Brothers, we make calendars and book bindery, you know, address book and all that, and over there I work, I have like a big table over here, and I used to collate on books, put books together, and boy, that felt very important because I read my order, and I went by the order and I put the books together. And I had a job sitting down, and I worked in paper. I felt like I was an office girl.

Q: And so what, you said your kids went to, went off to college and -?

A: Well, my three kids, they all went to parochial school, they all went to Holy Cross School. And then after that, (*unintelligible phrase*). And my two boys both went to college, and my daughter, she's a transcriber for CMMC. She works out of her home and she does the whole hospital, so she's pretty much up there. And my son Jeffrey is a designer for BIW, he went to college, and then my other son Jim graduated from college and he has his own business in Massachusetts. Yeah, he has a industrial label company. I'd have to show you the card, because it's beyond me. He takes us to the office, but it's all, but we're very proud that we succeeded with our children, you know. Plus, my son Jimmy, he played for University of Maine hockey, Division One, so we did very well with our three kids. And now we have grand kids, and as you can see over, my grandson, Nathan Frechette, is the hockey player of the *Kennebec Journal* for the year. See, here's that *Journal*, ice hockey player of the year, my grandson. And then my other grandson, he's the class president for Lisbon High, he's graduating this year, and he was in the paper there. (*Unintelligible phrase*) my grand kids are doing good, and he's going to college. And this one here's trying for Junior A hockey.

Q: Wow, is he going to look at the Maniacs at all?

A: He tried out last year for the Maniacs, but he knew he wasn't going to make it, but he was invited to try out and they had a nice write up in the paper about Nathan, that he's very, you know, he knew he wasn't going to make it, but he had a good attitude about it.

Q: So, I asked you about the like one great memory, or one specific thing, and you started to talk a little bit about it, but if you could just say one more, just if you had one -

A: Did you want me to say a memory about the mill?

Q: About the mill, like -

A: Because that's mostly about the mill, anh?

Q: Right.

A: Okay.

Q: Just like if you were at an exhibit in a museum and you saw your name, and like a, if there was like a quote about, you know, some special time or something that, or maybe something more general, or?

A: Well, what we did in the afternoon, just before going in at the mill, about ten minutes before, there was benches on the little walk where the canal was there, and there was benches, and everybody sat there. And every day I look forward, because I used to chat with everybody before starting my day's work, and then the first shift was coming out and they'd tell us how it went for the jobs that they know best. I don't know if that's -

Q: No, that's great.

A: Is that a memory, or what? You know, because when we were at work, inside, there was no -

Q: You couldn't talk to one another really?

A: Well, we could but not too much. We had to watch the frames, you know,

and we were busy. We worked a lot with our hands up, you know, and everything.

Q: Well that's great, that's really great.

A: I don't know if it's going to help you.

Q: No, that's perfect, that's just the kind of thing that I was looking for.

A: If you have any other question, I'll be happy to help you with it.

Q: So, yeah, was -

A: But I didn't want my kids to go through what I went through, that's why we put them in school. My husband, too, he was a hard worker. He didn't go to school either. Him, he was sent, by the eighth grade, that's all the school, you know, so he said, they're not going to go through what we had to face every day, you know.

Q: And what was, just because the work was so hard?

A: Well, it was hard work and, you know, how would I say that? It was a commitment every day, the same thing all the time, all the time. You know, and he said, well if we give a good education to our kids, they, actually my kids are all working hard, too, so I can't say, because my son that has the business, we saw him over the weekend, and my granddaughter got her first communion, and he's very business man and he's very busy, you know. But I don't think it's the, they don't work hard like us, you know, us we work with our arms like that, and I had surgery in my arms, you know, my hands. Then, I don't think they'll go through that, you know.

Q: And that's a good thing?

A: For them.

Q: For them.

A: For them, you know, I don't want them to go through what me and my husband, you know, the hard work. But we enjoyed our work. We can't complain. We went to work every day. That was the only thing for us, we wanted to do a living and we had to go.

Q: And the -

A: And we had a lot of pride, you know, we had so much pride that I didn't, I wanted my job to be well done and all that, so.

Q: And the Hill Mill was making bedspreads and -?

A: We were making, at the Hill Mill over there, us, we were just making the big bobbins, getting it ready, and they would send it to, Bates Mill was making the bedspread. Tablecloth and curtains, piping rod curtains, yeah. All kinds of nice things they made at Bates Mill.

Q: Well, -

A: I hope it helps you.

Q: No, it helps so much.

A: I hope so.

Q: This has been so great. But I think between you and your sister I have some very, some great stuff. I can just mix and match.

A: Okay, good, good, yeah, and if there's something just call me and I'll help you out.

Q: I will, and hopefully you both can come to the -

A: Yeah, I got to write that down.

Q: I can write it down for you.

A: I'm going to write it down. Because the computer's not always working, you know.

Q: So it's on Thursday, May 26th.

A: At?

Q: At Museum L-A, which is in, on the third floor of the Bates Mill, right next to DaVinci's, and it's from one to three.

A: There, okay, well then I'll try to go, I'm going to tell Jeannette and we'll go. One other thing, you know, us, when we came here to the United States we didn't have a word English. I didn't even know what the meaning yes was, didn't know.

Q: Really, and so you just picked it up in the mill, or -?

A: No, I went to school. My sister didn't go, but me I went, and when I got to

school, the nun, she make me get up. I was in the third grade, she make me get up with a reader, and I didn't know how to read English. So p-h-i-f and p-h-a-p, I'd say them in French, you know, (*pronounces in French*), and everybody would laugh, you know. So one day I take my book and I throw it on the counter, and I go home, it's ten thirty in the morning. I get home, my father says what are you doing here? I says, I'm done, I'm not going there any more. My father says, who says? I remember that so well. He says, and my father never swore, he said in French, goddammit, you get back there or else I'll take you there. So I didn't want him, because I knew when he got mad, I didn't want him to get, so I went back. And that was the best thing he ever did, because if he said no, honey, you don't have to go, it would have been over. But then, within the year I picked it up.

Q: Because he really wanted you to learn English.

A: Yes, and he, you know, but it was so hard because the nun, she'd say get up and read in your reader. And just like you, if you'd start reading Polish or something, never saw the words, you know. I was very good in French, I was very high in my class, but not, they should have put me in the first grade to learn my A-B-C and my vowels. But no, they put me there. It was hard, but you know, we moved here in August, and in November we went back to Canada for Thanksgiving, and there was like a little carnival on Saturday for the kids, at the radio station, and we'd go there and we could sing and all that. So the guy, the disc jockey there, he'd raise our hand, and I raised my hand, and he says what do you want to sing? I says, this morning I'm going to sing in English. And I sang Rock 'n Roll Waltz, all in English. And I only had moved here in August. And I won the dollar, not because I sang good but I guess because I had the guts, I don't know. But I won the dollar. And then at Christmas time, well, we lived neighbor to Robert Couturier, the lawyer, you don't know him. But him, he's a lawyer, and he graduated from Bates. And anyway, we lived neighbor, and his father was in the Circle Canadian Club, so they took me with them at the Christmas party, and over there they

wanted kids to sing, so I raise up my hand, and it was the Circle Canadian so I says, I'm going to sing in French. So I sang a nice song in French, and I won the dollar, (*unintelligible phrase*). I was pretty wise, you know. I'd come home with a dollar, and in those days a dollar was like twenty five dollars today. Oh yeah, oh yeah, that was something. Not because I have the voice, now, because I was wise.

Q: That's funny, that's funny.

A: So who gave you my name anyway?

Q: Our teachers just gave us these sheets with the names on it, it's Rachel Desgrosselliers.

A: Okay, Rachel, yeah, yeah, she was a nun before, you know.

Q: Really?

A: Yeah, she was a nun at St. Mary's Hospital, and then she come out and she married Desgrosselliers, there, yeah.

Q: Do you know her well?

A: Well, her maiden name was Baillargeon, I know her by sight, you know, I don't think she'd know me. She's a little younger than I. But I know who she is, and I know her pedigree because it all came out in the paper, when she come out.

Q: Yeah, well she organized that reception so she'll be there and she'll speak (*unintelligible word*).

A: Okay, okay, we're going to try to make it, but some-, are you going to be there?

Q: Yeah, I'm going to be there, we'll all be there.

A: Oh, well, I'm going to try to bring my sister and we're going to go.

Q: I sure hope, I hope you guys can come.

A: Yeah, unless something happens.

Q: Well thank you so much.

A: Okay, I'll show you my three kids.

Q: Please do.

End of Interview

blouin.nicole.smwoh.wpd