

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

**Neil Hanley**  
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

**SWOH #038**  
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**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is January 22nd, 2010, this is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and today I'm interviewing Neil Hanley at Falcon Shoe in Lewiston, Maine. Neil, could you start just by giving me your full name?

**Neil Hanley:** Neil Stephen Hanley.

**AL:** And how do you spell Hanley?

**NH:** H-A-N-L-E-Y.

**AL:** And where and when were you born?

**NH:** I was born in Norway, Maine in August of 1966.

**AL:** And did you grow up there, or surrounding community?

**NH:** Yeah, in the South Paris area.

**AL:** And what was it like in South Paris at that time?

**NH:** It was a nice place to grow up, I grew up on Paris Hill and it was a nice, close knit community, a lot of good friends, growing up, it was a good place to grow up. Great public schools, safe, not a lot of crime.

**AL:** And what are your parents' names?

**NH:** My father's Bruce, and my mother Nancy.

**AL:** And how many brothers and sisters?

**NH:** I had three brothers, so there was four boys, growing up. No girls.

**AL:** Well, talk to me a little bit about your father, was he, at that time when you were growing up, in the shoe industry?

**NH:** Yes, he moved up from Lynn, Massachusetts in 1963 and started Falcon Shoe

with Ted Johanson, and I think he actually lived in the YMCA for a few months until they settled in and found places to live. So he was here three years before I was born, so I've been in and around this place for my whole life.

**AL:** Now, did he meet your mom here, or had he already -?

**NH:** He met my mom, they were married in 1960, or '59, and they met in Massachusetts.

**AL:** So she was from, was she from Massachusetts as well?

**NH:** Yeah, and she actually worked in the shoe factory too, as a secretary.

**AL:** So he came here and started Falcon, and you were here a lot as a young child?

**NH:** Oh yeah, yeah, weekends, yeah, we'd come in with dad on the weekend, and it was kind of fun, because the place was dark but we'd run around and ride around on the conveyors and things like that, up and down, it was fun.

**AL:** Well, talk to me about what you sort of, what interested you in following in your dad's footsteps, did he teach you different aspects of shoe making?

**NH:** Not so much, really. I just, I was always fascinated with math and mechanics and things like that, and I went to school for electrical engineering, of all things, but I decided after four years of that I really didn't want to be in the electronics industry, I wanted to be more hands on in manufacturing. That certainly was due to my father's influence and being in the shoe factory throughout high school, seeing how things are done, the challenges. So that's really how I got into it. I interviewed here with Ted Johnson right out of college, and he offered me a position and it was – I wanted to stay in the area anyway, so I didn't, I prefer to stay in Maine versus, say, Silicone Valley or something like that, that's a big draw too, was to stay in Maine.

**AL:** So what year was that, that you came on as a regular employee?

**NH:** Nineteen eighty-eight, September of '88.

**AL:** So you've been here your whole career?

**NH:** Yeah, my first day here was my seventeenth birthday, in 1983, because I was old enough to go to work and work machinery, so my father called me, he said we need some help, get your fanny in here. So that's how I started.

**AL:** And so how long did, what year did your father retire? Did you overlap for some years?

**NH:** Yeah, yeah, he retired in, I want to say 2002 or 2003, maybe it was before that. But yeah, I worked for my dad for a number of years.

**AL:** Was he your supervisor, in a way?

**NH:** Well, I was an engineer, so I was responsible to really the whole upper senior management team, which was my dad and Ted. But it was a little awkward at times, working for dad, but never a bad thing.

**AL:** Well, talk to me about Ted Johanson. I know that people have described him in many different ways, and he really, one aspect was that he invested in the people who worked here?

**NH:** Well yeah, he took very seriously, takes very seriously, the responsibility to the community and to the employees. I mean it was one of the first shoe factories that actually had a retirement plan and profit sharing plans, health insurance, things like that, so very responsible and very caring for the community. And I would just add that when I started, I worked the regular shift as a cutter, because Ted thought it was very important for me, even as an engineer, to learn the aspects of the business, the hands on stuff, the importance of leather, leather cutting quality, different aspects of the leather, so I did that for three months full time, and then after the shift ended I would stay later and Ted would kind of mentor me in some of the engineering aspects of shoe making, so it was a good learning experience, and a lot of fond memories.

**AL:** Can you talk to me about Falcon Shoe itself and sort of its evolution and how you've managed to survive in this, you know, especially into the eighties, nineties, where we just saw all the shoe shops closing.

**NH:** Right, it's, I've seen of course the whole range of products that Falcon has done, I grew up wearing the children's shoes that the company started making, you know, little infants to young men's shoes. Of course, the mid seventies into the eighties, the foreign markets influenced that and they had to diversify, and in the late seventies, early eighties Falcon got into making men's footwear using direct attached polyurethane outsoles and PVC outsoles, and that was kind of a natural transition to then get into safety boots, outdoor work boots, performance boots for hunting and outdoors. And it was in the late eighties I think that we made the last children's shoes. For a while there, we were doing children's shoes *and* men's boots, but it got to the point where we could no longer be competitive in the children's market, so we transitioned into a hundred percent men's boots and just got more and more focused on safety footwear. Our parent company, Iron Age bought Falcon, I want to say, in the late eighties, early nineties, and pretty much made us focus on safety footwear. Got really good at that, and here we are, it's 2010 and we're doing high performance firefighter boots with all the latest technologies in safety footwear.

**AL:** Can you talk to me about, are there stories about, you know, there must be stories, you've worked here so many years, even anecdotes, funny anecdotes.

**NH:** A story I always bring up, because Roland Landry is my current business partner here, my first job here he was actually my supervisor, and he's not that much older than me, but he was my boss. They used to process the work in plastic tote buckets that were painted different colors, I think they had ten colors, and each color represented a day sheet. And let's say today, okay, the goal was to get the blue totes out of the factory, tomorrow would be red, then yellow, then green and so on, and that would rotate after ten days. I guess they had so much work that they needed more tote baskets, so my job was to paint the tote baskets. And they found a dark corner in the back room for me to do that, and I was using oil-based paint, and they started me first thing in the morning, said okay, paint these tote baskets red. I started painting, and I couldn't hear the buzzer for the break so I worked through coffee break in the morning, lunch break, and then it was three thirty in the afternoon somebody came out and said, hey, we're closing up. I guess the fumes had gotten to me. So I always pick on Roland when we're telling stories, but that's a good story.

And when I was real young, I can remember running up and down the stairs here, because this is a real fancy spiral staircase that comes into the building. And on Saturdays, we were occupying ourselves, my brothers and I, while dad was in the office doing some work, and I was running up the stairs and I ran into this guy. I still to this day don't know who he was, probably the custodian, but at the time, this big, imposing fellow, and he says, what are you kids doing in this hallway. Scared the daylights out of me. I don't think I had the nerve to say, do you know who my father is? But that's a memory that I'll keep forever, too.

**AL:** Now, did any of your other three brothers work in the shop here?

**NH:** Yeah, all of them worked here at one point in time, yeah. My oldest brother Scott worked third shift as a computer stitcher, my next oldest brother Dana worked in the shipping department, and my next youngest brother Carl worked as a computer stitcher and he also worked in shipping. But they basically just worked summers in high school and college.

**AL:** I guess I'm interested to know, in terms of Falcon Shoe, do you see, well obviously you're optimistic that you found a niche in the shoe industry to stay viable. What do you see as happening with your company to survive? Do you feel like that you're at a place where you're so specific that you provide something nobody else can?

**NH:** I think that's true today, but I wouldn't bet on it being true tomorrow or three years or five years from now, because the industry's evolving, the Asians are getting really good at making footwear, making really good quality footwear. What saves us today, or keeps us alive today is the fact that we can do smaller product lines, smaller

quantities. To the extent that that stays important, I think we'll be okay. Or we'll have to see, you know, what's the next biggest thing. We're working on some radio frequency identification devices to go in footwear that's specific to the mining industry, so folks that go into mines can have tracking, radio tracking of the footwear for safety reasons. I think the only way we'll survive is by going after these niches, we won't certainly ever be a high volume fashion type footwear place.

But it used to be, oh, in the seventies, they would go to a single shoe show in New York City and they would peddle the shoes to the Nordstroms and the Macy's and the big department stores, the children's shoes, and they would sell the factory out for a year, you know, they'd take orders and basically be able to know that they were going to have production for a year. Nowadays, you know, we can see out maybe a month or two. And that's good, that's a good thing for us. I've seen days where we didn't know what we were going to schedule the next day, so.

**AL:** So a month or two is a good thing.

**NH:** Yeah, yeah.

**AL:** What did you observe in the Lewiston community? Have you lived in the Lewiston community, or traveled from outside all these years?

**NH:** I did live in Auburn for ten years, but I lived in South Paris my whole childhood, and now I live about twenty-five miles north of Lewiston, in Hartford. But certainly seen the changes, I mean from the seventies when I came here as a kid, very bustling, booming, a lot of folks. Used to go Christmas shopping with my mom down on Lisbon Street.

**AL:** Was Peck's there?

**NH:** Peck's, and Benoit's, Benoit's is where we had to get our Cub Scout uniforms, it was the only place in the area, there was nothing in South Paris so we'd go there for our Cub Scout uniforms. But yeah, I saw that, the dwindling of that. And of course this building where we're located today was full.

**AL:** Just full of different businesses.

**NH:** Full of different businesses, shoe factories mostly.

**AL:** That must have been a big change, to see them disappear one by one. Was that mostly in the eighties?

**NH:** Yes. I think when I started full time in '88 it was, pretty much all of them had gone, it was ourselves and Acorn products, who do the slippers, was in this building, the

rest of the building was pretty much vacant. Etonic had a distribution but they didn't do any manufacturing here.

**AL:** And because so many of those businesses closed, there's a lot of people with skills that went away. Do you have difficulty hiring people with some of those skills, or do you just automatically train? Do you know what I'm asking, sort of have you lost your population?

**NH:** I think, well it's been enough years now that the folks that were skilled in footwear manufacturing, it's been such a long period of time since the factories closed – I say a long period of time, ten, fifteen years – that those folks that had those skills have moved on and gotten training in other things. So it is harder and harder to find experienced folks today, but the folks that we have hired that had no experience have worked out pretty well for us, they're eager to learn. And you know, as long as you do a good job screening them, it's worked out pretty good. And the skills, a lot of the skills are the same, but we have computerized machinery today that we didn't have twenty years ago that, it's more attractive for younger folks that have grown up with Nintendos and all that kind of computer stuff, that they'd probably rather work at a computerized machine than an old fashion type sewing machine or cutting machine.

**AL:** Were you old enough to experience sort of a social atmosphere of all the shoe workers? I mean, in the heyday, when there were all these shoe shops, people would go out after work?

**NH:** No, not myself really.

**AL:** That was sort of a little late in the game.

**NH:** A little before my time, yeah. But I've heard stories, the old, the Roundhouse, which is, I guess Margarita's is there now, but that was a place for all the shoe gurus to hang out, and the salesmen. And I guess in the day, say a thread salesman or a leather salesman, could come to the area and spend a week visiting all the various shoe shops. And today we're lucky if we see a thread salesman once every six months, because he's only got the one client to call on, so that's sad.

**AL:** There are no other shoe – are there any others?

**NH:** In the area right now? Yeah, there are, there are a handful.

**AL:** Small.

**NH:** Smaller, specialty stuff, Allen-Edmunds locally, they do real high end stuff, you know, shoes that retail for four or five hundred dollars, hand sewns and exotic leathers. Another niche, you know.

**AL:** Yeah, right, exactly. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think is important to add, something I didn't know to ask that it's important to know?

**NH:** You've done a thorough job of asking me questions, I guess the only thing I would add is that growing up in the footwear industry, and growing up at Falcon, and I think it's probably true of a lot of a lot of the other shoe shops that are no longer here, but it's really a family atmosphere, growing up here. You know, the folks here I've known for as long as I've worked here and it's, you get to know them, you can become close. You know, you don't necessarily hang out with them on the weekends, but you look forward to seeing them during the week, and you get to know their families and things like that. And when you have to do anything like downsizing, it's very sad, it's very traumatic and difficult on everybody, not just the people who are facing layoffs and things like that, so we hate to do it. We're so proud and happy that we're still here today and we're still employing some good quality folks.

**AL:** Well great, thank you so much.

**NH:** You're welcome.

*End of Interview*  
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