

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

Richard Labbe

(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

SWOH #03
March 12, 2008

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project. The date is March 12th, 2008. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and today I am interviewing Richard Labbe, at his house at Lamont Avenue in Lewiston. Is that correct?

Richard Labbe: Right.

AL: And Richard, could you start by giving me your full name?

RL: Richard A. Labbe.

AL: Where and when were you born?

RL: Nineteen thirty seven, Lewiston, on Lincoln Street.

AL: And your parents, were they born in this area too, or did they come from somewhere else?

RL: My father came from Canada, and my mother came from Auburn.

AL: What did they do for a living?

RL: My mother used to work in the mill, Bates Mill, Hill Mill, and my father worked at the shipyard, and he worked as a carpenter, construction.

AL: Now, how many brothers and sisters did you have growing up?

RL: I got one brother, two sisters, and that's it.

AL: So, what was Lewiston like in the Lincoln area, like when you were growing up, in terms of what you'd do for fun and school and that sort of thing?

RL: I didn't go to school on Lincoln Street. I went to school over here, Holy Family, and the *(name)* School, where the gas station is there on the corner of Sabattus and *(name)*, yes. Jordan School, for high school.

AL: Okay, so tell me when, when did you begin to work in the shoe shops?

RL: I was sixteen years old, I worked at Koss Shoe, and I did all kinds of stuff over there, tack puller, insole tacker, a long time ago.

AL: Sixteen, that's young, were there a lot your age starting in the shops then?

RL: Oh yeah, if you didn't want to go to school, you had to go to work. And the pay was seventy five cents an hour.

AL: This is in nineteen -?

RL: Fifties.

AL: Fifties?

RL: In the '50s.

AL: Was that good?

RL: It didn't cost as much as today. You brought a pay, twenty six dollars a week, take home.

AL: Now, where was Koss Shoe located?

RL: Right across from the Village Inn, where the old Jimmy's Diner used to be, over there.

AL: Oh, so that was a shoe shop.

RL: It's still up there, but I don't know what's going on now. And then I worked at Wood & Smith, that was a heel factory, where they used to make heels for loafers, for women, I guess. There used to be a slugger, the wedge was cut in half, had two tone leather, and you had to push it in with a special tool.

AL: And that was called a slugger?

RL: Yes, yes it was.

AL: Now, how long did you stay doing that?

RL: Not too long.

AL: No, it wasn't fun?

RL: No, it was all right, the job was all right, but I wanted to improve myself, make more money.

AL: So, how did you go about doing that?

RL: Get fired, go to another job. If you like it, you stay. If you don't like it, get, get out.

AL: Right, so that's, that's how you did it, yeah. And so, where did you go after that?

RL: I went to Beckerman, Beckerman Shoe. I went to Wood & Smith. I went to Belgrade, that is where I started to hand sew, and they used to have pre-punched shoes, the holes were already made. After that, I got laid off over there, and I went to Commonwealth, on, at the Continental Mill. That's where you had to punch your own holes hand sewing. Then I went to another shoe shop, and then I started to go construction. And I worked at the mill, Bates Mill, Hill Mill, and then I guess that was it.

AL: Did you, did you make friends working in the shoe shops? Like was it -?

RL: Oh, a lot of them.

AL: Because I hear that people really had a social connection with others that they worked with at the shoe shops.

RL: Yeah, there's a lot of them. A lot of them are, they died, and lost track of them, a lot of them moved out of the state.

AL: So when you worked at the shoe shops, would you go out and socialize with the people you worked with after work?

RL: Once in a while.

AL: Now, I understand that boxing is something that is part of your family.

RL: My, my, my father grew in Canada, and they had twenty two kids, eleven boys, eleven girls, and I met nineteen of them, because some of them died at birth. And five of them were professional boxers.

AL: In Canada?

RL: In the U.S. My grandfather had a beer joint on Lincoln Street, 185 Lincoln Street, and I guess that's where they started to, to box, in the gym downstairs. So, my Uncle Paul, Junior, my Uncle Jack, my Uncle Red, and my Uncle Dominic, and my father, KO Labbe, KO Arthur Labbe, that was my father. Now they're all dead, all of them.

see my to knock out

AL: Now, what did the KO stand for?

RL: Knock out.

AL: Yeah, that's what I thought. Oh wow, so you had a strong family in the community. So, did they, did they have like boxing matches and things?

RL: I was a little bit too, I've seen my father fought a couple of times, I was less than five years old, and I remember just a little bit. And my father stopped boxing in nineteen forty, so. And I was born in '37, so I wasn't too, too old.

AL: So, did it keep going? Did other boxers come in, I mean?

RL: Oh yeah, in the '40s there were a lot of them around here, but after that it just died down, like anything else.

Other: Your Uncle Paul, who did he fight?

RL: Oh, Henry Armstrong. Paul Newman. In the '40s, he fought twice. And if you want to see a lot of boxing pictures, you go to Graziano in Lisbon, all of them are there, hanging up on the wall.

AL: Can you tell me a little bit about the different types of work you did in the shoe shops? What were the different processes? I know that you talked about -?

RL: I did, I did a lot of them, I did sole laying, I did -.

AL: And what's that?

RL: You get a machine, you put the shoe on before the sole, then it presses it and it seals it. And I did cementing the sole, pass it to the sole layer. I did the hand sewing, I did tack pulling, cripple running. You get a cripple, a shoe that got lost, you got to find the match, so I had to go, I did all kinds of jobs, over a hundred, but I don't, I don't remember now.

AL: And then you left the shoe shops to go into construction?

RL: Construction.

AL: That's what you did for the rest of your career?

RL: No, I went to Bath Iron Works. I worked there for twenty two years, as a sheet metal. I retired seven years, eight years ago. I guess I'm all done now.

AL: Do you have any stories of, of things that happened when you worked in the shoe shops? I don't, it could be-

RL: Oh, all kinds of them, but I wouldn't tell any of them.

AL: No? There's none, none?

RL: Oh, we used to have parties, our Christmas party, yeah.

AL: Oh yeah.

RL: We used to go to the Royal Hotel, on the corner of Chestnut and Lincoln Street, right across from FX Marcotte, furniture store. We had parties over there, parties in the beer joint.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about, your time in the shoe shops, that you think we should talk about?

RL: No, I don't. I guess that's it.

AL: Okay, I thank you very much.

RL: No problem.

End of Interview

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