

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

Leo Levesque
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

MWOH# 032
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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Leo Levesque at his home at 11 Lincoln Circle in Lewiston, Maine, on March 16th, 2006. This is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History project, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could you start just by telling me your full name?

Leo Levesque: Leo L. Levesque.

AL: And what is your date of birth?

LL: February 26, 1923.

AL: And where were you born?

LL: Lewiston.

AL: And did you grow up in this area?

LL: Yes, I did.

AL: What part of Lewiston did you live in growing up?

LL: I used to live up above here, and then when I got married my wife, she wanted to live here, she was born here, so I moved here, I bought the house here.

AL: Oh, so you've lived here a long time.

LL: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Almost fifty years now.

AL: And your parents, what were their names?

LL: My father was Paul E. Levesque, and my mother, she left us about, I was six years old, so I don't know her, I don't know what's what. She came from Fort Kent.

AL: Okay, and your dad?

LL: My father's from Canada, (*name*).

AL: And did he come here as a young man, or as a child?

LL: Really, he came in here, I don't know if he was married then or what, okay, he was married anyhow. And they both, he worked for a lot of, (*unintelligible phrase*) he worked in Androscoggin, the Hill mill, then the Bates mill, that's where he finished his. And my mother, I think she worked a little bit, but not much.

AL: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

LL: I have two sisters. They're both, one is still living in Scarborough, she's seventy four I think, and the other one, my other daughter, sister, died, Carmen, Jeanette, there were three of us, and Jeanette and Carmen.

AL: What kind of work did your dad do in the mill?

LL: He was a weaver. That's why I say, he flicked the flack, I says I wouldn't work any more, I wouldn't work at any mill. They laughed at him and said, I thought you wasn't going to work. I came out of the mill at '87, went in there at '48.

AL: So thirty-nine years. And did you do mostly weaving?

LL: I weave quite, mostly, because I started, I start picking up the, cleaning the looms, come from the bottom up. You learn, watch, and my father says, you want me to show you, (*unintelligible phrase*), no, no, no. So I stayed there thirty-nine years.

AL: So did you overlap with your father for some years, were you both in the mill working at the same time?

LL: Yeah, yeah. I don't remember what year he got through, I know he was seventy nine I think when he came out.

AL: Did he talk about what the mill was like in the earlier days, before you started there?

LL: I saw some pictures from somewhere, and I can't in my mind now, they had people they usually brought, they went up and took in Canada to bring here to weave. And just like that guy that died, Frenchie, he was from Canada. And what's-his-name's got the car wash on Lincoln and Main Street, Emile Paradis. He used to go get people and bring them to work over here, that's what got them in the mill. And they used to stay, in the old Continental Mill, right, a hotel, there used to be, on Chestnut Street. Most of them, they were placed there to, (*unintelligible phrase*) live there.

AL: And so did you walk to work, did you live close enough?

LL: Oh yeah, I lived close I would say, right here in town.

AL: What was Lisbon Street like when you were growing up?

LL: It was lively, it was lively. Honky tonk. On Saturday night, Lisbon Street, whew, boy, it was party. You could go on the, was a guy, beer place, there, he's dead now, my wife, her friend she had this beauty parlor, there used to be a big, big hall, they used to dance and drink beer over there, right near the Dube's, the travel bureau, that used to be (*unintelligible phrase*). I pass a few times there, too.

AL: When you were working in the mill, were you ever involved in the social activities, like bowling and stuff, hockey?

LL: Yeah, I used to box, ah, box, bowling on the second shift. The second shift, we used to bowl at the, there used to be a bowling alley on Ash Street. That's gone now. Oh yeah, you had some with the second shift, and there was a first shift. On Saturday morning, that was a bowling time. I just put the bowling, my trophies away, because I got to start packing stuff, I might be moving in a little.

AL: So did you like the bowling leagues, was it (*unintelligible phrase*)?

LL: Yeah, I used to like it, we had a, then we used to have a banquet.

AL: Did you get to meet other people that worked in the mill that you didn't see every day on your job?

LL: Yes and no, some I might miss. My mind is gone there, a little bit there.

AL: That's okay. Is there, are there certain people that you remember that you worked in the mill with, that stick in your memory? Like Fred Lebel, or?

LL: Well, Fred, I know Fred and some of the, some of them I (*unintelligible phrase*) name is. Then one year I, there was an anniversary, my daughter was, her husband was located in Hawaii, and I asked my boss, I says, could you enquire, see if I can take two weeks vacation to go to Hawaii? And I paid, I think, my room and everything was over there, my granddaughter.

The last minute, they came and they changed their mind, I couldn't do it, so Maurice Provencer told me (*unintelligible word*), what will you do if they say they don't want to, and I said, I'll quit right here. I had twenty-three years service then. I says, no way. I said, I could put my hands up how many times did I loaf? (*Unintelligible phrase*) I can use my both hands and (*unintelligible phrase*) thirty-nine years. They came the last minute, and I had my tickets bought and everything. That was a surprise for my wife. She was surprised. She went back not too long ago, and now after that she went

back with Jackie Ricker. She wanted to go, I said, (*unintelligible phrase*), go with her. Boy, expensive to live there, whew.

AL: Do you recall any strikes at the mill?

LL: Two of them, I guess. The last one, well, the last one I went, the guy from the union says, there's three hundred good paid members. I told the guy, I says, I think, I lift my hand, as of next week I'm all done. The guy looked. I had it in my mind to quit, to retire anyhow. The guy, he says, you would do that? (*Unintelligible phrase*), I think it's two, twice they went on strike while I was there, I think.

AL: What were the strikes about?

LL: Wages and stuff like that. But just like the pension we got now, that started only in '78. I still got it. We're lucky we're having it. Yeah, so we went in '78 for the, we had a little more money. Furthermore, I got a, I had a problem on my tax or something, something happened, they sent me a 1040 form, I owed them, I didn't owe them no money, so the guy says they owe you money. They want you to pay tax, you didn't, after seventy-five you don't pay any more income tax. So (*unintelligible phrase*), he says, you got a pension there, too, at Bates Mill? I says, yeah. He says, you know, he says, by rights I'm not supposed to pay tax on that, so he fixed it up for me. Now I got a check \$116 every, (*unintelligible phrase*) the guy that (*unintelligible word*), he says, come in, I'll fix it up, and he sent it to me. I got a check three weeks ago. He says, how come they do that I don't know. See, you pay tax while you work, then give you a pension, they tax you? The guy said, that wasn't, that's not right. So I got the check, \$144.00.

AL: So did you appreciate having the union in the mill, were they helpful?

LL: Well, they had their times once in a while, you know. But it's worse now, over here now. I went to see Freddie Lebel when I was, he was, I never, well I knew he was there, never had a chance. I saw him, he says, come on over, come and see inside. Them looms over there, whew. His daughter works over there, daughter-in-law I think.

Well, I wanted (*unintelligible phrase*), seemed to me it, I didn't want to go to work there thirty-nine years, it seemed to me (*unintelligible phrase*). And then I went to the reunion there, I talked to somebody, she says, can I send a woman. I says, yeah, I'll ask her how old she is. She said, eighty-nine or something, I said, whoa. We had quite a crowd though, that time, that reunion. I don't know if they'll have another one, see how much more people there is left.

AL: We hope to have another one.

LL: Yeah? That's nice, that's nice. They made out good, I guess, I heard.

AL: It was very, very nice, yeah. We had at least four hundred people.

LL: It's too bad two newsmen there, with tripod cameras on it.

AL: Now, your father came from Canada. Did you ever get to meet any of your Canadian relatives?

LL: Where, over here?

AL: Yeah, did they ever come to visit, or did you go?

LL: Well, I got some that used to live in Valley Field, they used to work in mills in Valley Field.

AL: Where is Valley Field?

LL: It's close around that place they got, I can't, can't think.

AL: That's okay, that's all right.

LL: They're (*unintelligible word*), down there, (*unintelligible word*) mill, they work in the mill in Valley Field. That's closed now, that mill, too. They used to have, come, when they used to come down, they had a few drinks, they'd talk about the mill, the mill is not good.

AL: So they used to come here to visit?

LL: Yeah, it's relation to my father.

AL: Did he have a big family in Canada?

LL: Really, I don't, I went when I came back there, came back from the service, I bought a car and went to Canada, see our sister and stuff like that. And somebody named Michaud. And I had a picture of my grandfather, but we had floods here and everything was gone. It was a big family. They brought me on some of them farms in Canada, whew, it's a big family.

AL: Now, the weave room, I am told, was quite noisy.

LL: Yeah.

AL: Did the mill do anything to protect your ears?

LL: We (*unintelligible word*) plugs, we had ear plugs.

AL: The whole time you worked there, or did that happen later?

LL: Later. Because my daughter, she says, (*unintelligible phrase*) some things, you ought to have your ears checked. My father had some. That's why, some they don't believe us, some (*unintelligible word*) they used to get mad because I talk loud. I says, if you go to work in the mill thirty-nine years, you know what's the trouble. I used to clean (*unintelligible phrase*), they used to tell me, Leo, don't talk too loud. Yeah, I says, if you had to work thirty nine years in the mill, you probably say, do this. Oh, I didn't know, I didn't know. No, I work there thirty-nine years, and like I said, put my two hands here, that's how much I loafed.

AL: Now, did you have any children who worked in the mill?

LL: No, no, yes, Maddie Levesque. You know Maddie? She used to work in, she used to run the, she run the store for a while, just before the Chinese bought it. When they came, they wanted her to show them. She says, I'm not showing nothing to no Chinese. So they almost, they didn't want to share their, what do they call it, severance pay coming to her, they didn't want. So the state, they notify them, we give you thirty days. They waited til the last day, and she gave my daughter the money, the severance pay. You know, she had, she was a CEO in a bank in Lewiston, used to be the People's Savings Bank, I don't know what the hell the name of it, and she told me, I don't know what the hell the name of it.

AL: BankNorth, maybe?

LL: Something, it's all in the Bates Mill, yeah, she's a CEO, big wheel. But I don't blame her, she went to school. She quit school about three, four years, she was fifteen years old. I got the boy and the girls are twins, and my daughter in New Jersey, she's fifty something.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about regarding your work at the mills that you feel is important to add?

LL: Like I say, my mind, whew. I see some of the people once in a while here. I met one two weeks ago, a guy named Lepage, he used to work in Number Five weave. I was at the credit union on Main Street, he says, don't you remember me? The name, his face looked familiar, but I couldn't remember the name. Lepage. Oh, I says, yeah, he says, boy, you (*unintelligible word*) changed, Leo, you're getting old. Yes, I guess so, I'm eighty-three.

We used to get ready on, when we'd get out Friday, to go fishing, that smelt, go fishing, smelt fishing. My daughters, they come, they says, you go home there, get your bucket 'cause we're going smelting.

AL: Now, where did you go around here to do that?

LL: Bowdoinham, Bowdoinham down there, near the rivers. They didn't have nothing this year because it was, no ice. Because I went, I went to Togus one morning, and the shacks on the ice, on the Kennebec, they were all out, because they lost three shacks, the ice wasn't too thick enough.

Oh yeah, even my boss caught me going without, I wasn't supposed to, but he says, you go smelting? I says, yeah. No, I says no first. He says, look, no-no, don't say that. I says, yup. But I don't blame, I was alone when I was going, nobody around there go, they're all scared of ice. I used to love to go there, Friday night, *phweet*.

Even Maddie, she came one night and after that her and her girlfriend, they wanted to go. Put your own worms. I'll fix it up this time, but the next time you want to come. Then we went up to Dresden, it's way out, Dresden, Maine.

AL: Well, great, thank you so much.

End of Interview

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