

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

**Roland Martel**  
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

**SWOH #033**  
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**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at the Museum L-A. The date is October 21st, 2009, and I'm here with Roland Martel. And could you start just by giving me your full name, and spelling it?

**RM:** R-O-L-A-N-D, middle initial O, last name is M-A-R-T-E-L.

**AL:** Where and when were you born?

**RM:** I was born in Lewiston, Maine, in 1930.

**AL:** And did you grow up in Lewiston?

**RM:** I grew up all my life in Lewiston, yes. I went to school in New York for a couple of years, but most of my time, and time in the service, but everything else was spent in Lewiston.

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

**RM:** My father's name was Antoine Martel. My mother's name was Dorothy Coulombe. She was a Coulombe. My father was from Canada, my mother was from the northern part of Maine.

**AL:** Aroostook County?

**RM:** Aroostook County, yeah, Fort Kent and that area.

**AL:** Right.

**RM:** And they moved down here, migrated down here, and all my siblings were born here in Lewiston, and we've lived here all our lives.

**AL:** Your father came from Canada as a young man, or a child?

**RM:** As a child, I believe. I don't have too many memories of my father.

**AL:** And he met your mother.

**RM:** He met my mother, my mother was a mill worker, he was a shoe shop worker, and my mother was a mill worker.

**AL:** So your father worked in the shoe shops.

**RM:** He worked in the shoe shops.

**AL:** And your mother worked in the mills in Lewiston.

**RM:** In the mill in Lewiston, yes.

**AL:** What mill did she work in?

**RM:** Oh, god, that's a long time ago. I don't know. They all migrated here, lived in Canada, so they worked in the mills around Little Canada.

**AL:** So you grew up in the Little Canada area?

**RM:** No, I didn't grow up there, no. By the time I came and lived in Lewiston, I was born on Farwell Street.

**AL:** And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

**RM:** I had a brother and four sisters. Now, my brother has passed on, two of my sisters passed on, so I still have two sisters.

**AL:** And have they lived in this area too, or spread out?

**RM:** Yes, they've lived in this area all their lives, until recently. One of my sisters had to move to New Hampshire, because their children live there. It was just recently, within a year.

**AL:** So what was it like to grow up in Lewiston, well, in the forties mostly?

**RM:** In the forties mostly, yeah. It was okay. I mean you're a kid, you don't know what's going on. I mean, it was fun. I worked as a bellhop at the DeWitt Hotel in those days.

**AL:** At which hotel?

**RM:** DeWitt, over at Pine and Park Street, I was a bellhop there, and that was a lot of fun.

**AL:** Were there a lot of kids in the neighborhood?

**RM:** Oh yeah, there was a lot of French kids. We lived downtown, so there was a lot of kids in the neighborhood. And I went to St. Peter's school, primary school, and St. Dom's.

**AL:** What did you do after school for fun? What sorts of things was it, just outside, playing sports?

**RM:** Outside, playing games, stuff like that. Then I was kind of, I liked different activities. Bits in plays, shows, kept busy.

**AL:** And so you went through school, and then went to work in the shoe shops.

**RM:** In 1951 I started, in 1950 I believe, yeah, I started to work in the shoe shop. And in '52 I went in the service, '54 I went back, I went back to my job, and I worked there until 1969. And for health reasons, I had to leave the shoe shop.

**AL:** Which shoe shops did you work at?

**RM:** I worked at Shapiro Brothers, the one and only.

**AL:** The one and only.

**RM:** Yeah, I was there for almost twenty years.

**AL:** And what did you do there?

**RM:** I worked in the cutting room. I worked in the cage, what they call, I used to inspect leather, write up cutting instructions. I never was a cutter myself, but I used to tell the cutters what dies to use and what to do. Not how to cut them, but which jobs they had to do, and inspected the leather with this other gentleman that worked in the cage with me.

**AL:** Now, the cage.

**RM:** The cage, that's where they kept all the leather and the jobs was all sorted. We called it the cage because it was all caged up. I mean, you know, it was just wired up, so you called it the cage. Big sorting bench like this, to sort the leather. I had a desk on the edge there, to write up my reports and do my cutting instructions.

**AL:** And so the leather was something that you knew a lot about, the quality of it?

**RM:** Well yeah, yeah, I had to learn. This gentleman showed me the way. It took me a while, but I learned it. I did that job until I was forced to leave, because of ill health.

**AL:** Right. And so who was the gentleman you worked with?

**RM:** It was a Mr. Walker, Charlie Walker. He was an old, he used to own his own shoe shop back along in Massachusetts, where there's a lot of shoe industries out there, and he owned his own. So for some reason he came to Maine, worked for Shapiro Brothers, and he took me in.

**AL:** So he mentored you, in a way.

**RM:** Yeah, he did, he showed me a lot.

**AL:** One thing I didn't ask, you were born in 1930, so you were born right as the Great Depression was coming in. Do you have any recollections of that time period?

**RM:** Poor, poor, poor. We were poor. We made ends do, because my grandparents had a farm so they brought us a lot of food, they gave us the meat and food and poultry, you know, so that's how we survived.

**AL:** And where was their farm?

**RM:** In Lewiston, on the Greene line. It was a small farm. They weren't big farmers, but they had enough to support the family, all of us.

**AL:** So you got to know them somewhat.

**RM:** Oh yeah, my grandparents I knew well, on my mother's side, I knew them very well.

**AL:** So they ran a farm, did they - ?

**RM:** Well they didn't run a farm, they had maybe a twenty-acre farm, just a small truck farm I think you called it in those days. But my grandfather worked for a dairy farmer up the road, so that's how they survived, and they helped us survive. My siblings went to work and helped with the family. We all had to chip in.

**AL:** Yeah, you must have started working at an early age.

**RM:** At an early age, yeah.

**AL:** Do you remember how old you were?

**RM:** Well, part time job, I mean I worked there, like I said, I worked at the DeWitt Hotel for a while, then I was stock boy for one of the fur stores in Lewiston, Crawford Furs. And after high school I went to work in the shoe shop.

**AL:** So what was Shapiro Shoe like, in terms of the management there? Do you have recollections what it was like to work for them?

**RM:** Oh, Shapiro Brothers, they were good to me. They were very, very good to me. I got along well with, I mostly worked with, there were four brothers, and I mostly worked with, or associated with Louie, one of the brothers, and he was very good to me. Because I remember, when I came out of the service I wanted to buy a house, and I went to the bank and they okayed the loan but they said, we'd feel much better if you were making five dollars a week more. In those days, wages weren't big. So I went in to see Louie and I told him the story, and he says okay, he says, give this to the cashier. He gave me a piece of paper and I went, and he gave me a ten dollar raise. So that was a big thing for me. In those days, in the early fifties, ten dollars was a big raise. So I always got along good with them. They were very good to me.

**AL:** Did you have any interactions with other shoe shops in town?

**RM:** No, I never, my friends worked at Shapiro's and that was it.

**AL:** And what kind of shoes did Shapiro's make?

**RM:** Women's shoes, women's shoes, they had – let's see if I can remember the lines – they had two lines, a cheap line and a more expensive line. They made good shoes.

**AL:** So you made friends with others that you worked with there.

**RM:** No, yeah, some of the guys in the cutting room, we chummed around, til we all got married and went our own separate ways. But we see each other occasionally. I mean we're still friends, but we don't go out as much together as we used to, but we're still friends.

**AL:** Well, what were the social things that you did, were there things you did after work together?

**RM:** Well, it was mostly go to dances on Saturday night, go bowling, or do something like that during the week.

**AL:** Was there a place that they had dances?

**RM:** Oh yeah, all the clubs had dances, a lot of places had (*unintelligible*) -

**AL:** The social clubs.

**RM:** The social clubs, they all had dances. Fifty cents, you went in for fifty cents, and you danced so it was fun. See all the dances, go there.

**AL:** Now, in your position in the cutting room, did you have to work with leather suppliers, was that part of your job?

**RM:** No, no, I didn't work with the suppliers. I just worked, everything was ordered and in the stockroom, and I ordered from the stock room, what I needed, and so I didn't deal with the suppliers or anything like that.

**AL:** Can you talk about what your job was sort of in detail a little bit more? You said making patterns.

**RM:** Well not, I didn't make the patterns, I'd tell them which pattern to use. They used dies to cut the shoes with, and I'd tell them which dies to use, and sometimes, a seven, if it was snug, they'd go to, cut it as a seven and a half, and make it a seven. So that's what I'd tell them to do, tell them what kind of material to use and this and that, and then deploy the other parts of the shoe to the different departments, like the soles and the heels went to someplace else, somebody else was taking care of that, but I had to send them their information. And the lines and all that, that was a different department, send them the tags and the information. I kept busy.

**AL:** And you left in 1969, you said.

**RM:** Yes, I left for medical reasons, yes. And the doctor advised me not to go back to the shoe shops.

**AL:** And so when you left, were you already seeing the downward turn for the shoe industry in the area, or did that really come later?

**RM:** No, it was still good when I left, it was still good when I left, but of course, I saw it coming because, through my friends, and my brother, he worked at the same shop.

**AL:** Oh, your brother did.

**RM:** Yeah, yeah, and I could see it. But I was out of that by the time, before they moved, they moved to the old Long Building, and I was out of the shoe shop before they moved there.

**AL:** And what was your brother's name?

**RM:** Vernon.

**AL:** And did he work where you worked, or a different area?

**RM:** No, he worked in the cutting room too. He was a block cutter, what you call a block cutter. Little hand dies with a mallet. Little bows, cut up little bows and stays and stuff like that.

**AL:** Now, did Shapiro have, were they in big competition with other shoe shops?

**RM:** Oh yeah, there were a lot of shoe shops around here and they were, Shapiro's was a big, yeah, they employed quite a few people. It was one of the biggest in the area. Clark Shoe I think was as big, and Lown Shoe for awhile, but Shapiro's was, it occupied three floors in the building. Very competitive, yeah.

**AL:** My next question is about, thinking about maybe some of the people who were older than you when you started. Is there any that you recall that you could talk about? Maybe some that had worked there a long time when you came in, that you remember?

**RM:** Oh yeah, there was that gentlemen, Charlie Walker, that mentored me, yeah, he was there. And the foreman in the cutting room was a man by the name of Frank Herrick, and he was very good. And then he retired and Harold Taylor took his place. And those are the only bosses I've ever had.

**AL:** Well I know that some of the people I've talked to, they went from shop to shop, to a lot of different shops. That wasn't the case for you.

**RM:** No, not for me, no, I went there and I stayed there.

**AL:** Did you have any friends that were in that role of going from - ?

**RM:** Oh yeah, there was a lot of people. There was man by, Harry Pelletier, he worked there for years and years. Another friend of mine, Raymond, he stayed there until they closed, then he went to another shop. But a lot of them stayed right there until they closed. It was a good place to work. Shapiro's was a good place. But you had some that kept going from one job to the other.

**AL:** Did they provide any benefits for workers?

**RM:** Nothing like they provide now. We had insurance, but that was it. I remember when vacations started. In the beginning we didn't have any vacation time, so I

remember when vacation started. You used to get, for a week's vacation you got two percent of your pay, yearly pay, not counting your half time, but your straight time. And when they went up to two weeks vacation, then you got four percent. So if you had worked a lot, you did a lot of overtime, you had bigger pay for your vacation than you would normally. So I remember when that started. That was back in the, must be in the fifties, it started then.

**AL:** Were you allowed to work overtime on a regular basis?

**RM:** Oh, I worked overtime all the time. I worked almost forty-nine hours a week, an hour overtime every night and five hours on Saturday morning. On Friday, you didn't work overtime on Friday. That was payday, you had to rush out and go spend your money. I worked at least forty-nine hours a week.

**AL:** Was there ever a time during the work day where employees could socialize and kid around? Were there pranks or jokes?

**RM:** Yeah, we had our breaks, you know, you had a mid morning break, and you could socialize then. Then you had lunch hour from twelve to one, and then a lot of people played cards, or they did something like that during their lunch break. And then in the afternoon, about two o'clock, you had another break, you know, two-thirty, you had another break, ten, fifteen minutes, I believe, but you had a break. During work you could talk, I mean you could go from one job site to the other and socialize. Not, you had to do your work, but you could still talk.

**AL:** Were there any events, or incidents that you remember during your time in the shoe shops that stand out in your mind?

**RM:** Well, we had started something, or I had with some friends started something. We organized a Christmas party for our spouses, the workers and their spouses, just for our department. And in order to raise money for that we, on Friday we'd sell raffle tickets on a bottle of liquor. Chances were a quarter, and we accumulated the money. So that way, at Christmas time we could have a caterer and cater us a dinner. And I would go to different companies that we dealt with and ask them if they'd donate liquor, or donate something. I asked the Shapiro brothers if they'd donate something, they would give us some liquor, a couple bottles of liquor, and somebody else gave us this and that, and that's how we'd get the party, and it didn't cost anybody anything. And you went in and you had, well you had to buy a ticket, maybe like two dollars, something like that, and you went in and you had two drinks, free drinks, and if you wanted more, the drinks were twenty-five cents each. And anything that we had left over at the end of the night, we'd raffle off. Everybody wrote their name on their ticket, and then there was a bottle of liquor that wasn't open, we'd raffle it off. We didn't keep anything for the next year, you know, just organized that, had a good time, a little dancing, and we were all set. It was a nice event, it was a fun thing. After I left, I don't think they kept it up, but



when I was there we did it.

**AL:** Is there anything that I haven't asked you, that you think is important to add?

**RM:** No, I think you've covered it pretty well. We've gone through from start to finish, and in between. I think you've covered it pretty well. Like I say, the Shapiros were very nice people to work for, and they employed a lot of people. You'll always find somebody that will gripe about something, but in general, I think they treated us well. They were very good.

**AL:** Great, thank you very much.

**RM:** You're welcome.

*End of Interview*  
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