

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

Moe Cote
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

SWOH #047
April 23, 2010

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at the Museum L-A. The date is April 23rd, 2010, and I'm at Pamco in Lewiston, Maine with Moe Cote, this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Moe, could you start just by giving me your full name?

Moe Cote: Maurice Cote.

AL: And is that spelled C-O-T-E?

MC: That is correct.

AL: And where and when were you born?

MC: I was born here in 1950, in Lewiston, Maine.

AL: And you grew up in this area?

MC: I did, I grew up in Auburn.

AL: What was Auburn like in the fifties, the later fifties and in the sixties?

MC: In what respect?

AL: In terms of growing up, neighborhoods, what you did socially, education, that type of thing.

MC: Well, I grew up on Poland Road and it was a nice little community, and it was basically French. And normally did what every little kid would do, is go out and play outdoors and ride our bikes and go to the river, and things of that sort.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

MC: My father's name was Paul, and my mother's name is Jane.

AL: And what did they do for work, growing up?

MC: Well, my mom worked in one of the shoe factories here, and my dad was a

carpenter when he first got out of the service, and then he went to work for Theberge Sewing Machine Company, and he was making attachments for the footwear industry.

AL: Okay, so they both had jobs related to shoes.

MC: That is correct.

AL: And what did your mom do in the shoe shop?

MC: Well, she was a stitcher, and she worked there until she started having children and once she started that, she stayed home.

AL: And how many were there in your family?

MC: Nine, nine children.

AL: Where were you in the nine, older or younger?

MC: Number two, I was the second oldest. I have an older sister Diane, which works here, by the way.

AL: So talk about when you first began being interested in working with shoes.

MC: Well actually, when I was a teenager I played in a rock 'n' roll band, like almost every kid did, and I needed money for my guitar and my amplifier. So my dad bought it for me, but I had to work for him. And he's the one that founded the company, in 1960, and how the name came about was, his name is Paul Marcel Cote, so he had 'PA' for Paul, 'M' for Marcel, and 'CO' for Cote.

AL: I was wondering how this name came to be.

MC: That's how it came, that's how it came to be. So he started it in 1960. Four years later in '64 I joined him, I was fourteen years old, and the company was in his cellar and it was fourteen feet by twenty-eight feet, and what he did is, he made attachments for the stitching room, the fitting room, is what he did.

AL: And what do you mean by attachments?

MC: Well, on sewing machines you have these special small parts that will do a specific job on the shoe, is what it is. So a folder on the top line, if you want to fold the leather over, you'd need a second collar gauge, and it would fold the material over, okay? So, you had a binder that would bind the top line of a shoe. He would make those types of parts, and then he taught me how to do it, so he taught me how to make every single part in the fitting room. That's how I started.

AL: And so your company is sort of inventor and supplier to the shoe shops? I mean, how did that work?

MC: Well, we were, like I said, we were attachment makers, I learned how to make attachments, which is a trade, but I wanted to do a little more than that. And I didn't want to work in the cellar, I mean I wanted to expand the company so we had to move out of the cellar. So we did, and we bought a small building and we operated out of there. And what I did is, I started selling the sewing machines with the attachments as one package, and that's what worked for us. So I went around to all the shoe factories in Maine, because there was enough of them at the time, and I would sell that type of program, I would say, I will sell you the sewing machine with the attachments to do the application, and that way they wouldn't have to buy the attachments from us and then buy the machines from someone else and then put them on and make them work. So that's how we started. And from there, I just expanded into the pre-fit room, down into the cutting room, and went all the way to the end to the finishing room, that's what I did.

AL: And so you had a large base of business in the mid sixties.

MC: Yes, yes, we did.

AL: Do you know sort of in terms of numbers how big it was and how small it got?

MC: Well it was, I guess the heyday for me being in the industry was probably in the eighties. It started in the mid seventies, it went up to the late eighties, and that was the peak for me. We had forty-five shoe factories just here in Lewiston and Auburn, which is incredible. We had over a hundred just in Maine, we had eighteen hundred in the United States, so that was peak for me. So what I did is, I would sell to Bass Shoe, Dexter Shoe, we had these factories here in Lewiston, we had Stride Right in Auburn, we had Kagan Lown, we had Clark's, which is now Clark's of England, they were here, you had Supreme Slipper, you had Fancy Stitchers, you had Billings Shoe, Dori Shoe, Falcon Footwear, Downeast Casuals, and Knapp Shoe, which made the welts. So yeah, it was quite a good booming industry here in Lewiston and Auburn. So that's what I did, I sold to these people here.

AL: And so it was late eighties when you saw the decline start?

MC: Yeah. What happened was, is of course we had no tariff to speak of, and everybody was looking for cheaper labor and so what they did is started looking elsewhere. First they started in Puerto Rico, and then from there they went to the Dominican Republic, and from there they went to Central America, and then they shot off to China. And do what happened was, let's just use Bass Shoe, for instance, they would find factories in China, and the Chinese companies would call me and say, we want the exact same machine that you set up for Bass so we can do their product. So I

would send machines to China. So slowly, that's what was happening, all the footwear was going off to the Far East, is what it was. So all these companies, you know, once they started the process of going offshore, it just continued because it got easier and easier and easier, and people started to understand how to do it, and do it successfully. So that's when we saw the decline. But it's been happening for fifty years, it really has. So what we had to do, Pamco, is we had to follow the business. And that's what we did, wherever it went, we followed it and we went to it. So we went from Maine to New England to America to Canada, to Puerto Rico, to Dominican, to Mexico, to India, to China, Indonesia. So that's what we had to do, we had to follow the industries. So because we had a good base, a good foundation on the companies here in America, we followed them to these different parts of the world. And that's what kept us going and kept us in business. So we had to diversify, you know, we had to look beyond just here even in America, is what we had to do.

AL: And to continue in today's world, does that mean that most of your business is overseas, or do you still have local business as well?

MC: Well, we do. When I say local, I mean the United States at this point. You know, we know here in Lewiston we have Falcon Performance Footwear, we have Mike Rancourt that's doing some beautiful handsewn shoes, and we have a couple other little factories here. Allen-Edmonds is still here as well, which is a great footwear.

AL: And so you have a few locally that you work with, but mostly local you see in terms of the United States.

MC: Yes. And then what happened was, is of course the war started, and what happened was, all the factories in America started to manufacture footwear for the war, for the men and women going off to war. So that really sparked some business for Pamco, because we sell to all the manufacturers of the footwear for the war so we had a lot of business in that arena. And then we sell, also right now we're doing a lot of business with India, India is doing a lot of cowboy boots, welt construction. In China the same thing, the welts are being made over there so we have a lot of business in China as well. And of course we still have Dominican Republic, and we still have Puerto Rico, so that's still going very, very well. So now we're going into Bangladesh, and we're going into Vietnam and Indonesia, so yeah, we're actually worldwide.

AL: And your product hasn't been duplicated in a way that would – you know what I'm saying? Have you developed products over time to keep your business on the top?

MC: Well, what we had to do is find a niche, because today that's what you have to have to be in business, especially in the United States. And especially in the footwear industry, because it's a very difficult industry. So we had to find out where we fit if we wanted to be global, and so what we did is we found that we could do the welt construction machinery, and do it very, very well. And we're probably one of the only

ones left in America, other than one other, that will make welt machinery. So that's a very good business for us. Also, we're doing lasting equipment, which is toe lasters inside, and heel seat lasters, to last the shoe, so we got involved with that and that's doing very well for us as well. And we do splitters and skivers, you know, we're doing a lot of those machines as well.

AL: And I don't know if this is, I had it in my notes and I'll ask you if it's correct, that as the shoe shops closed, were you able to acquire some of the equipment from those shops?

MC: Yeah, when the shoe factories started to go out of business, I would travel to that factory, whether it was in Maine, Pennsylvania, California, Puerto Rico, Canada, and slowly they were closing one by one. Like I said, we had eighteen hundred factories at one time in America and one at a time they were going out of business, so I would go to those factories and I would buy trailer fulls of equipment and I would bring it back here to Pamco and refurbish it and sell it elsewhere, so that was a big business for us as well.

AL: So looking at your years in the shoe industry, and you mentioned this a little bit, about finding a niche, where do you see it in the future?

MC: For Pamco?

AL: Pamco and the other shoe shops that are still in business.

MC: Well, I think we need to have a base, a certain base for footwear in America, especially for our military. And of course it has to be made in America, so that's a good thing. And most of those factories are in the midwest, and we have an office there, in St. Louis, Missouri, that caters to the people over there that make military footwear. We also have a place up in Canada that makes some of the lasting equipment, we bought International Shoe Machinery of Canada, and that's right outside of Montreal, and so we're doing International Equipment up there, which is lasting equipment.

AL: And so, you said you and your dad started business together when you were fourteen, and you moved into a new location. How long was he with you, working?

MC: My dad founded the company in 1960, but I joined him four years after that so he's the one that actually formed the company and started the company. So what we did is, from there we just expanded it, like I mentioned to you, going into sewing machines with the attachments, and of course we expanded at that point, we needed more room to do that, so that's why we did it.

AL: So your dad, I wanted to focus on your dad because he's the one that really sort of developed the machinery and the pieces.

MC: Yes, yes, he did, and he was with us til he retired when he was sixty-five years old. Yeah, he stayed with Pamco til he was sixty-five, and then he retired. And we were in Auburn on Washington Street, is what it was.

AL: And when did you move to this location?

MC: We moved here, this used to be Crest Shoe, and they used to, they were doing a lot of work for Bass Shoe, which was the buck suede with the red crepe sole, they had a great business doing that for Bass until Bass pulled out and went offshore. But then Capezio out of New Jersey bought it, which is a dance shoe company, they make dance shoes, different type of dance shoes, and so what they did is bought it from the Smith boys and they were making all dance shoes here. In 1991 they closed the factory and I bought all the equipment, and then they offered the building to me so I bought the building as well, and then I moved in. So I've been here since 1991, yeah.

AL: And talk to me a little bit about Lewiston, Lewiston when you were growing up, the downtown, what it was like. There were still, the mills were open, the shoe shops were open, can you describe what it looked like, the downtown area is what I'm thinking of, and people getting out of work, and the weekend shopping and all that.

MC: It was huge, it was just so vibrant. And you had Lisbon Street, and you had Peck's, way back when, and you had five and dime stores, Woolworth was here. It was great. And we had like the Bates Mill here, and we had all these complexes full of shoe factories. Like I said, there was like forty-five of them, so when everybody got out of work – most people walked to work, and that's why you see so many apartment buildings around here, and you have Little Canada, because a lot of the French people were there, working in the factories here. So yeah, it was very vibrant, and on the weekends we had the PAL hop and we used to go there and dance, we had dancing over there, over the Lewiston Police station on Pine Street. And everybody would migrate to the city, is what it was, and it was just a good time, it was a good time, it was a good place to grow up.

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

MC: No, I think you did an excellent job.

AL: Thank you very much.

MC: Thank you.

End of Interview
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