MILL WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE

Ray Croteau **MWOH# 008**
(*Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu*) September 23, 2005

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Ray Croteau at the Muskie Archives at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine on September 23rd, 2005. 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?

Ray Croteau: Raymond Henry Croteau.

AL: And where and when were you born?

RC: I was born in Lewiston, Maine, May 4th, 1933.

AL: And did you grow up in Lewiston?

RC: Yes.

AL: What was it like then?

RC: A lot less traffic, really, that's what it was. That's the main thing, the traffic.

AL: The community was much smaller?

RC: No, I would say, well yes, it was smaller but it was still a fairly good size city, yes. But there were no cars like today, everybody didn't have a car. You had a car every three, four houses on a street. Today, everybody in the family's got one, so it makes a big difference.

AL: In what part of Lewiston were you living in, growing up?

RC: Wood Street.

AL: Oh, right here.

RC: Right here, down the bottom, near Sabattus.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

RC: My father was Arthur J. Croteau, my mother was Eva Jutras.

AL: How do you spell that?

RC: J-U-T-R-A-S.

AL: And did they come from Lewiston, too?

RC: Both of them, yes, they're both natives.

AL: In the community at that time, in the '30s and '40s as you were growing up, what were some of the things that families did for social activities?

RC: Well, they had get togethers, they'd visit a lot. More than you have today, okay? There were a lot of social clubs in town which, and the snowshoe, snowshoer programs. Of course, most of those are all gone now, but that's what people did. Listen to the radio, read newspapers. And the meals were usually always, particularly the evening meal, was total family. No interference with television, it didn't exist.

AL: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

RC: I have two brothers and one sister.

AL: And what were the schools like, what schools did you go to?

RC: St. Peter and Paul's grammar school, and I went to St. Dominic's my freshman year of high school, then I transferred to what is now the middle school, which was the high school then.

AL: And was French spoken in the home?

RC: Always, that's why, I'm bilingual, all right? In the home was French, all French. Of course, you go to St. Peter's, it's a parochial school, was fifty-fifty French and English. So there was a lot of French, yes.

AL: So you were allowed to speak French at school?

RC: Oh yes, either morning or afternoon session was in French. You'd go, half the school year you'd have it in the morning, and the other half you'd have it in the afternoon. And all the French, like the catechism, we had religious classes, well, everything was written in French. And they taught French and French grammar a little bit.

AL: And was there a sense that when you graduated from high school that you would go to work in the mills, did your, any of your family work in the mill?

RC: Oh yeah, my father and my mother both worked in the mill at one time or another. My father did until he became a postman, mailman. My mother did until she had four kids to raise.

AL: What kind of jobs did your father have in the mill?

RC: He worked in a department called jacquard card cutting, they'd make the patterns for the bedspread looms. That's where he worked that I know of. My mother was a spooler, a winder, yarn winder. She started young, oh yeah.

AL: What age?

RC: I don't know, but I remember she used to tell me that when the State inspectors would come around they'd hide them.

AL: Yeah, so maybe high school age then?

RC: Oh, probably, well my mother, she went to the sixth grade, then she became deaf, and she couldn't hear so she just dropped out of school, so. You didn't stay idle back in those days, money was very, very tight. I guess she, as soon as, as old as she could, she got in the mill, yeah.

AL: And so how old were you when you started at the mill?

RC: Oh, depends on what time. Now, I had small episodes before becoming a full time worker. Let's see, I would say I was eighteen, yes, I was eighteen, I had a couple of stints as a what they call spare hand at the Bates Mill, just temps, we were temps. But I started full time in 1957, let's see, I'd be twenty four, yeah, I was twenty four.

AL: And what were you doing then, can you describe your job?

RC: Beg your pardon?

AL: When you were twenty-four and went into the mill full time, can you describe your job?

RC: The first job was a temporary one, I worked as a helper on a slasher. They made loom beams, that's what they made. You just assist the operator, you do the toting and, you know, more or less, you supplied it and then you got rid of what they made. I did that for a while, but I knew that if I didn't sign for a job I'd be out the door, because there's a, you owned your job, and you had to sign for it, then it became yours. If you didn't sign, they'd get rid of you because they couldn't keep you. There was a union contract, they can only keep you for sixty days I think it was, as a temp. That's when I became a bobbin boy, which I'd rather have kept the other job, I liked it more, but I wanted to work.

AL: And so what did a bobbin boy do?

RC: He supplied winders, spoolers they called them, (*unintelligible word*) called them spoolers, with yarn. And then he'd take them, their finished product to the next process.

AL: Okay, and so this was to keep the flow of work going? Was it fast paced?

RC: Well, it would keep you going. There were lulls, though, you know, there were lulls. That kind of work, I mean if you're, sometimes these machines would run out of, depending on what they were running, you know, if they were running fine counts it was a picnic, because it's slow. If they were running the coarse yarns you got to hustle because they eat that yarn right up.

AL: And so it was about 1957 when you went to the mill?

RC: Yes, it was '57, yeah.

AL: And what role did the unions play in the mills, the unions?

RC: Oh, unions, well they, they just looked after the employees' grievances, and working conditions, and wages once a year, or contract times, sometimes they were longer contracts. Pretty much, but mostly got into grievances. Somebody had a complaint, or somebody was written up for bad work, well, they'd go in and investigate and negotiate and things like that.

AL: Were there ever any strikes at the mill when you were there?

RC: Not while I was there, no, no.

AL: Did you hear about them happening before your time?

RC: Oh yes, before I went in I did, yeah.

AL: Do you recall any of those stories?

RC: Not really, not really. No, I wasn't that interested, let's put it that way. I really wasn't.

AL: Now, you were born during the Depression years.

RC: Nineteen thirty-three.

AL: Yeah, so you were very young, but did your family ever talk about how hard it was during those years?

RC: They were lucky, okay? My father was a postman. They worked, so he had his pay every week. They were very lucky. They didn't suffer, let's put it that way. Now, my brothers did, because they were older than I am, one is eighty-six, the other one died 2001, he was eighty. When they got out of school, work was very, very difficult to get. Now that's where they suffered. That stopped when the war started. Until then, it was hard to get a job, very hard.

AL: So a good ten years there.

RC: Oh yeah, they suffered.

AL: Did they have families yet?

RC: No. Well, my oldest brother did. He was married in, gosh, he was eighteen when he got married, yeah. He was born in 1919. He was eighteen, he had family, yeah. Now, he would do, he'd work a couple of jobs a day, you know, he didn't just work one, he'd work at night, too. He drove a cab around this town at night, besides whatever else, other work he could find.

AL: So you became a bobbin boy, and how long were you a bobbin boy?

RC: Not a year, less than a year. Almost a year, but not quite a year. It was third shift, too, nighttime, yeah. Now, the company came along and asked if I'd be interested in taking an exam because they had an opening in the industrial engineering department. Ah heck, what the heck have I got to lose? I took it. And I got the job. But not because I was the best one, because another fellow who ran the same department, was a slasher man, he was number one. To take the job you had to take a pay cut. He was married; he didn't take it. I was single, so I took it.

AL: So that, was the job that you kept from then on?
RC: Well, that was the good starter, yeah, I did that for a long time, yes.

AL: And what were your responsibilities in that job?

RC: Oh, that was a wonderful job, you got into everything, you know. You got into, actually you went in and you observed how things ran. If there were problems, you know, you solved problems, if there was productions problems. And the machine layouts, that was part of our job. Justifications for improvements, that's part of our jobs. You did time studies, a lot of that. That's what we did, we just, we were problem solvers, that's what we were.

AL: Time studies, was that to figure out how much time each job took to complete something?

RC: Exactly. Piece rates, too, we used to establish the piece rates, all the incentive rates in the plant, yeah.

AL: Now, when you were at the mill did they have sports teams?

RC: I would say no, not when I was there, okay? Just prior to it, though, there were a lot of them. I had relatives that played on them.

AL: So, I know as we got later into the second half of the twentieth century, the mills started to reduce the amount they were doing. Were you there for that time period, did you see?

RC: Oh yeah, oh.

AL: Can you describe that for me, when it started taking place and what happened?

RC: The first time I noticed it was in 1956, that's when the Androscoggin division downtown, they were, they ran synthetic yarns, mostly all rayons and that type of thing. They made upholstery cloth that they wove on looms. And I remember when they shut that down, because competition was tough and they were trying to get concessions from the workers and the workers wouldn't give. So they shut it down. I remember that The same thing happened to the plant in Biddeford, which was a Bates plant, in Biddeford, they did the same thing there, they shut that down.

AL: So what, did they want the workers to get paid less?

RC: No, they wanted them to run more machines. Because the running conditions of the yarns that they were using allowed the machines, I mean they wouldn't stop. For the workers, it was paradise all right. But they wouldn't take more machines, that's what it was.

AL: So did you supervise people as well?

RC: Oh yeah, yeah.

AL: Now, you retired in 1982?

RC: I didn't retire, oh no.

AL: Not retire, left the mill.

RC: See, the mill, it was partly what you were saying, that they were shrinking. Bates had become an ESOP company, employee stock ownership, and of course that involved a loan. The banks were very,

they weren't sympathetic, let's put it that way. So they, the mills started shrinking. Of course the Hill Mill had already been closed, and the Bates mills are shrinking and shrinking and shrinking. Finally, I was odd man out. They were cutting, what they were doing, they were saving money. What they'd do is they'd, they'd fire somebody and hire somebody to do the same job for less money, that's what they were doing. They may change the job title, okay, that's what they were doing.

AL: So how did you feel about that?

RC: Oh, I was livid.

AL: Because from the people I've talked to, really, I've gotten the sense that they worked real hard in the mills for what they earned.

RC: Oh yes, they didn't pay a lot of money, let's put it that way. That's one of the problems when they let you go, you didn't have any money, you spent it raising your family, you know?

AL: Were there any people that you worked with over the years that you recall, that stick out in your mind for one reason or another?

RC: Oh yeah, quite a few.

AL: Can you talk about them and who they were?

RC: Well, Fred Lebel, for one, I think you already, you must have met him, Fred Lebel. Richard Sylvain, Richard Sylvain left the mills in the '60s, but he was a plant superintendent at the Hill Mill at the time. Of course, he went to the National Guard, he retired from there a general, but this man was smart, very smart. Mill men, yes, are Raymond Coulombe, he was plant manager of the Hill division at one time. Then his family started White Rock Distributors in the cities here, which is a very well going business, but Ray Coulombe was a very, very smart man, very, very smart man, yeah. Ron Gosselin, Ronald Gosselin, I don't know if you've met him or not. He was a, he grew up in, he worked for me for a long time. Actually, he replaced me in the engineering job. When I was let go, that's who they put in charge. He's a brilliant young man.

AL: What are some of the changes that you've seen in the Lewiston community since the mills have closed? Have there been obvious changes?

RC: Yeah, well of course, the skills are gone, let's put it that way. You're not going to make textiles here even if the thing picked up right now, because they're gone. But yeah, I used to walk by and see the empty buildings, and that bothers me, you know. But I am glad when I see other businesses going in there and people going to work, I like that. But it's a different, the work is different. Bates was a, as I think about it, was a good place, you know. If you needed a job back then, you could always pretty much get it because we had a lot of textile mills. There were five thousand jobs in this city, and there were a lot of mills, including the big Continental Mill down on Lincoln Street. And that was gone, you couldn't depend on them, there were no more big industries where you could go in and say, hey, I need a job. They're gone, everything is smaller, all the businesses are smaller. The only one that's bigger is the hospital up here, and of course Bates College.

AL: When you worked in the mill, was it, I know it was mostly Franco Americans, but were there distinctive populations in the mill of Irish or Greek or others that you worked with?

RC: I worked with Polish people, there were some Greeks. Oh yeah, oh yeah.

AL: And I guess I'm asking did they, were they a group in a certain area of the mill, or were they spread out just like everybody?

RC: Oh no, there was no grouping, certainly, you worked, the guy next to you could be Jewish, you know, he's right there next to you. No, there was no groupings, no. At least not when I was there. There may have been, years ago there may have been, yeah. I don't know, but there weren't any when I was there.

AL: You talked about a lot of the social activity was with you families when you were growing up, and the family meals. Were there particular dishes that your mother or grandmother made?

RC: I never knew my grandparents, none of us did. They all died before we were born. My mother, oh, my mother could cook anything. She was a marvelous cook, oh yeah. And she did (*unintelligible phrase*) cooked on, I say how could she do it, I think back, I say, how could she do it. She did it. No, she was a great cook, yeah.

AL: Were there particular dishes that she cooked that you remember?

RC: I have never tasted, and don't tell my wife this, but I have never tasted a chicken, not the way they make it today but the way she used to make it. And her stuffing, there was nothing like it, oh, believe me. And of course she'd cook crepe and, you know what that is. French pancake.

AL: Oh, yes, yes.

RC: She was very good at that.

AL: I pronounce it wrong, I pronounce it crep. Yeah, those are wonderful.

RC: Yes, I go to Rolly's all the time, in Auburn. They serve it there, they make great, good ones, very good.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think I've missed in terms of talking about your time at the mills?

RC: Well, yeah, you know, I was kind of blessed in a way that, but Bates had three mills here when I was there, so I worked in all three of them. I worked in the Hill Mill, I worked the Edwards Mill, not in town, Edwards was in Augusta, and I worked here. Before I worked at Bates, though, oh, I forgot about that, yes, I worked at W.S. Libby, yes, I worked there. I worked there for about a year. That was '55"56, yeah, so that was a whole different kind of textiles, they made blankets and it was a woollen mill as such, they didn't run many wools, but they were running synthetics.

Edwards, now, made industrial fabrics, and what a dusty, dusty place. You know, they have a lot of lint, a lot of dust at Edwards, yeah. You didn't go to Edwards and look in for a good running condition because there wasn't any, but it ran. That was the good part, go to different mills, see different things. Yup.

AL: Great, thank you very much.

RC: Okay.

AL: We're going to add one more thing here.

RC: You know, my last job at the Bates plant was plant manager. So that was, that was kind of like a

frosting on the cake for me. That's all, that's it.

AL: Great, thank you.

End of Interview
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