

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

Dot McAtee
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

MWOH# 043
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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History Project. The date is May 22nd, 2006. I'm at the Maine Heritage Weavers at 41 Chestnut Street in Lewiston, interviewing Dot McAtee. And if you could start just by spelling your full name, saying and spelling it?

Dot McAtee: Dot, D-O-T, McAtee, M-C-A-T-E-E.

AL: And where and when were you born?

DM: I was born in Lewiston, 6/4/54.

AL: And what part of Lewiston did you grow up in?

DM: Actually I was born in Lewiston because the hospital is here, but I lived in Auburn, I'm from Auburn originally.

AL: And what part of Auburn did you grow up in?

DM: Down off the Poland Road, Washington Street area. Yeah, down that way.

AL: Was that, I mean it's fairly rural today, was it much more so at that time?

DM: Yes, it still is. Oh yeah, well it's grown up a lot now, because I was down there not too long ago and I noticed a few more buildings. But Pioneer Plastics was there at the time, GE was in the area, so, they had Maine Milling there, too. I'm not sure if that's still there or not, but there wasn't a whole lot of, it was pretty rural, yeah.

AL: And what age did you start working at the Bates Mill?

DM: At Bates I started, see, my youngest just turned twenty eight, and he was six weeks old, so that's when I started at Bates. And I had two other children at the time, but I started working third shift then. Because my ex husband decided to go to school full time, so it was an easy way to get a job and not have to worry about day care, and

so, and it was an aunt of mine who had been at the mill for years, my godmother, who got me into Bates Mill.

AL: Oh, wow. So at that time was it much easier to get into the mill if you knew somebody, or?

DM: I think, there was just, the jobs were plentiful and the pay was good, because they were union. So compared to, because I didn't have any college education, so as far as, because I got out of high school and got married and, you know, had kids, and so I didn't have a whole lot of experience working. Although I had worked like in the heel factories when I was like sixteen, I did that part time.

AL: Oh, you did.

DM: Yeah, because my mom worked in the heel factories and the shoe shops, so I did that part time. So I was familiar with manufacturing, but I wasn't, you know, I didn't have a whole lot of educational background as far as getting any office work or anything like that. And it just worked. I mean, where are you going to work third shift, you know? It's either the heel factories or the mill or, so that worked.

And I loved it. When I went into the mill I just, I immediately liked what I saw and, of course it was quite different then compared to when they closed as far as the number of people went.

AL: Right, because this was, what year was it that you would have gone into the mill?

DM: Seventy-eight, it was in '78 that I started. But it was amazing to see the people coming out of there. I mean, hundreds of people. And then I was told that at one time there were thousands, but to me this was a lot. I mean, there were times when you actually had to wait for a parking space, you know, to go into work. And then when I saw, I mean it, of course I didn't stay there all that time, because I had quit after, I think I was only there seven or eight years, and then I was involved, they had a fire there and my husband told me to quit, that was it, you're not going back, that's it. But after I went through my divorce and stuff I ended up going back to Bates, and so I probably have a total of twenty years between Bates and here.

AL: And what different jobs did you do in the mill, (*unintelligible phrase*)?

DM: I started right from the beginning, they called it a battery hand. We were putting bobbins in the magazines. Now we used spools of yarn. At that time they were just bobbins. We used to put them in the magazines, and they had a person that covered so many looms, and that's what you did. You know, the weaver didn't do any of that, weaver was just weaving. And we used to, I think they called it magazine tender or

something, that's how I started out.

And then I got a job as a room girl, and the room girl would, that was the, because eventually I weave, because I really liked, you know, I was impressed and fascinated by that job. And so I took a job as a room girl when it became available, which you draw in the warps and you actually learn how to, you know, draw it in, how the reed works and how the looms work. And then eventually I became a weaver after that.

AL: Were there many woman weavers?

DM: Yeah, yeah, I was surprised, yeah, there was quite a few woman weavers. And it was weird because a lot of the older women wore skirts and dresses, and I just can't imagine how they did that, but yeah. Because, I mean, I always got dirty and, you know.

AL: So by the time you were at the mill, the dress codes had changed?

DM: The older women were wearing the dresses and, yeah -

AL: But by their own choice.

DM: Right, I mean you could tell they'd been for years. And my aunt had been there, gosh, I think, she must have, when she retired she must have had over forty years in the mill, and she, you know, would wear the dresses or the smocks and, you know, they had the aprons and they put all their little tools in there. But, no, when I went there we were wearing jeans and, you know.

AL: Did she talk about what it was like when she first started, did she give you a sense of that, the differences that had occurred?

DM: She had talked about, see, she was a room girl. I don't think she ever did the weaving part of it. But in those days it was like, when you had a job you stayed there. You know, it's like, you didn't hop from place to place, unlike today, you know, I mean people, nowadays you probably go through five, six jobs in a lifetime. But then, it's like you got out of school, you started a job, and that's where you planned on retiring. And that's what her thing was, you know, she didn't even have any insight or, you know, had no intention of going anywhere else or doing anything else. That's what she knew and that was it. And she loved her job, you know, she, so, so when the opportunity came or, you know, when I was looking for work, and she said, oh, gee, they're looking, they've got an opening at the mill, I'll see if I can get you in. And, you know, I went there and filled out an application and started right away.

AL: And what was her name?

DM: Emma, Emma Pelletier. I think you interviewed her. Either you did or, it's Rachel's aunt, matter of fact.

AL: Now, how long have you been with Maine Heritage Weavers?

DM: Since they opened, so that would be, was it 2003? About that, 2003, yeah. Fred called, I was going to school, because I took advantage of the schooling when Bates closed and, in fact I'm still going, and he called and said he was opening up a small operation, was looking for a weaver and would I be interested. And so we talked, and I said, well, I really don't want it to interfere with my school because I'd really like to finish, and oh no, no, we'll work around it. So they've been awesome about that.

But I, you know, even getting a degree and, I still feel like this is where I want to work, you know. I enjoy weaving, and they're great to work for, and I like the job, I like seeing the finished product, you know, when you go into a store or you open a magazine and you say, you know, I made that. So it's a good feeling.

But I don't think I realized how the Heritage, how important Heritage was until Bates closed. It's like it was just a job, and then when they closed and I realized the effect it had on the community and, you know, how many people had worked there. It's like you never think of it when you're right there, you know, it's like you don't know what you have until it's gone. And it hit me after Bates closed, how much of the heritage was gone. And I think I appreciate my job more now than I did then. Over there, it was more of a job, you know, I didn't, it didn't feel like I took a lot of pride in it. But over here, it's like a I take a lot of pride in knowing the trade, you know, I know that somebody just can't come off the street and do this, you know, it does take some time to learn it.

AL: Were there people when you worked at the Bates Mill who helped, who mentored you?

DM: Oh yeah, yeah.

AL: How did that work, can you describe?

DM: Well even any of the jobs, even just doing the bobbin thing, you know, you had to be trained to do it because you had different fillings, you have to know all the fillings, and you had to know, you know, if you didn't do it properly you're going to ruin the blanket, if you put it in the wrong slot. They have four slots, bobbins had to go in, and so you had to know the filling. So then, you know, as a room girl you got to learn more about the yarn they were using, and you actually got, you know, it wasn't as important if you ruined a blanket or a bedspread, because they were putting in new warps so you

had knots in there, so you didn't pay a lot of attention to starting it the way it should be.

But as a weaver, that's when you learned how the cards worked and, you know, everything had to be synchronized. You know, if your filling breaks, you've got to know how to back your pattern up and to go back to that same spot, otherwise you're going to ruin a two hundred dollar bedspread. So, and you have people that teach you that. I mean it's, some people can learn it, pick it up right off, and others it took a long time. I mean, I trained some people before I left there, I mean, six, eight, ten weeks sometimes and they still couldn't run it, some of them, some of the looms, without making mistakes. But I think when you do it you just, it's like, you know, you just figure everybody else should be able to do it, you know. It's like, gee, it makes so much sense to me, how come you can't do this part.

AL: So it's passed down.

DM: Yeah, it is, it is. And I think you've got to have a little bit of mechanical ability, too, to kind of understand what's going on. You can't be afraid to get dirty. And, I don't know, I enjoy it.

AL: Did they still have any social activities for employees at the mill when you were there?

DM: You know, no, I mean they probably did but I worked third shift most of the time, so I didn't, I mean they had their regular Christmas party and they had, that was more union, it was more union based. But I don't know if they had, they sponsored, they probably sponsored softball teams, and I think at one time they had bowling, that they had sponsored that. But it wasn't anything I was involved in, you know, because it was later, and of course with the kids I didn't have time either.

AL: What are some of the things that you remember about your time in the mill that I might not know to ask about?

DM: The fires.

AL: Fires?

DM: Oh, it was like, I mean it, like that one fire, I remember going in third shift, and we had a boss and he was in charge of Number Five and Number Two weave room. And we didn't punch clocks then, you know, the boss would just see who was there and, you know, you just, they used to have a light that would come on and that was the end of your shift and the beginning of the other shift. So you had to wait for the light to go on before you could leave or you were coming in.

And I was working third shift, and it was a skeleton crew, wasn't a whole lot of people. And all of a sudden it's like, I look, I see these flames. And the cardboard, I mean the cardboard, the patterns were cardboard so you could see it jump, you know. And he was in the other place, so you run, I mean you know where the extinguishers are and how to use them, and so you get the extinguishers and you try to holler and, you know. Finally he showed up. Well, that was the first time I had seen the fire department there.

And there was a couple of us that ended up at the hospital for smoke inhalation, and that's when my husband had me quit, it was after that. Because, you know, you don't realize how dangerous it is. I mean, those cards are up top, and they could have fallen. But, it was like, my thought was just to get the flames out and, you know, so you stay in there and you try to play fireman, but. They had quite a few fires there.

AL: Was it usually caused by having a lot of dust in the building?

DM: I think a lot of it was, no, I think it was the cotton dust underneath the looms, you know, and you'd get a spark and it would start that way. But at Bates it was more common upstairs for some reason. I don't know if it was the way the heads worked upstairs, or, you know, and the cards, they were cardboard and it would just, I mean it's like, it would jump, you could actually see the flames jumping from loom to loom. So, yeah, so I guess it wasn't, I mean it wasn't a big deal to them. It was like that was just common occurrence, you know, til the fire department came. They didn't show up very often, because most of the time you could get it out yourself, because they had enough extinguishers around. But this one time it, no, we had to get the fire trucks there.

AL: Is there anyone who's perhaps passed away that I can't interview that you feel is important to talk about or describe, that you remember? Maybe somebody you worked closely with?

DM: Gert Dick. Did you get to interview her? She passed away, oh, probably within the year. She was a weaver, and she was so, she was very helpful when I learned to weave because she was always there. You know, she would, any time I had a question she never, you know, lost, she had so much patience with me, you know, and she would explain and explain and explain, and she was just an awesome teacher. So she, I don't know how long, she was there a long time, her and her sister both, Cecile Lessard.

They were all good. I mean everybody. They were just, you know, everybody was there to help. I don't think there was too many people that, you know, we were all there for the same reason. The only thing is, though, when you are union, that you didn't do somebody else's job, you know, that was a part, I had a hard time with that. Because sometimes, you know, you really weren't busy and you could be helping somebody out but, you know, because you were union you couldn't do that. So, like

that, I had a hard time with that part.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think is important to add to your experiences in the mill?

DM: I don't know. I think initially going there, it was more, you know, I went there as a job, it was a job. And like I said, I didn't value that until it was gone, and appreciate what the mill meant to the community. Because even my mother came from Canada, and she worked in the mill a short time. But she, I don't know what happened, if they had a layoff or something, and she ended up in the shoe factories, and that's where she ended up staying. Even until she passed away, she was in the shoe and heel factories for years, years and years, that's all she ever did. So, but I know a lot of people that she knew that came from Canada. That's where they worked, you know, was the mill.

But that's all people knew, you know? That was all they, they never looked for anything else because they were happy where they were and, you know, the money was good for that time. And you didn't really, you didn't need an education, you know, it was just a skill they learned once they got in there and they were taught, and they advanced that way.

AL: So did your mother speak French?

DM: Yes, in fact when I started school I could only speak French. When I started kindergarten, I could only speak French.

AL: So you had to learn English (*unintelligible word*).

DM: I did, and I was, that's how she learned English, was just, because my father spoke English, so, but he was from up north, but she learned from us kids at home.

AL: When you say up north, is that Aroostook County?

DM: Yes, he was from Fort Kent.

AL: Was he Franco-American as well?

DM: Yes, yeah. But he was in construction. I think he could never have stayed in a mill. No, I think he told me he had tried it for a couple days and that was it. No, he needed to be outdoors.

AL: Great, thank you very much.

DM: Well, you're welcome.

End of Interview

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