

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

**Mary Jane Gervais**  
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

**MWOH# 010**  
November 3, 2005

**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview with Mary Jane Gervais at her home on Jeffrey Street in Lewiston, Maine on November 3rd, the year 2005. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and this is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History Project. Could you start just by spelling for me your full name?

**Mary Jane Gervais:** Mary, M-A-R-Y, J-A-N-E, G-E-R-V-A-I-S.

**AL:** And when and where were you born?

**MJG:** In Guerette, Maine.

**AL:** Where?

**MJG:** That's up north.

**AL:** And your birth date?

**MJG:** April 5th, 1931.

**AL:** And did you grow up in the northern part of Maine?

**MJG:** No, we moved from up north in, I was eight years old, moved to Biddeford, Maine. From Biddeford, well actually we moved to Houlton first, couple of years we were in Houlton, my father had to find work, so then the mill where he worked kind of, you know, they kind of lapsed and so we moved to Biddeford where there was work. And then from there we moved here, and we lived in Biddeford a couple of years, then we moved here and we've been here since then. So I was twelve years old when we moved here, in Lewiston.

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

**MJG:** Josephine Lagasse, and (*name*) Lagasse.

**AL:** And did they work in the mills?

**MJG:** No, no, my father was a carpenter. My mother, well she did work at Max Miller's, which was sort of a mill but not Bates, or (*unintelligible word*).

**AL:** And how many brothers and sisters?

**MJG:** One brother and one sister.

**AL:** And so you were twelve when you came here.

**MJG:** I was twelve when we moved here to Lewiston.

**AL:** What was Lewiston like at that time, in terms of how you see it today?

**MJG:** Well, it was quieter than it is today, and of course the kids were more, you know, quiet. Like today, a lot of them are on drugs or things like that. And you weren't afraid to go out at night, you know, we'd play outside for, you know, we weren't afraid. But today I wouldn't play outside, you know, at that age I wouldn't play outside, when it's dark.

**AL:** What was the downtown area like? Were there lots of, was it a more vibrant shopping area?

**MJG:** Oh yes, yes, it had a lot of stores then that, you know, like when I was older of course every Saturday my mother and my sister, we'd go out shopping and we'd stop at Nichol's, the restaurant, and have blueberry pie with whipped cream. And we'd shop around, and there was a lot of stores where you could find nice clothes, nice dresses and all that, you know. But today, well, there's not much on Lisbon Street, they're all out, you know, like at the malls and all that.

**AL:** So after, of what age was it when you went into the mill?

**MJG:** Sixteen years old.

**AL:** Was that the legal age to begin working?

**MJG:** Yeah, they hired you at sixteen, but I worked for a little while and then they passed a law that you had to be eighteen to work on the machines, so they laid me off. And then they called me back when I was eighteen, so I went back but then I got married so I quit. And I didn't go back until later on, after the kids were, my youngest daughter was about five years old, and I went back to Bates. And from then on a lot of times I was laid off, because they didn't have much work. But then they'd call me back, I'd go back. And then I, after the kids were born I didn't work for a while.

Then in 1971 I went back to Bates, worked in the yarn department. I was there for probably eleven years, and then I went to -

*(Break in taping.)*

**AL:** So we were talking about, you came back in 1971.

**MJG:** Seventy-one, I went back to work at Bates in the yarn department, and I worked on third and second shifts, I worked on spoolers and the unicorners.

**AL:** Now, what are those?

**MJG:** Okay, spoolers are like you have to feed the machine, a long machine, you have to feed them, put in the bobbins and put up the threads so that when the machine passes by it picks up the threads and hooks it up onto, they call it a cheese, and it's on a drum so they wind around and they make a big cheese. Once that's full, when the machine goes back by, that cheese stays down so you have to take it off and put on a new starter. So that was the spoolers.

And unicorners, well it was almost the same thing, they made cheeses also, but it was a lower machine and not as long. You just fed the like bobbins around and that would pick up, too, and make the same things, like cheeses. So that was what I did when I went back.

And then I, they laid me off again after, well I worked in that department for probably close to eleven years, then I was laid off and I went to the sample department, worked there for a little while.

Then I put my name to work in the finishing room, and I got a job in the finishing room. So I worked there for quite a while, too. Then I was laid off, kept laying me off and the work was getting slower, so then they'd send me to the weave room, I worked in the weave room for a little while and then they called me back on my job in the yarn, not the yarn department but the finishing department, so I'd go back down there and then they laid me off again.

So then one of the bosses, Mr. Provencer in the weave room saw my name on the list of laid offs and said, I want her to come back to work for me. So I went back in the weave room and worked there for seven months making the heads, putting up strings for the heads of the patterns, the patterns, the designs come through, so I worked there for seven years, sweating.

**AL:** Very hot?

**MJG:** Oh well, it was not that it, it was kind of hard but it was hot in the weave room, and it's, they needed that steam so in the summer you were sweating. And you had to tie those strings, you had to string them all up and then tie, when they hung down you had to put on the little gadgets that they had and you had to tie that in a knot. And then it took almost over a month or so to make one head, so it was a long process. And then after the knot you'd have to tie them with pliers and pull, make them tight, tight, and then you'd have to shellac them so they wouldn't slip off of the, while they were going up and down making the pattern.

So then after that, well, they laid me off down there, too, because it was getting slow, so they sent me to the office and I worked in the office for, on the switchboard, for maybe three months. And then the girl that I was replacing came back, because her husband passed away, so I was laid off again. But then they called me back in to work in the office on orders, taking orders, you know, on the computer. But that didn't last too long either because then the Chinese were involved in there then, and so they decided to move all the office work to the Minnette Mills in North Carolina. So then I was laid off again.

So then they sent me, they asked me if I would want to go to work at the store, or else be laid off, so I said I'll go to work at the store as a telemarketing, you know, and so I'd have to call in like motels and all that to see if they wanted bedspreads, and I did that for quite a while. And then in the meantime they asked me to work in the store also at the same time when they needed somebody in the store to help them out, so I'd do that and work in the office and the store also at the same time. And so I was there for thirteen years, in the store, until I retired four years ago. So that was about it.

**AL:** Now, you were laid off quite a bit over the years.

**MJG:** Quite a bit, yes, I was laid off quite a bit, yes.

**AL:** Were, the times when you were laid off, were they short periods, or many different lengths?

**MJG:** No, sometimes probably like three months or a couple of months to three months sometimes, and then they'd call me back and I'd go back in and do different jobs, I did different jobs in the, like in the yarn department. Sometimes when they didn't have too much work on folding, where you used to fold, they'd send me doing some other things that needed to be done in the area, you know, so.

**AL:** What were some of the difficulties that you encountered from being laid off numerous times?

**MJG:** I'd go on unemployment and that was about it, you know. Look for other work in the meantime, but they'd always call me back to go in.

**AL:** Over all your different jobs that you did in the mill over the years, do you have a favorite or something that you really enjoyed?

**MJG:** Well, I enjoyed working in the store, doing the office work, helping in the store. And, you know, I was on customer service, people would call in and I'd take the orders or, you know, and make sure they would get out and all that. I enjoyed that. I'd talk to a lot of people that would come in when I was in the store, and it was fun. And I liked my boss which, Nancy Higgins, I don't know if you know her?

**AL:** Yes.

**MJG:** And I worked with Howard, Howard Ashby. It was just like family, so that was enjoyable.

**AL:** Did you have any involvement with the union when you were at Bates?

**MJG:** No, no, I was with the union but I had nothing to do with them.

**AL:** Were there ever any strikes that you can recall?

**MJG:** I recall a couple of them, yes. We went to the meetings, hoping they wouldn't strike. But I guess they didn't strike at that time, though.

**AL:** Neither of those?

**MJG:** No. I remember one, though, that, my husband was working then at Bates and I wasn't working at the time, and they did strike. And that one was hectic because, you know, there was nothing coming in so it was kind of -

**AL:** Do you remember what the issue was?

**MJG:** I can't remember that, no.

**AL:** So your husband worked at the mill.

**MJG:** Yes.

**AL:** For how many years?

**MJG:** He worked there for over forty years.

**AL:** And what sorts of jobs did he do?

**MJG:** He took care of the bobbins in the yarn department, and then at the end he was working in the, not the yard but the, oh, I can't remember that name of that job but his, he drove a little truck there and did, he'd have to, whatever came in and whatever went out he'd have to weigh it and everything.

**AL:** And what was his name?

**MJG:** Wilfred Gervais. He passed away about six years ago.

**AL:** Were you involved in any activities that were sponsored by the mills? I know that at some point they had like bowling leagues and -

**MJG:** No, I never was, no, no.

**AL:** Did you have a social circle of friends that worked at the mill with you?

**MJG:** Well, yeah, and the, in the finishing room I, the first time I saw the finishing room I couldn't believe that, because I was working the sample department and the lady brought me into the finishing room and we just stood above them on like a little balcony like, and I can't believe, I've never seen so many women working in one room all together. You could see the whole finishing room, you know, stitchers and folders and all that. I couldn't believe how many people were in that room. But then I went to work in the finishing room after that, and I got friendly with most of those women. And I'm still friends with some of them today. So it was a nice time, nice people.

**AL:** Are there memories you have of the mill that you can share with me, experiences, they're funny, they're sad or, you know, any kind?

**MJG:** Can't think of anything.

**AL:** Did people ever play pranks, or was it just very, very serious?

**MJG:** Well, my friend and I played some pranks, but I don't think I'd want to say them. Well, you know, once there, we were just sixteen years old then, and there was this man, well we tried to get this man and this lady together, and we'd tell her that he was interested in him [*sic*] and we'd tell him that she was interested in him, trying to get them together. And one, I don't know if they ever did, but anyways one time this man was always wearing the same clothes, and they were kind of filthy, so my friend and I, well let's get him, have him change those clothes. So my friend was talking to him while I was spraying him with oil, we were spraying him with oil, I was spraying him with oil, and then when he noticed what we were doing, he was so upset. And I said, well, have them cleaned and I'll pay for it. That's about all, is that one thing that I remember that we were pretty bad.

**AL:** Do you have memories of, or do you have other relatives that worked in the mill as well?

**MJG:** My aunt, my aunt Jane. She worked on third shift, and when I went to work, to work there at Bates in the spooling department, she's the one that trained me on the spoolers. And we worked on third shift, which was very hard, you know, you're always sleepy.

**AL:** Is that midnight, or eleven to seven?

**MJG:** Yes, eleven to seven was third shift. And so every time it came like six o'clock in the morning she'd really be tired and wanting to sleep. And on the spoolers, you know, you have to keep feeding this machine, because when it goes around if there's no thread in, you know, no bobbins and threads hanging up there for it to pick up, then all the cheeses come back down and it makes them soft, and they didn't like that.

So, you know, you had to try to fill up that machine. I can't remember how many bobbins you have to put in before it came around, must have been three hundred and something bobbins that you had to do. And if you had a bad bobbin that was, you know, bad that you couldn't pull it out fast, you were having a hard time and you had to have that machine filled before it goes by. So plenty of times we couldn't fill it, we didn't have time, the machine would go by and -.

Anyways, when it would stop on the end for not too long, then you'd try to pick up but then sometimes you still, if you had like I say bad bobbins and if you were slow, well of course the machine went by and you had, didn't have time to fill it.

Anyways, one time my aunt was like, you know, was kind of getting tired and she was sleeping standing up, and she was still working, she was still putting on thread but she was sleeping, just standing there. And I happened to look at her and I said, oh, my goodness, I'd better go wake her up. So I went

over and I told, kind of, not to scare her, and I told her, I said, woke her up, and she didn't know, she didn't realize that she was doing that. But just standing there, and she was still working but nothing was happening. So, and the boss came around the corner at the same time when she finally woke up.

So, you know, at that time, in the morning like that, like six o'clock there, you'd start getting tired and sleepy.

**AL:** Now, with you and your husband both working in the mill, did the management work with you so that you'd be on different shifts to be able to take care of the kids?

**MJG:** No, no, we had to plan it, plan a kind of plan, you know, that, like when he was on second, I was on third, so we'd have, when I'd leave for work before he came home, he'd be on second, I'd just have somebody kind of, the neighbors, you know, kind of keep, just keep an eye for five, ten minutes before he would come home. And that's the way we had it. When he went on first and I was still on third, so the kids were in school then so it wasn't as bad. And I'd come home and go to bed, and when they came back from school, well, I was home, you know.

So, in the summer, well he was home during the day, so if I was on second or third, well he'd watch the kids, and we had to plan it that way. Plenty of times, too, when he was on second and I was on third, and you know, you get tired at night so you go to bed and try to sleep a couple of hours before you go to work. And the girls, well, I'd say okay, you can watch t.v. but you go to bed by eight o'clock, or whatever, you know. And they'd come, Mom, can we stay another hour, this show we want to watch. And I was so sleepy, okay.

And plenty of times my husband would come in and I was still in bed and I didn't get up to go to work. Then I had to rush, really rush. And a lot of times, a couple of times it happened and then finally, well, I was on spooling then, so if you're not there when your, you know, when you start, your work is starting, like eleven o'clock you're not there, they have to strip that machine, that side of the machine because all the cheese would fall back down because there's nothing to tie them. So they'd take them all down, so then I'd come in fifteen minutes late. They didn't like that too much, they'd have to put them all back in. So anyway, I did that maybe, maybe three times. The third time the boss said, don't you have an alarm clock? That was the last time I was late.

**AL:** Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think is important to add, in terms of the mills and, you know, a sense of work and the time period?

**MJG:** I can't really think of anything. I just remember when I first started working at Bates, sixteen years old, you were wearing dresses then. And, you know, today you wear slacks or jeans or whatever, so that was a different time there, because everybody had dresses on. And in the morning the older ladies would go and, where their lockers were, whatever, and they'd change right in front of you. Took off their dresses and you'd see them in slips. That was different than it is later on, it was different because then you'd wear a pair of jeans or slacks and you'd keep them on to go home. It wasn't like it was in those days.

And then a lot of times, too, you couldn't wear, you couldn't wear open shoes because of the risk of hurting yourself. You'd have to wear shoes that were harder a little bit.

**AL:** Were there a lot of injuries that happened on the job?

**MJG:** Well, I remember one that happened when I was on the spoolers in the yarn department. Well, one girl was working on another machine, I can't recall the name of it, but she had her finger cut off. So they rushed her to the hospital I guess, and then somebody else, somebody came and looked for the rest of the finger, and they found it and they passed in back of me with a finger, I almost passed out. So that

was one thing that I remember of an accident.

In another, well myself, when I was spooling and the bobbins got stuck sometimes on the strap, so I had gone, put my hand in there to kind of loosen them up, and one of them came up and caught my finger there and I couldn't get it out. So of course they came and shut the machine, and then that was really cut and it was really hurting, that was on third shift, so the boss brought me down to the nurse's station and there was nobody there because it was third shift. So he called the doctor and the doctor came down. I was laying down, but the boss was walking around and walking around, he was all white and nervous. And anyways, the doctor came and stitched it. And the next day when I went back to see the nurse, she opened that up, I almost passed out. I said, please, let me lay down. So, it was all pussey and, yeah, so that's another thing that happened.

**AL:** Before we started taping, you were talking about having seen some time ago pictures of the canal? Do you know what time period that was when the canal was being built?

**MJG:** I can't remember. I would have that information, like I let my friend use it, I probably have that information in that.

**AL:** Right, right, and you were saying that they can't find a lot of those pictures now?

**MJG:** A lot of pictures that I was talking about that we had seen then and we took a few copies of them, that I asked somebody else where they were and they didn't know. So I don't know if, where they ended up. I don't know, because there were some that the workers were in overalls, like, you know, they were down in the, building the canal. When I get those back, I'll bring them to Rachel, to have her look at them and take copies, whatever.

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

**MJG:** You're welcome.

*End of Interview  
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