

Jack Tetrault
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

BWOH #24
February 21, 2009

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

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Brickyard Workers Oral History Project at the Museum L-A. The date is Saturday, February 21st, 2009, and I'm at Museum L-A with Jack Tetrault, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Jack, could you start just by giving me your full name and making sure I pronounced your name correctly.

Jack Tetrault: Very well, it's Jack Tetrault.

AL: And where and when were you born?

JT: I was born in Lewiston, August 1941, brought up in Auburn, went to Edward Little High School, graduated from there, went into the Air Force, came back, went to college and – how much further do you want me to go?

AL: Well, let's start with growing up in Auburn. What part of Auburn did you live?

JT: Oh we, I was brought up in the Sacred Heart parish, Sacred Heart's right on Western Avenue in Auburn, and basically my whole childhood was spent there. Dad was a bus driver, and that's when I, as I got into high school, that's when I started working in the brickyard, which is why you are wanting to interview me right now.

AL: Yes. Now how many brothers and sisters -?

JT: I have one brother, name's Gary, and he could tell you the same things I just told you. Being brought up in Auburn, we got to know the shoe shops but not the mills too well, there were shoe shops in Auburn, the woolen mills were in Lewiston, the Bates Mill. Growing up in the forties was, we didn't know it at the time, it was kind of unusual because that's when the Second World War was being fought. I was born six months prior to WWII breaking out, the attack on Pearl Harbor.

And I remember as time went on, my dad wasn't eligible to go into the service because he was too old and he was married, but I remember he wanted to buy a car, it's always stuck in my mind, and he had to wait six months to buy the car because there wasn't any available, and he could only buy a used car because they weren't making new ones at the time. So it's kind of interesting, when you juxtapose that with what goes on today, they got more cars than they have people.

AL: And was the reason of not making new cars because of the war and needing to

conserve resources?

JT: Yes, everything was going into the making of guns and bombs and things like that. Those were the days when women started working, they started leaving the home. All the men were in the military, and the women had to go to work in the factories. You've heard of Rosie the Riveter, that's where that got started.

AL: Now did your mother work outside the home at all, or not, because your dad was here?

JT: She mostly stayed home, but she was a registered nurse so she worked as a nurse off and on over the years. Dad worked for L and A Transit, and he spent most of his time working. I don't remember seeing him a heck of a lot. In those days men worked two shifts or two jobs, Dad had a half a day off a week, which was Friday morning, and that's the day they went shopping. So never got to see him too much. Mom was just about everything in the family. Dad got a week's vacation every year and we got to see him then, but that was it.

AL: And what were their names?

JT: Tony and Jeannette Tetrault.

AL: Were they born here, or had they come from some other -?

JT: Both of them were born, Mom was born in Lewiston, Dad was born in Sabattus. I'm actually fourth generation American, my background is French but my ancestors came down from Canada quite early, and they settled in the Lewiston-Auburn area.

AL: Now you attended Sacred Heart Church?

JT: Sacred Heart Church.

AL: I understand that it originally was like a big barn.

JT: I have no memory of that.

AL: So you don't have that memory of the change.

JT: It always looked the way it looks today. There's a couple things that they've added to outside and they remodeled the inside, but basically it's the same church I knew when I was a kid.

AL: Okay. Because I was told that they built the new church right in front of the old church that was this barn so that -

JT: They could have, I mean that happened a lot.

AL: So that's probably before your -

JT: Yeah, it was before my time. Holy Cross parish is another one that started out in a, kind of a barn-like affair and it just evolved. I think a lot of the churches did that.

AL: So what did you kids do for fun, growing up in Auburn?

JT: What did we do for fun. Well, we didn't have TV, we had a radio. Spent most of our time outside. When there wasn't school, we were outside playing. And Ma didn't see us until it got dark, and she had to yell for us to come in. We were fortunate, we weren't too far from a farm, it was a, you know, even though it was in Auburn. Today that farm is nothing but houses, it was the Merrill Haven Farm, and we'd go up and chase the cows so they'd get sour milk. But we spent a lot of time at, it was called the Pinnacle back in those days, and besides chasing the cows, in the fall there was a lot of wind up there so we'd go up there and fly our kites. And when we weren't doing that, we were building tree houses and stealing apples from the neighbors, so, the ones that had apple trees.

We made our own fun, you know, we didn't have the computers and the TV sets. That didn't come, the TV sets didn't come until the mid fifties, and my folks were the first ones in the neighborhood with a TV set, which meant the whole neighborhood was at our house almost seven days a week. And I can remember my folks before they got the TV set, they visited some friends of theirs who they, they dad worked at Snow's over in Auburn where they sold TV sets, so they had one, they had a TV set about five years before everybody else. And we'd go up there on Friday night to watch the Friday night fights. And all the programs came out of Boston and it was very snowy, so you'd sit there for twenty minutes looking at snow and then a picture would come in and everybody would just sit up straight and look at it, ooh, look at that, it was a miracle. I mean, we watched stuff that people would never watch today. It was totally boring, when I thought about it. And one of the bigger programs was Howdy Doody, Buffalo Bob and Howdy Doody, and as kids we watched that and we enjoyed it, and even the adults, just to see the picture come in.

But growing up, it was the radio, that was our entertainment, other than making our own fun. I'd come home from school or the Scouts and sit down by the radio and listen to programs like Corliss Archer, the Green Hornet and the Sky King, Sgt. Preston of the Yukon. The pictures we saw were in our heads. So it was an interesting time. TV changed all of that.

AL: Could you hear sports on the radio, too?

JT: Oh sure, yeah.

AL: Were the Red Sox -?

JT: I'm sure, all the football games and baseball games were on the radio. Much the same as they have today, that hasn't changed. What has changed is how they present themselves, the advertising and the type of programming and so forth. But back then, that was the entertainment that we had, besides what we made up on our own. And back then families sat around the table at night, either playing cards or talking. They don't do that today. I look at my grandkids and they want cell phones and texting machines, and I don't even know what a text machine is. So along with the computers and so forth, they spend most of their time inside. It's a lot different.

When I was a kid, you didn't see any fat kids, there was no obesity. Didn't have the money that people have today, I mean we would have, we didn't know it but by today's standards we were dirt poor.

AL: But you didn't know it.

JT: Didn't know it. Nobody knew it, I mean we were all the same. I mean I had two pair of pants and two shirts and a pair of shoes, and that was it, that's what we wore, you know, plus some underwear, and all the kids were that way. I can't remember anybody that had any more than anybody else. And we knew everybody, I mean the whole neighborhood, you know, if you had a kid, you were involved in the neighborhood, and we all played and fought together. So this was an interesting time, juxtaposing it against today when you move into a neighborhood and it might take you five years to figure out who your next door neighbor is, because we're all self-contained in our little cocoons.

AL: So what was your first job, was it going into the brickyard or was there something before that?

JT: Well, as we got old enough and were able to do things reasonably well, in the winter time we shoveled sidewalks, in the summer time we mowed lawns. And at twelve years old I wanted something steadier than that, so that's when I started in the brickyard, twelve years old. They didn't have the child labor laws that we have today. I survived, I'm still here, in spite of what they might do to those people today if they were around.

But I started as a sand boy. What that is, is they had people they called strikers and they would lay the brick down on the ground, and then the sand boy would sand the bricks to keep them from cracking in the sun when they were curing. And what that entailed was getting up around three o'clock in the morning, going over to Jimmy's Diner and having coffee with the strikers, and then driving up to the brickyard and working til eleven o'clock in the morning, we were done after that.

I did that for probably one summer, and I decided I wanted to make more money so I asked if I could wheel brick. And the big boss says, oh, you're too thin, you're tall enough but you just don't have enough muscle on you, you just stay with the sanding for now. Well, whenever they ran out of help or somebody had to go to the bathroom, I'd grab a wheelbarrow and load it up with brick and I'd wheel it over to the kilns and help them make the kilns. And I wasn't paid for that, I just wanted to show them I could do it. So they saw that, and they hired me on as a wheeler, so my pay immediately went up substantially.

Back in the days when the average wage, even for a grown man, was like ninety-five cents an hour, I was making a dollar and a quarter an hour. Big money, you know, working fifty hours a week. Saturdays they worked us eight hours, they gave us, it was a short day, during the week it was a nine or ten hour day, Monday through Friday.

AL: You were young to be working that many hours.

JT: Yeah, yeah.

AL: Now, did you do it out of necessity because the family needed it, or were you enterprising?

JT: No, my family let me keep my money. Dad did pretty well, you know, in the job that he had, and they let me keep it. I was just like a lot of kids back then, you know, very ambitious, wanted to work, that was a goal, get a summer job. And the summer job turned into a job that, I'd start in May, which you were still in school, and I'd work right straight through to the middle of December. Of course when we were going to school we didn't work so many hours in the brickyard, except on vacations.

And the jobs I had there were varied, I did just about everything. I didn't strike brick, that was a very high paying job and there was a lot of competition for those jobs. But the wheelers, bricksetters and so forth, I was able to do all of that, burning the kil[n]s. Mostly I did that in the evening, we'd go to work at six in the evening and we'd get done six the next morning. We'd chop, split wood all night, because they burned the kil[n] with wood, not oil like they do today, you know, oil or gas or propane, whatever it is, they're oil fired. Back then the Morin Brickyard had what they called oil-fired kil[n]s, they burned, they had wood kilns like we had at Dennis, but the oil fired were a lot easier. Wood fired, we had to split the wood, make it big enough so you could put it into the holes in the side of the kil[n], the kil[n] had an opening about every foot, so hot that even in the summer time, it's like ninety degrees outside, we had to wear winter clothing and mittens and hats so we didn't burn.

AL: Oh, wow. I've heard it was hot. Did they have any special things, or it was just your mittens and -?

JT: Well we, they gave us gloves, but there wasn't anything fire retardant about it, it was just protection. And so we, when we'd close the kil[n] so it contained the heat, we'd have to get up on top of the kil[n], and then they wore wooden shoes so that, because the heat would go up through whatever we were wearing, and leather shoes, you'd burn your feet, so they devised these wooden shoes that you could put on, strap on, and you'd get up there, and the wood would, it would be lucky if they didn't catch on fire, because it was still very, very hot.

AL: I have a question. Do you think there was a difference between the oil fired bricks and the kiln?

JT: The product was the same. The bricks just needed a lot of heat to cure. The oil fired, the bricks were wheeled into these honeycomb kil[n]s, they were ready-made kil[n]s, and so they were heated with oil and you didn't have to split wood or, I mean it was pretty constant. Probably more efficient than the wood.

AL: I was told the colors, though, you couldn't get those unique, people debate this, I think, in terms of the coloring of the brick. Have you ever -?

JT: Well the, in the oil fired, the bricks were more uniform. In the wood fired, you had, you've heard the term "antique brick," it's brick that actually has cured and melted, you know, that twist, and that's the brick that's around the entrances, where we were burning the wood, that's where the heat was the most intense. And then as you go up the kil[n], more towards the center, you had what they call a face brick, and that was brick that had, if you look at it, and you look at that picture, the face brick would have a dark oval type circle in the brick, and it would be dark, and then on the inside it would be a lighter colored red. Then you had, in other sections of the kil[n] the brick was more uniform, it was like a red color. And then in the very outer areas, the brick sometimes didn't get fully cured, and it was brick that the people that built buildings said it was brick that you put on the inside, that wouldn't be exposed to the weather, because it didn't have the same properties as the brick that was fully cured.

We made two kinds of brick, we made water struck brick, that's where, you know, I was a sand boy, that was water struck. They'd have nine bricks to a mold, and they'd squish the clay into the mold and then put it on these carts, wheel it out to the yard and flip the molds, and it's what they call striking the brick, and the sand boy would come along and sand the top of it. And we had water struck brick, which was a brick that was run through a molding machine, it was – did I say water struck? Wire cut. And it was actually cut with wires, and you got your nine bricks that way, it wasn't in a mold, it was just, it came out of a, it was extruded and then was cut with wires, and the wheelers, which I was one, would load those on their wheelbarrows and then we'd, we'd then wheel them out to the drying racks, take, you know – there's usually three people that did the wheeling. You had one person that did the wire cutting.

And what was interesting is how fast you could go. If you could get out there and unload your load real fast, come back, you got to sit and rest for a little while before you had to load up again. So it was, and would you like me to explain the process?

AL: I would love that.

JT: On the wire cut, once they're loaded into the racks, they're dried for, oh, two or three weeks, sun dried, and then they have people go in and space the bricks. And spacing the bricks is, so that the drying effect can get on the side of the brick that didn't have any space, it was still, all it had was that narrow area where the wire had gone through to cut the brick. So people would go in and they'd space the brick, put about an inch of space between the bricks so that the whole brick could dry.

Once the bricks were dried enough, then you could put them into the kil[n], and so that involved some more wheeling, a wheeler would have to go in, slap the bricks together, pull up, load up your wheel barrow, wheel it out to the kil[n], and either toss the bricks to somebody that was building the kil[n] or they have these conveyor belts where we put the brick on the conveyor belts and it would go to the people who were building the kil[n].

AL: And so did you ever build a kil[n]?

JT: I did some of that. But as, being a high school kid and considered not as reliable I guess at the time as the men, it was a higher paying job to be a setter, brick, you know, where you went in, you set the brick. There was a science to that, a real skill.

AL: I've heard of that, yeah.

JT: You had to be fast and accurate, and you just didn't throw the bricks, you had to lay them down, because if you threw them you'd break the bricks and lose the purpose of making the bricks, because the bricks wouldn't be any good. So we would, as I said, we would load the bricks on the conveyor belt and the setters would set the brick into the kil[n]s.

AL: Now who were the owners?

JT: It was the Dennis brothers.

AL: The Dennis brothers. What were they like to work for?

JT: They were as different as people are different, you know. Laurence was the guy that ran the office, he'd be in his little office smoking his cigars, writing out the checks, doing the paperwork. And his other brothers, Larry, Willy and Ross, ran the manufacturing portion of it. Larry ran the wire cut area, Ross I guess was kind of the

general guy, he worked everywhere that was needed, and Willy took care of the basically building the kil[n]s. Willy just passed away a couple of years ago, he was almost a hundred years old. I didn't know that, I only found out after he passed away.

AL: So they were very hands-on.

JT: All the brothers worked in the brickyard. They could do everything that we did, and sometimes they had to, you know, to, you went into the brickyard, everything back then was do things fast, I don't care where you worked. I mean, I worked in a supermarket, I worked various other places during my school year, but the brickyard was my main source of income, and it was always, do it fast, and let's see if you can, in the brickyard it was, let's see who can do it the fastest. Every day was a race. And being kids, we wanted to be better than the next guy, so we raced. They took advantage of that. Speed, time was money.

AL: So how many years did you go back and work there?

JT: All through high school, freshman, sophomore, junior, senior year. And I got a break my senior year because I graduated and I didn't have to go back to work that summer in the brickyard.

I'll tell you something that's interesting: I used to like to keep in shape during the school year for the brickyard work, so I lifted weights and did a lot of exercising, and I would think that I would be in pretty good shape. And I'd start work in May, and I had a pair of jeans that I wore, they were buttoned up in the front, not a zipper, and I couldn't button the top two buttons because I had too much waist. Within two weeks, I needed a belt, and I had about an inch and a half overlap on the pants. And I gained weight, it all went up into my chest and my legs. It kind of indicated to me that what I was doing during the school year, you know, working out in the gym, wasn't enough.

It did, it got people in shape. I mean we were, one of the guys, he lived in my neighborhood, it was Paul Hilaris and he was football star, he loved football. And he worked at Dennis, he worked Morin's brickyard, hard worker, but because of the work in the brickyard he was very strong, very tough. And when he played football, you got out of his way because he'd blast you over, I mean they literally had to take him out of a game one time, because when he hit somebody he hit him so hard he'd hurt him. Not on purpose, but that's, it was his conditioning.

It's probably the hardest work outside of working in a foundry that there is. So the, it kept me in good shape. When I went into the military, basic training was a breeze. There wasn't anything they could give me that I found challenging, and that's basically attributable to the brickyard conditioning.

AL: Well did you have friends that worked in the brickyard with you?

JT: Oh sure, yeah, yeah, Paul Timberlake, and Paul Hilaris. I brought a friend of mine from high school and he lasted two weeks, I won't give you his name.

AL: Well yes, it was hard work, very hard for some. Were there, I want to call them old timers, there when you were there that sort of you observed?

JT: Well, in the brickyard there's no such thing as an old timer. By the time you're forty years old, if you work that long in a brickyard, you're crippled with arthritis and lumbago. It's very hard on the body. The guys that you might call an old, that I would have called an old timer, were probably late twenties, early thirties, and were already at the point where, you know, they needed to quit, because their bodies couldn't take it any more.

There's only one guy that I knew that, and he was the biggest, burliest, strongest guy that I ever saw in my life. I saw him pick up the rear end of a Lincoln Continental all by himself. Here's this car, and we were always trying to show how strong we were, you know, how many bricks can you pick up with one hand and so forth, and he'd do us one better, he says, come on out, he says, I'll show you something. If any of you can do this, you got my respect. Good thing Bert was a nice guy. There was a Lincoln Continental – and that's a big car, as you know, and back then it was even bigger. And he had a guy get in the front of the car, start the car, because there was rear wheel drive in those days, and he picked up the rear end, you could see the tires spinning, the car wasn't going anywhere. He lasted, he worked in the foundry, over here in Lewiston, and he'd come to work in the brickyard on the weekends, for a rest, he said.

AL: Do you remember Bert's last name?

JT: No idea what his last name is. That's so long ago.

AL: Yeah, it's so long ago.

JT: But I remember thinking, I'm glad you're a nice guy and you don't go around looking for fights.

AL: So what did you do after the service? Did you say you went to college after?

JT: Oh yeah, yeah, I got out of the Air Force and I went to, back then it was called MVTI, today it's Southern Maine Vocational Technical, it's in South Portland, studied electronics technology, went on to the University of Maine, graduated from there with a bachelors in science degree, went to work for corporations after that.

AL: Doing what kind of work?

JT: I went to work for W. T. Grant's, I was in their management program. Of course

they went out of business. Came back to Lewiston, went to work for L and A Tire for a little while, it didn't last too long, and ended up at Bath Iron Works for a number of years, and eventually ended up owning and running my own business here in town, Service Master, commercial cleaning. Which I sold to my daughter last year, so I, she keeps me around to do her job, so.

AL: Well that's great. Is there anything that I haven't asked you about the brickyards or your experiences that you think is important to add?

JT: Well we talked about sanding, we talked about wheeling bricks, setting brick, burning kil[n]s, that was the work. Very repetitive, over and over again, same stuff. Weak mind - strong back.

AL: Yup, I heard that.

JT: But that's about it, you know, you'd go to work at seven in the morning, get out at five, but like I said, on Saturdays we got out an hour early, gave us a break, so.

AL: One thing I did want to ask is what, how have you seen the Lewiston-Auburn community change over the years, because you've been here for sixty-plus years. How has it changed? I know you talked about technology, but what about just the community itself and how people -?

JT: Well growing up, you know, the forties and fifties, there wasn't a lot of wealth in the community. People, the bulk of the people worked in the mills, bulk of the people took buses, the L and A Transit System. I can remember buses lining up on Lisbon Street during the shift changes. Lisbon Street was a two-way street back then, it was actually until two years after I graduated from high school, it was two-way. I came back from the military, borrowed my dad's car, and immediately took a right hand turn on Lisbon Street, and wondering why all the cars were coming at me and tooting their horns. They had changed it to a one-way street.

But people paid cash, there was no such thing as credit cards. They thought Franklin Delano Roosevelt sat at the right hand of God, he saved us. They were hard workers, the men worked two jobs or two shifts most of the time, women stayed home, took care of the kids. Some women went to work, but not many. Kids that went to work, my wife for example worked in the mills. Her paycheck went to her parents, and they gave her an allowance, and that was typical.

Today, I mean, there was very few automobiles. Goff Hill was a playground for us kids. In the winter time we could slide down Goff Hill, if you dared, no traffic. (*Unintelligible*) down, you'd end up about where C.V.'s was, C.V.'s would be right across from where Denny's is right now, it was C.V.'s, or Mac's Variety. And when there was no snow, the next big challenge was to take your bicycle and try to go down Goff Hill without getting

half killed. The other challenge was trying to pedal *up* Goff Hill, which was a real challenge. Again, we could do all of that stuff, very little traffic, people didn't own, very few people owned cars.

Virtually no crime in the city. I mean the parents never worried about us. We'd leave the house after breakfast and then show up for dinner maybe, and then we'd play outside all day, and we all had tans and there were no skinny kids [*sic*] and all we'd do is run around, playing Indians and cowboys and other games that we could think of, tag, hide-n-seek, ride our bikes. I remember getting on my bike and with my friends pedaling out to Lake Auburn, going up Center Street in Auburn. Center Street in Auburn, by today's (*unintelligible*), was barely enough room for one car.

AL: Really. And would you go down Lake Shore Drive?

JT: All day thing. We'd even pedal out to Taylor Pond.

AL: Did they have Tabor's Ice Cream then?

JT: Yeah, Tabor's has always been around, in my recollection.

AL: My next door neighbors are married, they're up close to eighty, and they worked there as teenagers.

JT: Yeah, it's always been. And the building, the caddy – I say caddy shack – the shack where they give you the balls and stuff, that hasn't changed, that's the same as it was back when I was a kid. Even the store where they sell, it's changed very little. The tees are all in the same place. One of the few things around that hasn't changed. All the shoe shops are down, some of the banks that were in Auburn, that were next to the river, they're all gone, where the Hilton Hotel was, in that area, there was, where you cross the bridge, I think it was the Auburn Savings was right there on the river.

I think somebody coming to the L-A area today out of that era, you know, if they left and they hadn't come back, they'd have a hard time getting around. They'd recognize some of the buildings on Lisbon Street, and of course Peck's, well it's not Peck's any more, it's L. L. Bean. Peck's was the, that was *the* store back then, Peck's and then Penney's right next to it. And I can remember going into Peck's as a kid, my mother would buy me a pair of shoes and they had an x-ray machine – today of course it would be a health hazard – but you put your feet in there and you could see your bones. The reason they did is to see if the shoes were crowding your bones, to see that the shoes were a good fit, that was the purpose of it. And they actually had elevator girls, you'd get on the elevator and there was a girl there that would open the door for you, and announce the floor as she was going up, you know, lingerie, menswear, so forth, each floor had a different name.

AL: So it really made it kind of an experience to go shopping.

JT: Oh yeah, Peck's was the place to go shopping. And after Peck's it was Penney's, right next door. Penney's now is Human Resources, the state Human Resources building. They've remodeled it so much I don't recognize it, but a few years ago, before they remodeled it, I remember going in there and recognizing some of the structures that hadn't really changed.

The Strand Theater, we had lots of theaters in Lewiston and Auburn. In Auburn there was the Auburn Theater, next to the courthouse, and the Community Theater in New Auburn. The Auburn Theater still had vaudeville, we'd go there on Saturday and we'd see two motion pictures or cartoon (*unintelligible*) for eleven cents.

Later on the Ritz Theater, which is still there and it's, L.A. Arts I think is, something like that. But we'd walk there on Saturday afternoon, again it was two motion pictures, or a serial, Captain Marvel or Superman cartoons, parents could get rid of us for a whole day, just, and they knew where we were, we were at the theater. And I think back then, under twelve it was nine cents to get in.

And you had the Empire Theater, which recently got torn down. That was the theater where they had one show, it was usually the first run, and you paid more money to get in to see that one. And then up from that was the Strand Theater, which, it was quite a theater, they had a balcony that used to make me dizzy, it was so high. You'd get up there in that balcony and just, my head would, I'd get dizzy, it was just, but we used to like to go up there because we could shoot popcorn over the edge and irritate the people underneath.

So, those are all gone. The Community Theater building is still there, but it's a catering outfit that works out of there now. Strand got torn down, there's a gas station where the Strand used to be.

AL: Where was the Strand, can you describe that?

JT: It was just up from where Human Resources is, on the same side. In those days people went to the, there was no TV so they went to the movies, and especially on the weekends, I remember there'd be lines all the way down Main Street, waiting to get into the theater, people would just wait one or two hours just to go in and see a motion picture. Those were the days when Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis were a team. So, you don't see that today, that's all different.

AL: Well thank you so much, that's wonderful descriptions, I appreciate your time.

JT: You're welcome.

End of Interview

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