

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

Ray St. Pierre
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

MWOH# 029
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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Ray St. Pierre at his home on Montello Street in Lewiston on March 9th, the year 2006, and this is for the Mill Workers Oral History project, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could I start just by having you give me your full name?

Ray St. Pierre: Raymond A. St. Pierre.

AL: And where were you born?

RS: In Lewiston.

AL: And your birthdate?

RS: It's May 26, I was born in 1928.

AL: And were your parents both from Lewiston?

RS: Yes, they were both from Lewiston.

AL: And what were their names?

RS: My father's name was Philip St. Pierre, and my mother's name was Gloria. Her maiden name was Gloria Levesque.

AL: So what did they do for work?

RS: My dad was a meat cutter for a local grocery store, and he then during the war went to work at Pepperill as a dyer. And then went into business, the family business and remained there until he retired.

AL: And what was it like growing up in Lewiston in the '30s and the '40s?

RS: Entirely different from what it is today.

AL: In what ways?

RS: Well, of course at the time that I was growing up it was during the Depression and, you know, it was tough for the family, you know. I can remember going out and selling pot holders that my mother made, and selling vegetables that were given us by welfare people, you know, and little things like that.

AL: Did it help at all that your dad worked at a grocery store at that time?

RS: Well, it did in a way. He was able to get groceries, but the pay was so minimal at that time that oftentimes he'd come home with no money left after he got paid, you know, because he had spent it all on the groceries. But once he moved to Pepperill that was entirely different, during the war. They was getting good wages and, you know, we started to get a lot of little things that we missed out on.

But as a family we were very, very close. And little things, you know, to us were kind of like a big deal. I can remember going out to the movies, probably once a month or so, they would buy us big quarts of orangeade with Ritz crackers, and that was a big treat for us. And that Dad used to make ice cream on Sundays which was, you know, practically every Sunday he'd make some ice cream in the morning, at home. So that, you know, things like that. And we were a very close family.

AL: Did you have brothers and sisters?

RS: Yeah, I have, we were eight in the family including my father and mother. And I have two sisters, and two brothers, all very successful. My brother Jean, the second oldest, was president of the People's Heritage Bank, and my other brother Phil was in the family business with my dad.

AL: And what was the family business?

RS: Victor News.

AL: Oh, okay.

RS: And I worked there after I got through high school, when I graduated in 1947, and I worked there for three years in the family business. And then I left to go in the service, in the Korean War, and I was in the service for two years and when I came back I went back into the family business for a short time. But my girlfriend then, who's my current wife, was also, her dad was also in the same type of business, a confectionary store. They made ice cream and candy and things like that, and she was fed up with working like seven days a week, so she kind of, you know, tried to steer me to something better for myself. And she finally talked me into going to college, and so I went to Bentley's in Boston for two years to learn accounting. And then from college I came back here, because of my wife, we were still going out, and that's when I started working at Bates, after college, right after college.

AL: And what year was that?

RS: That was in 1955. And it's funny, I really didn't want to work at Bates because the textile industry seemed to be, you know, in a lull and was not a growing industry locally as it had been in the past. But I needed experience. In those days, I mean, you can come out of college and if you didn't have experience you still had trouble finding a job. So I thought, well, gee, here's an offer, I can get experience, I'll go work there for a year, and then I'll find something else. Well, it ended up that was it for me, you know, it became a career.

AL: So what was it like doing the accounting at the mill?

RS: Well, it was, when I first started working at the mill, it was kind of odd in a way because they were so backwards. I mean, the accounting at the mill was all done manually with pen and ink, you know, and we had these big ledgers that we worked with. It's not like it is today where, you know, everything is computerized. So we had like, we had one, two, three, four, about six people, each one working on a different ledger. And then once we got all, with the closing, you know, the ledgers would come together and be summarized.

But we would, at that time we were doing, we were in what the division called the general office, located on Locust Street, and we did the accounting, the consolidation, for all of the divisions. The divisions would do their own closing at the end of the month, and then send all the figures to us, and then we would combine the figures and come up with a consolidated statement. And this was all done manually.

And this continued for a few years, you know, and then as I, the longer I started working there, you know, I was gaining a little bit of more input as to what was being done. And then I realized that there was some equipment that was being used in New York that was going to be transferred here, because we were going to start doing the accounts receivable here as opposed to New York. We had a, the main office, the selling office, was in New York. And I realized that some of that equipment could be used to do the work of the consolidation, so I started pushing in order to get that done.

And we, eventually, you know, it took a couple of years but we started doing in a more or less semi computerized atmosphere, which helped in the sense that we were able to cut down on the number of people that we had working there. Some of those ledgers just disappeared and the people were given other work to do. And so, you know, that was the beginning of the computerization of Bates.

And that continued on until they, at that time they were closing up some of the mills. In other words, the York Division was closed up, and that was in the early '60s. And the Androscoggin Mill was closed up. The Androscoggin Mill made rayon fabric, and the rayon fabric business was good during the war because they were making fabrics for parachutes so, you know, they had all the business they could handle. As opposed to the type of fabrics that York was making, they were making what they call a lawn, which is like a fabric used for ladies blouses and stuff. And at that time synthetic fabrics were coming along, and so instead of, you know, business getting better in that type of product, it was sliding because people were into no press fabrics, and they weren't making that at the Androscoggin.

So then, as we went along, they started consolidating some of the work so that they would have, well at that time there was a big crunch for drawing back and cutting down, so I was heading up the project that, working under the president at that time, who was Woodrow, Woody Lambert, at the time was president then. He had been moved into Lewiston to see what he could do about consolidating the facilities. And one of the things that he started, an austerity program. And I was in charge of drawing together some figures in order to, (*unintelligible word*) to see if they could cut down on some of the, you know, high salary people. So we did at that time, did a lot of cutting back.

AL: What period was that? Nineteen seventy?

RS: That would have been in the early seventies, okay? And that was slightly after the Hill Mill had closed, the Hill Mill was in the process of closing, and the Androscoggin Mill was being closed, the Edwards was being sold.

AL: In Augusta.

RS: In Augusta, yeah. And so at that time we started working on this austerity program to cut down on overhead, and the result was that the whole accounting function was moved from the Locust Street location over into the Bates Mill, you know, and they at that time put me in charge of managing those various departments that had to do with accounting. I was in charge of the accounting, I was in charge of payroll, I was in charge of the computer operation, the accounts receivable, the accounts payable, the cotton buying, you know, all of that came under my jurisdiction.

AL: So you had a lot more work you were responsible for?

RS: Well, not really, because most of the people that were in those departments were long time employees and they knew what they were doing so, you know, it wasn't like I had to be there all the time. I mean, if they had a problem they'd come to me and ask me questions and they'd have me make the decisions. But this ran fairly smoothly, you know.

And it did save some, a lot of work because at that time we had a fully computerized operations running in the, you know, the office that's in front of the Bates Mill, the little office? I think the people that

are operating the mill, running, are in that office now. That was our, that ended up being the final location for the computer program. And at that time we had quite a sizeable computer.

In those days, I mean a computer took a whole room, you know, it was so big. Now you can do the same thing, I have as much power in that little thing than they would have with that big computer. But we did put most of the accounting function on the computer, so it became, you know, a great work saver for us. We were able to do the consolidation, and of course we had a lot less work to do then because the Hill Mill was gone, and the Androscoggin, the Edwards was gone, so it was basically the Bates, just the Bates Division that was operating, and we were doing the accounting for the Bates Division actually, is what it amounted to.

AL: Now, when the, I know the union became active in the mills in the late forties or early fifties?

RS: Yeah, I, you know, I'd be guessing, but I'd say yes, yeah.

AL: And did things like workers comp claims and things like that affect the accounting department?

RS: It did in the sense that, see, at that time we were self, we were self-insured. I know we used to hire a firm to do all of the processing of claims for workmen's comp, and we used to pay them, you know, a monthly fee for taking care of that. And we did this for quite some time

AL: Did it become, did the amount of claims become a burden on the profits of the mill, or, I'm just wondering what effect it, if it had an effect on the operation of the mill.

RS: Not a big effect, no, because it, the claims pretty much scrutinized and, you know, and the firm that we had hired to work with us on that used to do some investigative work, you know, to find people that, you know, would be on claims when in effect they shouldn't have been. I mean, people was always trying to find some way to, you know, to use the system, and it wasn't unusual for them to, you know, to find people that were capable of doing work but were still getting claims, in which case they were processed and eliminated as far as reimbursements are concerned.

AL: I've talked to a few people who started at the mill a long time ago, and they said when they first started working they were paid in cash, and then it went to a check system. Was that during your time, or before?

RS: No, that was before my time. But I had one employee that was a former Androscoggin employee, and it was his job to go get the cash for the payroll at the Androscoggin. So like once a week he used to have to go with a guard, and then go to the bank and pick up cash, you know, to pay out, to pay the employees.

No, when I first, when I was working they were paying by check. And I can remember one of my first jobs was, the checking account was at Key Bank and I used to have to go to Key Bank every Wednesday morning and pick up all the cancelled checks, you know. I remember, I used to get there before the bank opened up, you know, I'd have to press a button and one of the employees used to come in and hand me the checks and, you know, off we went. The reason for us doing it was because we had to reconcile the bank account, you know, all those checks had to be reconciled and we did that at the general office.

AL: Now, I know there were social activities associated with the mill over the years, like hockey and softball and bowling. Did you ever participate in any of them?

RS: No, I never did, no, no. But they had baseball, and they had, you know, hockey. The hockey team was quite something, I mean they won a championship and they went over to Europe to play some of the

European teams. I remember because that was about the time that I got drafted, that was 1950, and one of the fellas that was in the bed next to mine at Fort Devons, that's where we were processed, was on that hockey team. And he, he was so upset because all his buddies were going over to Europe to play, you know, and there he was stuck in the Army.

AL: Are there some presidents that you worked under at the Bates Mill that you have impressions and recollections of that you could talk about?

RS: Yeah, the one that I was closest with was Woody Lambert. He was from South, North Carolina, and he had worked at Virginia Mills in Virginia for most of his life. He was, when he graduated from college, he graduated from North Carolina University, Wolf Pack, and when he left college he thought he was going to go play for the Red Sox, he went, you know, he tried out for the team and everything. And he finally decided that he was going to go in the textile industry.

But I think he was the closest as far as presidents are concerned. I mean, I was very close with him. I mean, we worked together quite a bit, you know. And even after he retired, that was when the ESOP was completed, in 1976, he retired. He stayed with us while we were trying to get this ESOP going, and once that job was done he just, you know, he left and went back to North Carolina. And I used to go visit him while he was in North Carolina, we went two or three times, I guess. And we're still on contact every once in a while, you know, I'll call him on the phone and talk with him. He's ninety years old now. Yeah, but he was a real gentleman. There's an article in one of the folders that I have here about him, you know, a southern gentleman takes over, you know, the mill. He was quite some person, yeah.

AL: Now, were you still working at the mills when the Tang brothers bought the mills?

RS: Yes, I was.

AL: What was that like, what changes occurred?

RS: That was tough. In my estimation, there was only one reason that they bought that mill. Number one, the government was trying to get rid of the mill because it wasn't making any money, so they offered it at a very low price. They bought it I think for one reason, they would tell you that they were going to make some big thing out of the mill, but I think their sole purpose was to raid the mill of whatever they could get out of it, you know, as far as equipment and things like that.

They were very, very difficult to work with, because you could see that they were after saving money, and they were eliminating people that had been there for some long time, you know. And personally, they gave me a hard time.

AL: So they didn't do any upgrades to the equipment or the mill, or -?

RS: Not once. They would tell you that they were doing upgrades, but they weren't really. I mean, they would move equipment from one mill to another, and bring it here, and never really got it fully working a hundred percent. And as far as the computerization is concerned, they brought in these very old IBM computers and they wanted to junk the system that we had working, which was a good system, it was a Univac, and they wanted us to put it on these old computers. They did get some of it going, but that was after I left. But it was tough, it was tough.

AL: What year did you leave?

RS: I left in 1987. And I can remember when I left, when the president came in one day and sat at my desk and said, Thomas wants to talk to you. And I says, what does he want to talk about? He says, I think you know. I says, no kidding, I says, thanks a lot. I was so happy to leave, yeah. It was tough.

They wanted us to leave on our own most of the time, and especially in my case where I was entitled to a severance pay. I wouldn't get it unless they let me go, so they tried everything they could for about a year, you know, trying to get me to leave on my own. But I never did, I waited.

I remember the day I left, I told them that I wanted to leave a little early because we were leaving for Florida, my wife and I, and he says, yeah, okay. I says, well, can I get my pay right away, rather than waiting for a week, because you normally had to wait a week, you know. So he says, well, go ahead, tell payroll to give you a check, and they gave me a check. Seventeen thousand dollars. That was entitled, that was one, I think one week's pay for every year that I was with the company.

Anyway, I got my check, and I ran over to the bank and cashed it. And then I was getting ready to leave when Thomas, the older of the two brothers, came in and asked me to do him a favor, and I says, what's the favor. He says, well, we're going to eliminate the self-insurance on the workmen's comp, and we're going to sign up with Blue Cross/Blue Shield for the health coverage. So, he said, I'd like you to stay, and he says, see that all the papers get signed this afternoon and that, you know, we transfer all that activity to Blue Cross/Blue Shield.

And I was more than happy to do it, because this way I was able to get coverage for the health under the COBRA plan, which gave me eighteen months coverage if I wanted it, you know, through the company. And so I left on a Friday, and on Monday I was at Blue Cross/Blue Shield signing up for the coverage, you know, before we left for Florida. And I can remember him coming up, would you do me a big favor, you know, before you leave, and he put his arm around me, you know. And he says, would you stay and see that those papers get signed, he says. And Thomas, who was the president at the time, Thomas Levine, he says, will be there and, he says, both of you can sign and get that done, you know, which we did.

But the two Tang brothers were like night and day. They were like, they had, I guess maybe this is the way they worked, but they had, Thomas was like a father, I mean he was all family, you know, and I guess the Chinese people are like that when you're working for them, you know, you're like a big family. Eric was a hatchet man, so he was the one that's giving everybody a hard time, getting them fired and letting them go and everything. And whenever something like that happened, you know, Thomas would kind of play it up, over, you know, and be the good guy.

AL: I want to go back for a minute. You were talking about Victor News.

RS: Yes.

AL: That was very much a central meeting place for a lot of people in the Lewiston community. And I know that I've heard a lot of people talk about that being a place for talk about politics, local politics. Did you get a sense of that growing up?

RS: Oh yeah, politics, and a lot of sports and, you know, Red Sox. I had, at the time that I was working there in the evening, I had bought an FM radio, and at that time the Red Sox were being broadcast all the games on FM, you know, it would, you know, not on the regular station. And I can remember, we had a stand for newspapers, and it was just like steps, you know, it was almost like a bleacher. And the guys from, guys from the *Sun and Journal* especially, used to come over on their breaks at night, you know, especially late at night but, you know, they'd come over around nine, nine thirty and come over and stay a while and listen to the ball game.

No, it was quite a meeting place, you know, politics and a lot of, we used to have a club of older men, they used to gather every night around nine o'clock, and they used to call themselves the Merrymeeting Club, you know, and they talked politics and whatever, you know. And they'd just stand out there and, in front of the store, and they would stay there til probably ten, ten thirty, and then they'd all go

home. And one of them used to come in and do the sweeping, he used to sweep the store at night, save me the trouble, you know. They were nice guys.

AL: Was one of that group Louis Jalbert? I know he was a colorful (*unintelligible word*).

RS: No, no, he wasn't one of the group, yeah.

AL: Now, is there anything about your time at the mills that I haven't asked you about that you think is important to add, that I didn't think of?

RS: Not that I can think of. There were so many things that happened at the mill. I mean, you know, we got involved with selling the mills at one time, they were all sold to the City. The City bought the mills, and I don't think we were paying rent. They bought them specifically to keep the jobs going, because Bates wanted to divest itself of brick and mortars, you know, they wanted to be able to put themselves in the position where if they wanted to, they could move out of this city, you know, without having to worry about selling buildings and stuff.

And then we were involved with buying the rights to the canal. Because at that time we were producing a good part of the electricity that we used at the mill, because we had a generating facility at the Bates Mill down in the lower section with, you know, generators and stuff like that.

AL: And did the city own the canals at that time?

RS: No, they were owned by Union Water Power Company, which was a subsidiary of Central Maine Power. They're still at the, where the old Empire Theater used to be, there's a building that's built across the canal, you know, next to the bridge, and that's where they're located.

No, they bought, they sold the rights to the mill, and then when we went into the ESOP, we all, we had to make some changes relative to, before we could go into the Employee Stock Ownership Plan, we had to get rid of those things. So we bought the mills back, we got the mills back, and we had to, I can't remember specifically what happened to the electrical thing. I think we had to buy back the electricity, too. But that was a big change.

AL: And the ESOP wasn't successful in the end.

RS: No, it wasn't, no, it didn't, didn't last more than two or three years, a couple years.

AL: And is that when the Tang brothers came in and bought it?

RS: That's when they bought it, yeah.

AL: Great, thank you very much.

RS: You're very welcome.

*End of Interview
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