

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

Jim Wellehan
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

SWOH #048
April 30, 2010

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Industry Oral History Project at the Museum L-A, the date is Friday, April 30th, 2010, and I'm at the Lamey Wellehan store in Auburn, Maine with Jim Wellehan, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Jim, could you start just by giving me your full name.

Jim Wellehan: It is very full, it's James Francis Xavier Wellehan, and to make matters worse, there are two more just like me, my oldest son is Jim, and he's a wildlife veterinarian, teaches at the University of Florida, and poor devil enjoys being called James F. X. Wellehan, Jr., and if you Google James Francis Xavier Wellehan, you'll see more about him, he works for the CDC and all that stuff. And he's a thoughtful guy and a bright guy and he has a little boy that he called James Francis Xavier Wellehan as well, but they call him Xavier, which is a real act of kindness. Who wants to be number three, you know.

AL: And so your father had the same name as well?

JW: No, dad was Daniel J. Wellehan. And you know, we Wellehans aren't very creative, he passed it on to my brother, who ran Sebago for years, and he was Daniel J. Wellehan, Jr., and Dan had six daughters, so when our third son was born – we hadn't wanted to intrude because an awful thing happened, this is probably not part of the interview, but for, I taught in South Africa in 1968, and Dan's wife was expecting and I waited and waited and waited and finally had to go because I had to get there. I said, well Dan, look, it's going to be a girl, I know it's going to be a girl because (*unintelligible*) the first boy in the Wellehan family. And he had six daughters after that. Then Kath and I got married and had three sons. So it was a little sensitive, I didn't want to, I had called (*unintelligible*) and wanted to honor the name but I didn't want to, I said okay, (*unintelligible*) a son, we'll call him Daniel. Should we call him Daniel Joseph or do you think we should, well, why don't you change the middle name, that'll be fine, so he's Daniel Thomas.

AL: That's great. Now, where and when were you born?

JW: A long time ago, Lewiston, Maine, 1938.

AL: And so did you grow up in this area?

JW: Right here. My teachers always told me I'd never go far, and I didn't.

AL: Now, you mentioned before we started that your dad was actually in the shoe industry, and then you came in, and your brother came in later.

JW: Dad started the business, Dad was born in 1888, a while ago, and he started the business in 1914. He had gone to, his dad had come up from Holyoke, Mass. when they built the railroad, and worked at the Bleachery all his life, and dad left school in the freshman year and had a job in high school, and went to work for, I can't remember the name of the shoe company over in Auburn, he went to work in the stockroom there and so forth. And then he had a few other jobs, went to work at Peck's department store, he used to start trimming the window, he was the window trimmer and the sign painter, he'd start trimming the window, the four major seasonal trims, he'd start trimming the window on a Saturday night at ten o'clock when the door closed, keep on trimming all night long, from one end of the thing to the other, go up to St. Joseph Church to mass, and come back, keep on trimming, and he would, he'd finish up by about nine, ten o'clock that next night, go upstairs in the furniture department, sack out in a bed, be all ready to go to work in the morning when the store opened up on Monday morning.

So after doing that, Charley Lamey was the shoe buyer at Peck's, and they were good friends. So after a few years they decided to open up their own store. Which they did, which is actually in the original, the location we have down on Lisbon Street, and so they opened the store there. And they were very happily successful from day one. Dad afterwards wound up going into the naval air force, Navy aviation, back in WWII, 1917, but he had, they were successful, the thing worked. And a few years later they, Hardy Peck, who was a very nice man, asked Dad and Charley to come back and run the shoe department. They did that, they opened a store in Rumford, opened a store in Portland, and things just developed and it was good. And then, my dad was fifty years older than I, so you grow up and you -

AL: Right, he was fifty when you were born, so he'd already had this long history.

JW: Yeah, he was forty-four when he married, forty-five when my brother was born, and so it was, you know, you kind of expect, what am I going to do? Well destiny, and that's true, it was truer then than it is now, destiny says I'm going to be a shoe guy. So I became a shoe guy, you know. And I went to Holy Cross, and then I taught overseas for a year in Southern Africa, and after that I came back and went into the shoe business with Dad while I was waiting to go in the Army Reserves, because I figured if I was going to go in the shoe business, Dad was now in his early seventies, I said, I better give this guy a hand.

So I went six months active duty, and while I was active duty I said, you know, really, if I'm going to do this, it's a tricky business, I should get a master's in business administration. Because Holy Cross, I studied economics, but it was really more about Latin and Greek and other things and philosophy than anything else, so I went down to

Philadelphia, got an MBA in a year and a half, and then came back and went to work, and here I am years later. It's always been fun.

And the nice thing about it, I came back to an organization where there were lots and lots of people who had been working with the company for twenty and thirty and forty years, and they were my friends, I'd known since I was a kid, it was wonderful. And the reason they lasted so long is because they were constantly moving. Putting away shoes, shoes were up on the second floor, you know, some on the first floor, some in the basement down below, it was constant exercise, constant social interchange, and they always had the feeling of making someone feel good.

Now then, they might feel good because if you were five feet tall, they found just the right high heel, and now we're fortunate, we still have a lot of people who worked for us for a long, long time, twenty, thirty years, and when you take care of people, you make them feel good, you enjoy what you do. You go home and you feel good. And so it's -

AL: So tell me about what you learned from your dad in those early years when the two of you were together.

JW: Well, Dad at that time had done a wonderful job. And I think, there's a real difference between somebody who is twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five and somebody who's seventy-three, seventy-four, seventy-five, seventy-six, and I was looking to, as young people always are, develop things, make some changes and so forth, and Dad was very slow. I wanted to open a store in the Maine Mall when it opened, and Dad said, why would you want to go to work for the landlord. And that was the way he felt about it, and so we didn't go to the Maine Mall while Dad was alive.

But Dad had a lot of patience, and made decisions very, very slowly. And as a young person, you like to make them quickly. And as I've got along, I like to make decisions because we have to, that's what you have to do in a business, but I've learned to make them at the last possible moment when all the information is available. You pull the trigger when you have everything, and you got to do it now, and that's, I guess it was a combination of working with Dad and going through that that helped it.

And it's funny, I think being a son in a family business is always, there are frustrations, whether you're the father or you're the son, and I always kid that there'll be a spot in my, on my foot that'll always be sore for having kicked the living hell out of a desk one time after talking with Dad. But that really is not true, he was a lovely man to work with, and it's just a normal sort of thing, that you go through these things. And one of the happy moments of my life was when, after I had been there five, six, seven years, Dad said, Jim, you've done a good job. And that type of affirmation is one of the most wonderful gifts a father can give a son. And I'm very appreciative of it, and here I am.

AL: Well, tell me about how, what were the dynamics that built the business and kept

it viable and successful over time.

JW: Well, I think the dynamics were probably always very civil. Dad was deeply committed to his friends, to the community, committed to the people who worked there, and always tried to do the right thing. He was a kind guy, and that never gets in the way. And I guess if I've learned something, you do learn some things, even after you think you haven't, you learn things from your dad, and his kindness and his approach to, gentleness in approach to life was a very good one, it made for a wonderfully happy life for him. And that's, you know, the lesson I've learned from him about me having a happy life.

AL: And when you talk about, like what was, was it Lamey-Wellehan?

JW: It was Lamey-Wellehan, and Charlie, (*unintelligible*), Charlie was the shoe buyer, and after a few years he married my aunt, my aunt Mary, my dad's sister. And he was a, I never knew Charlie, because my aunt lived to be ninety-nine years old, we were very close, Mary Lamey, and so when, one day when dad went down to the church on Sunday morning, he walked down, he lived on Howe Street, walked down to church, and when he got to church the priest said, Dan, you better go home, Charlie's been taken ill. And when he got home, Charlie was dead. Charlie and Aunt Mary lived downstairs and Dad lived upstairs at 56 Howe Street, and that's where I was born too. And so that was, and Aunt Mary was just a nice, nice lady, and she never remarried, never had children, she'd been a teacher before. And so the name always survived, but there was, all of a sudden became, Dad took care of my aunt all the way through and he was very kind to her, and she was a great lady.

AL: Now, how did your business relate to the shoe industry, the other shoe shops? Were you making shoes yourself, or were you just more of retail?

JW: No, we were retails entirely. At that point in time, there was a real separation and you were a retailer or you were a manufacturer and so forth, and vertical integration really hadn't occurred probably for several reasons. One was that the nature of capital investment was such that, you know, opening a shoe store, you had to have saved up some money, you had to go and buy some shoes and all the things, and it was the way it was. And if you opened up a shoe manufacturing shop, you know, your capital is consumed very quickly in equipment, materials and the whole thing, so there wasn't this mass capital to develop vertical integration.

And Dad was fortunate, because I think the Depression was just a terrible time for people in the shoe business. Then WWII came along and rationing, and Rosie the Riveter, and everyone who was here was working and making money. And everybody who wasn't here was in (*unintelligible*). But when they all came home, we were the only manufacturing power left in the world. Europe had been destroyed, China hadn't been invented yet, and so we had this tremendous capacity to make things, we made things,

shipped them out all over the world, and we had this tremendous need and we couldn't get enough shoes, because the Depression had closed a lot of shoe factories.

So that was why in '26 Dad decided to open a shoe factory. The story's right here, he and Joe Gaudeau (*sounds like*) and Billy Bowden got together, opened a shoe factory. And a fellow by the name of John Marshall, who grew up in Lewiston on Spring Street and was a third, I guess third and a half cousin of Dad's, was very involved in running the shoe factory. My brother came back, went into retail, and then afterwards with Dad into manufacturing.

AL: I think it's important to say what the name of the company is that your dad -

JW: Oh, Sebago, I apologize.

AL: Sebago, yes, we don't want to leave that out.

JW: And Dad did a wonderful job with it. And you know, as we, my brother did a great job with it too for many, many years, he opened, all of a sudden Sebago became a world brand, and he sold it in 2003, and Dan's four and a half years older than I am, so Dan was a year, maybe a couple years younger than I, he was, (*unintelligible*) we sold it, and I think it was a hard time because Dan knew that manufacturing in this country was coming to an end. And he liked all the people who worked for him, they'd been there for years, and it was sad.

You know, it's funny, talking about people there for years, in the stores we would always have, as I was a kid, people come in, they'd pick up a shoe, they'd look at the heel lasting, they'd look at the tongue lasting, whatever it was that they did, they'd look at the stitching, they'd look at the hand sewing, whatever they did, and they would look at it with great pride. And it was kind of a wonderful thing for them to have this, and they didn't get fabulously wealthy, and it was hard work, and people who hand sewed had carpal tunnel syndrome after a while. It's a tough industry, but it's an industry you could feel good about. And people enjoyed it, people came back, they talked about it. And when that was gone, when that was taken away from people, I felt we had just lost something. When you take away people's skills, people's ability to contribute to this world, it's a hard thing. And we've done that in many areas.

AL: So did you have any inside workings of Sebago, or were you really on the, solely the retail?

JW: Solely retail. As a kid I worked there in the packing room one summer, and that was fun, but I was really a retailer. And I came back, Dan had gone into the business, into the manufacturing, and so it was appropriate that he do his thing and I do mine. And we've been friends all through life, and I think if we worked together it might have been harder. That's the way brothers are.

AL: So, talk to me a little bit about what you learned as a youth that you were able to put into your business over the years. Is that a fair question?

JW: Yeah, it is. What really happened is that the world, you know, when you grow up you expect you kind of know what the world is like, and you don't expect it to keep on changing but it does change constantly, steadily and so forth. And after WWII, after the Depression, every store owner on Lisbon Street played golf on Wednesday afternoons and Saturday afternoons, and retail business was good and just kept on coming, and the factories did well and everybody was happy and things were going along well. Then gradually some people in Italy said, well you know, we make shoes here, and the value of the lira was way down, so you could go over and buy some shoes a lot cheaper than we could make them here.

So that was when the whole thing started to change, and so started to bring in Italian sandals, and then Spanish shoes and so forth, it started to impact the shoe factories here, first in the women's business because there were certain things, I mean the hand sewn shoes were still very much made, but certain things that just got impacted more and more. And life began to change. All of a sudden, The Fair was the first store that opened up, up where Marden's are now, that was this off price discount store and so forth, then there was Mammoth Mart and all these things came together, and life started to change for the retailers and everything and it became much more competitive, and people started to develop mass retail businesses. And I think of them, there were an awful lot that looked very, very strong and very, very powerful, and as retailer you worry about them, because you've got a family to feed, you've got people who depend on you for work and so forth. And we're very lucky, we always tried to work and provide value for the company.

I mean, the fact that Thom McCann as a company is gone, and Lamey-Wellehan continues to exist, defied the odds. There were so many big operations that came and were here, and (*unintelligible*), then they weren't here. And I think some of it is the commitment to people, to the product and so forth that really does make a difference. And so we've been very lucky, and we've worked very hard to keep it going. And it's funny, after, we opened in the Maine Mall in 1976, maybe four or five months after Dad's death, we got a people who ran the Boston Shoe, who were local competitors, nice people, that had been bought by the Wahl Shoe Company, which is a part of Brown Shoe Company out of St. Lois, and they had been there for a few years and they were looking to close the Boston Shoe stores, they weren't doing well with them.

So a fellow by the name of Dan Marshall, who was John Marshall's brother, the John Marshall I mentioned to you before, had been with the company since he was a young man, my dad's third cousin, again, a nice, nice man, we went and we talked to the people at Wahl Shoe and decided to buy that, and the Brunswick store, very quickly. I think from the first phone until the decision to buy was a three-day process, and I think

we opened the store five weeks after we exchanged the, you know, made the decision, concluded this transaction.

So we were there and we, it was funny, when Dan and I did it, then it was only between Jordan Marsh and Sears, those were the two stores, there was nothing else in the mall at the time, so Dan and I walked up and down and we said, you know, you could fire a cannon from one end of the mall to the other and not hurt anybody. And Dan and I looked at each other and said, there's only one thing to do, let's go get drunk. Which of course we didn't do, but that was our reaction to that. But we were very fortunate, and we opened the store first of December, and getting all the shoes and so forth part was a very difficult thing, but we were very fortunate.

I had an old station wagon at the time, and I would fill that thing up I think at least three times a week with shoes and bring them down to the mall, because all of a sudden, the mall caught fire. And our timing could not have been better, it was busy as blazes. We turned, normally you turn your shoe inventory, shoe inventory at retail is a very slow turning thing, you'll turn it maybe twice, if you're in the women's fashion business you may turn it three or four times, but if you're in the family shoe business it's a two-times turn. We turned a whole inventory one time in the month of December, in the Maine Mall, when we opened it up. And we thought we were going to be closing Cook's Corner in Brunswick shortly, because that was a small store, but that had continued to be a very good store and done very nicely over the years, we've had to relocate it in the same mall a couple of times, but it was, the same strip center, but it's been a very good store for us. So that was one of the things that worked out well.

You know, luck is always important, and over the last few years we've had some funny things happen. We had, we were in the Auburn Mall, as you know, and there we were the, we were one of the original tenants, we'd been there since the mall opened, and in every study they said, after CVS, you're the major reason people go inside the mall. They come to the mall for Penney's, or they go to CVS, and they go to Lamey-Wellehan. But, so we had talked to them about doing a redo in the mall, and we wanted to put in a larger store there that would open both front and back, and we had comfortable relationships, and we worked also with a lady by the name of Liz Ryan.

And Equity Properties, who own the mall, turned the leasing to General Growth Partners, and Liz worked for General Growth, and she stopped in, the mall manager stopped in to see Don, who's next door here, one day and said, this is back five and half years ago, says, by the way guys, you've got to leave here in thirty days. Which (*unintelligible*) and so forth, and apparently there had been a side transaction, that's the only thing I can gather, Liz took some money to get rid of us and put another shoe store in there. And that was the dealing with Liz, so we've had that, that was a challenge. We were fortunate, Jim Pitman has been a wonderful guy, had a lot of support from the community. We moved our location, moved into here, and we're doing more business than we ever did before.

AL: This is a unique location. It's separate from everything, but it's near everything.

JW: It's a great location. Well, Jim Pitman had this all set for a restaurant, the same size and everything, all zoned and all approved, and just right for us. And then the restaurant pulled out and couldn't do it, so we were offered the location in six months, and Jim built the building for us, and he's been a – I don't know if you know Jim, he's a wonderful guy.

AL: What's his last name?

JW: Jim Pitman. Run's Jim's Auto Sales, nice, nice guy. And then we had to relocate our Augusta store three years ago when that was bought. And again, we were tenants of Will, it was downtown Augusta, we were very fortunate, he gave me the most wonderful location up on Western Avenue, and that store's now doing more business than we ever did in the Maine Mall, so that's worked out well. And two years ago we were negotiating, you know, what are we going to do with the Maine Mall when the lease comes to an end. Two and a half years ago, started, and we worked with (*name*), we worked out an arrangement that we thought would work for us, and then Liz Ryan, who worked for General Growth Partners, she said, let's have coffee, she says, you know, that deal we worked out, that's too good a deal. We got to charge a little rent for that and we've got to, we can't give you that sort of construction allowance. So we said, well Liz, nice to see you again, and we found another location outside of the mall and we're doing more business outside the mall in Scarborough than we did then.

So I think some of the lessons you learn, you go as you go along, because the world keeps changing. A lot of things change, retail locations, types of stores, relationships with, how much you can trust corporate America, all these things, they all change. But we've been very fortunate, and our business is, last year's the best year we ever had, and I think this year is set to beat it by quite a bit, so we're very fortunate.

AL: I want to -

JW: Focus on some other things?

AL: No, no, I don't want to miss anything in terms of the history of your shoe business. Is there anything that I haven't asked that -?

JW: Only about this, the founding of Sebago, and there, Dad did a wonderful job and my brother took a wonderful job. And if you want, you can look this over, it's just a nice book that's printed up, up there, sold by Tim O'Donovan, who's (*unintelligible*). I would like it back because it's kind of a family thing.

AL: Oh, absolutely.

JW: And the other thing we've always done is, we've always tried to build our own shoes, and we have a very small wholesale business as well where we sell four-siders. Tragically, they're made in China. And we sell ice-boaters to all the retailers, and they're made in China as well. Now, an interesting thing is happening in China, in that the Chinese factories who had to downsize during the world wide recession are now working very hard to come back up to build as many shoes as they can again. But they can't hire the workers, because the same thing that happened here in Lewiston-Auburn is happening in China, happened in Italy. I mean, people are going into higher paying industry in China, and the factories are all of a sudden, buying things takes a month longer, a month and a half longer for delivery and so forth, so there's some real problems. You know, the industry keeps changing, evolving, and a lot of the industry now is starting to go to Vietnam, and life keeps on changing. And I guess that's about all. Is there anything that you wondered about, as we were talking, that you wondered about, Andrea, that you -?

AL: Yes, well one of the things that we like to capture in these interviews is a sense of what the Lewiston-Auburn community was like in the years that you were growing up, in the forties and the fifties?

JW: A wonderful community, and it still is a wonderful community. But it was, some of the things I think was, people lived in town and worked in town and didn't need a car, and all my friends were, I went to St. Pat's and I went to St. Dom's, which were both inner city schools, and a lot of my friends lived in apartments in downtown Lewiston and the families were all together, and that was very helpful. And it may not have always been Ozzie and Harriet but it was easier for the kids, and there was less of a – no one commuted from Greene or Minot or Sabattus, what have you, but gradually, as the housing stock got older and the city failed to invest in recreational activities for all the young people in town, I mean they should have had, it did what it could but maybe it could have done just a bit more. People said, let's get the blazes out of here, we're left with this old housing stock that people want to avoid, so all my friends moved out to Sabattus where taxes were cheaper because they didn't have to plow for the hospital or the courthouse or all these things that we have in a service center.

But they also now have two cars, they've got to pay for them, they've got to commute. It's a much more, when everyone knew everyone, everybody worked together, it was kind of wonderful. Because down on Lisbon Street, you'd be in the stores, you'd be on the street, you saw nothing but friends. When that came to an end, the community broke up a little bit. It's still a wonderful community, but there isn't a closeness, the warmth that there was. And that's sad.

AL: Now, when you were growing up, were you in a neighborhood where there were lots of kids around, and what did you do for social activities? I mean, I'm talking about going outside, did you play ball and -?

JW: You did on Saturday mornings, you'd go down to the corner lot and everyone would kind of, all the older kids would kind of congregate there. And there wasn't the worry, despite the fact of what we've seen happen in the Catholic church, there wasn't the worry about pedophiles that there seems to be today. I'm not sure to what degree we were innocent, and to what degree that's changed. We may never know those numbers. But kids would walk to school, kids were free to walk to school, there was no need for school busing, or I'd bike to school later on, and the streets were safe, and we'd go down on the corner lot and start, first two kids would start playing pass, and a third kid would come along and be playing pass, somebody would bring a bat, they'd stop playing pass and start playing infield and gradually the game would start, and the game would keep on going until there were fourteen on one side and fifteen in another, and then go home for lunch and they'd come back and the game would keep going, and at the end of the 343rd inning we'd call the game off, you know.

So it was fun. It was different sports at different times, you know, it was the way it was. And at St. Dom's, you know, football practice was up the top of the hill behind the arena, where the arena is now and so forth, and it was great, and the games were on Bartlett Street on the football field there. And it was fun going back there when my kids were young, because I coached soccer and some of my other friends who I'd gone to high school with also coached soccer, and three of the kids were on the same team one time, it was just fun being there, remembering all these wonderful things. It's always been a wonderful town. I still love the town.

AL: And when you were like teenage years, were there places to go hang out and have a soda, or go to dances? Where did those things happen, or did they happen in your group?

JW: Well, they happened. You talk about sodas, Jimmy Harkins had a drugstore on College Street, when I was a little younger, it was always a great place to go have an ice cream soda, and ice cream frappe. The drugstores had these wonderful old high chairs and the high marble top counter and so forth, and it was kind of a wonderful spot. But we used to, the Y always had weekend dances and we'd go down and go to the Y dances. I think they were Saturday. It could have been Friday, but I think it was Saturday night, and you'd go and you'd meet all the kids from all the schools and see, you know, going to St. Dom's, the boys were here, the girls were there, so you got to look at all these girls, and those E.L. girls were pretty cute, you know, and those Lewiston girls are pretty cute. So we had fun. And of course there were dances at St. Dom's, over at the old St. Peter's school there were dances for St. Dom's kids, and that was the only time the boys and the girls at St. Dom's ever got together in those days.

And some of the things were different as I brought up my kids. Boys played sports, girls didn't. And as my kids grew up they played sports, they were involved in track and cross country, among other things, and skiing. And those were all sports that girls did

as well, and it was kind of a wonderful thing, they got to be friends. And girls and guys, they knew each other as people, as opposed to, wow, she's kind of cute, and it was a much healthier thing, I think. Some good things happened in the last fifty years, as well as everything else we could lament, you know?

AL: Is there anything else that I haven't asked you that you think is important to add?

JW: We haven't gotten into global warming, we could talk about that. I will tell you just one thing about that, in kidding about that, we do take that very seriously. And I was at a Earth Day promotion with Mike Retelle, he's a geologist at Bates and my son Dan's thesis advisor, and – do you know Mike?

AL: I know his wife, Julie.

JW: Okay, and so the rate of sea level change in Maine has (*unintelligible*) I think 1.8mm per year to 3.2 over the last ten, fifteen years. So we're seeing global warming as a real thing, we're seeing more storms, all those things. As a company, we're doing our very best to cut our emissions. Between 2004 and 2008 we cut our carbon emissions by twenty percent, figures aren't in for 2009 yet, we'll be doing that in the next month or so, but the new store in the Scarborough, which replaces the Maine Mall, is one-third larger than the Maine Mall store, and we are currently using one-third less energy in the new store. We've worked at it very hard, and as a company we're committed to cutting our carbon emissions by at least fifty percent by 2020, and I think we'll meet that goal in terms of time and everything.

AL: Oh, that's great, that *is* an important piece to add to that.

JW: Critical, critical.

AL: Great, thank you.

JW: Andrea, nice talking with you.

End of Interview
swoh048.wellehan.wpd