

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

Victor Vital Gagnon
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

BWOH #21
December 17, 2008

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Brick Makers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is December 17 2008, and I'm at the Museum L-A with Victor Vital Gagnon, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could you start just by saying your full name to make sure I pronounced it correctly?

Vital Gagnon: Vital Gagnon.

AL: And where and when were you born?

VG: Nineteen thirty-seven, in Lewiston.

AL: Did you grow up in Lewiston?

VG: Thirty-five – beg your pardon?

AL: Nineteen thirty-five? And did you grow up here?

VG: Yes.

AL: What part of Lewiston?

VG: Lincoln Street, Cross Street, Hinds Alley and back again, after bouncing around, back to Cross Street. Then we bought the farm in Auburn where Pioneer Plastic is now. I lived there until I was married and moved out.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

VG: Vital Gagnon and Marie.

AL: And how many children did they have?

VG: Seven.

AL: So there were seven of you. Where did you fall within the children?

VG: I'm the oldest one.

AL: And what did your parents do for a living?

VG: My father worked in Bates. First he worked in Androscoggin Mill for seventeen years and the mill closed down all of a sudden and he was out of work, then again to Bates Mill, where my mother had started after she'd gotten done with shoe shops for a while. So they both worked at Bates Mill for a number of years, I'm not sure what years.

AL: Right. And then she must have been in the home some raising children, or did she work all the way through?

VG: No, it was off and on, because in between the youngest – and there was a fifteen year lapse there, so she had a pretty good working period, then when the last one was born, it kind of knocked things off kilter there so she took a few years off again. After that, I think she went back, I'm not sure, I think she went back to fancy stitching after that. She was a fancy stitcher in Brunswick for a long time besides working in the mills, you know, a few years in the mills.

AL: Right, was that piecework?

VG: Oh yeah, all your shoe shop work is piecework, or ninety-five percent is piecework.

AL: And so then your father bought a farm to get out of the mill, or did he do both for a while?

VG: Well, we used to live on the farm in the summer, moved to Lewiston in the winter. Because we had a long road, a private road, to get to our farm and it was, the snowfalls were just too big. We didn't have the right equipment to plow, couldn't afford it. Had a small model A Ford tractor and that's what we plowed with, the snow, plowed the snow. I mean we had an old, I don't know where the plow came from, but the plow weighed more than the tractor did. It was wicked. It was wicked. The driveway was about, I'd say, half a mile long, private road. And in the spring we had mud. Here was a month of the mud season where we couldn't get the car in, had to leave the car on the main road, on Poland Road, and that made for quite a walk. Then we got a little bit organized and we stayed all winter, stayed year-round after a while. I can't remember what years it was, but I was roughly eight, probably eight years old at that time, and we moved there for good.

AL: Now how did you get into brick making and how old were you, probably early twenties?

VG: I was, yeah, I think I was twenty-two, I think, and I had a couple of friends who worked there, and money wasn't bad. I thought it was maybe something I'd like and it

was, I liked it, I enjoyed it.

AL: Talk to me about what it was like to work in the brickyard.

VG: Well, first of all it was very cold in the morning, because we had to strip down to our bathing suit for the simple reason that we were working in water all the time and we were always wet. Whatever clothes we tried to wear just slowed us down and we couldn't perform, so a bathing suit was the most, it was just a cold job, it was wet and cold, no matter if we wore – what they had is, some guys tried rubber pants and rain jackets and rain suits and all that, but you just can't maneuver it, because this is all speed. Another thing is, it's piecework, so you can't go there and waste time. You got to get it done, and that's the way it was done for a hundred years. And water-struck brick, it's more or less, you know, you've got to be in there. We tried all kinds of gloves, and you might have one piece of space dry, but the rest was wet. As far as the boots were concerned, if you got wet from the belt up, it would leak down and would eventually end up in the boots anyways, so clothing was a slowdown, was just a drawback.

So when you get there in the morning, and I can't rightly remember what month we started in, but when we'd get there in the morning, I'd seen a few mornings that there was a layer of ice, little puddles, on the ground. And I'm telling you, you want to get started making brick fast. Of course, in ten minutes we'd be nice and warm because we were going full blast, you know, but I tell you it was cold in the morning. But it was beautiful. It was hard work, but I enjoyed it very much. I think you'll find that – I don't know how many people you've spoken to about making brick, but we all enjoyed it and we all enjoyed talking about it.

For some reason, I never worked that much in the woods. I've worked a little bit in the woods and it doesn't seem as though that's anything that people talk about, but if you worked in the brickyard, I've never seen anybody that didn't like it, even though a lot of guys worked two or three seasons and that would be it. Like, I worked two seasons and that was it. I can't remember, I went on the road after that. Yeah, I went into construction after that, and then I got into the glass business and got a trade. But most guys, that was it, two or three years. Some of the old timers, you'll find they spent ten years in the brickyard, but it was good, it was all right.

AL: Can you describe the different things you did? How you went about doing it and what kind of tools and technology you had?

VG: Well, first of all, okay, in order to start in the morning you've got to have a pit mixed with clay, water and sand, and this pit is, wouldn't dare say exactly but I would say probably sixteen feet long by maybe nine feet wide and about eight feet deep, almost like the cellar of a house, small. And you'd fill that with clay and water to the right mixture, and then in the morning you'd start this machine up, and you got molds

with six brick and you've got a water tank about waist high, and you had to dunk your molds – they're made out of wood – you'd dunk the molds so that their clay doesn't stick and you put the mold in the machine and you put this big lever, you pull this lever back and then you jump on the pedal with your left foot. It's got to be the left foot. Push the handle back and you pull your mold out, which is, the mold is two-piece, and now you flip this board over and dump the brick onto a – there's a difference – there's making brick in the yard, which I've never made brick in the yard. If they made brick in the yard, they had a wheelbarrow and they'd put these molds, they would have individual molds, which I don't know how many they put on the wheelbarrow. I think it was approximately eight or ten. They'd put these on the wheelbarrow, special made wheelbarrow, two tiers, and they would run up into a field that was all clay, a clay bed, very smooth like the table here, and they would dump these brick onto the ground, which had been sanded. The ground had been sanded, which is hard clay, not round clay. They would spread a slight layer of sand on the yard so that the brick wouldn't stick, and they'd dump all these bricks on the ground in a nice even row and they were to dry for – depending on the weather – that's where they would dry enough to handle them and pick them up again after they were just sitting. And they would stack them up to dry some more before they put them in the kiln to bake, to cook or bake, whichever you want to call it. And that was the old, the way they made bricks way, way years ago.

But the brickyard that I went to work for was Morin's over here in Danville, which is about eight miles, seven or eight miles from here. They modernized the (*unintelligible*). We had conveyer belts over there so that we didn't have to haul the brick away from the machine onto a field by hand. What we did on these newer machines with the conveyers, we just made brick, took the mold from the machine, turned around and dumped it on the cables and then we'd make another quarter turn. We'd dunk the mold into the sink, like a wooden sink there that we had, and back into the machine, fill that up again, turn around again, and dump her on. This went on and on and on like this. And the mud has to be, we call it mud, and it has to be mixed, the mixture has to be right. So once in a while we'd have to haul it to the guy in the pit, you know, you're getting hard or you're getting soft over there or something, and he has a little bit of water and whatever. Of course we made a lot more brick that way because we didn't waste time, you know, running back and forth with the wheelbarrow, which is what the guys in the older days used to do.

And I worked with Rachel's husband a couple of days after school, I think it was on the weekend, on the yard. He had made brick on the yard. I don't think Harvey, Harvey never made brick on the cables, he made it in the yard. That was wicked hard work, though. Of course we made doubles – we doubled on our brick, the number of bricks we made. I can't remember how many thousands were made, maybe twenty thousand, I don't remember. And it was the same story. We had to have bathing suits. Sometimes we'd wear one of these sweatshirts and then it would get – see, as you turned, as you flipped your mold to dump it, which was a two-piece mold and you'd have a board on the bottom – you'd slide the board. So water was splashing continuously.

So no matter what you wore, how cold it was and windy, you'd get soaked. I'm pretty sure this would weigh more than you wanted to carry around all day, so this would come off eventually too.

If they'd had something that – we looked into quite a few things that never worked. Maybe now what they have, they probably have something now that would work, but it wouldn't pay any more to make – you can't make water strike brick any more, but you'll never get that beautiful pattern either. I don't know how familiar you are with – water-struck brick has a pattern that has seven or eight colors to it, and the only brick that has that is water-struck brick, and it's quite a process in how it's stacked when it's cooked, how the brick is placed together to get that beautiful round rainbow-type effect. And it's a combination of heat and evaporation and moisture that causes all these beautiful rings to be on that water-struck brick, so when you look at brick it may look like water-struck, but if it hasn't got that nice rainbow effect ring, it's not water-struck.

And, you know, there's wire-cut, but of course that isn't the same. That's not the same at all. It's not the same texture. I've lost my train of thought now.

AL: Well, let me ask you this. Before we started, you were mentioning some college kids who started. Can you tell that story, because I think it's -

VG: The what?

AL: The college kids who worked at the brickyard. I thought that was kind of interesting, just in terms of what it took to do it.

VG: Well, what they had was – some of these kids were looking for tough work because they knew they were going to go to college this fall, okay, so they want to get tough for the football season. So they'd come looking for work, because they'd heard through the grapevine that these brickyards were kind of rugged work. You had to be pretty tough for that, you know. And some of these kids were, you know, nice big, husky, couple hundred pounders, you know, and rugged as heck, and usually by the time they'd get to us, we had broken ourselves in. Now, we had hardened ourselves up. In a period of maybe a week or two, you know, we start off with maybe a quarter of what we're going to do once we're broken in. We have to start off slow, because if you start off trying to make a full day's quota, you're going to burn out. You burn out and you're not going to last the summer. You'll probably last a couple of weeks. You won't even last a couple of weeks because your muscles won't take it, so you've got to harden yourself up, and it takes about a week. It's a good idea to go a week, a week and a half, and then you can let go.

Well, these guys didn't know that we were hardened up, so they'd come – this is what they were looking for – something that would harden them up, but there was no way they could. You wouldn't believe it. They'd be wiped right out. Three or four hours,

they were wiped out. They couldn't walk home hardly. That gave us such a good feeling. They were tough, but so many of them got wiped out. Actually, they would ask for the toughest jobs that the brickyard had. They didn't want easy jobs, they wanted something that was going to harden them up for this fall, they didn't want to lay around, But some of them went home, I'm sure, for two weeks and couldn't move. It was good. We had one kid, he watched the operation – and in the pit is pretty rugged work. I mean you've got to have a good back and good arms, because you've got to shovel that wet clay, and I'm talking about, you know, a hundred and fifty, two hundred pounds per shovel full. Now, this is almost inhuman. Of course, I couldn't handle that much, so I used to have to shovel faster. But we used to have two guys on the crew who would do that, a hundred and fifty pounds, two hundred pounds per shovel full. We had one of these big aluminum shovels, they shoveled coal, they used them for coal shoveling. That's what we used to use. And I'm telling you, half the size of a refrigerator, down the machine. Of course the two guys in front are always trying to run the machine dry, you know, so we could say, (*unintelligible*). So it's a race. How fast are we going to empty the pit is really what we're trying to do, is empty the pit every day. It has to be empty, you can't leave anything in the pit. So the quicker we get this done – it's so much a car. A car is a rack, and I can't remember right now how many hundreds in a rack, but once that pit is empty, we used to have a guy that ran a rototiller, big rototiller about eight foot wide, and he would skim the top of the field, which was all blue clay, and he would pulverize that and let it dry. You know, while we were making the brick he was getting the field ready. And then he'd have like a scoop. He'd scoop a couple of inches of that dry clay and dump it in front of our machine, which the top of the pit was even with the ground. So he'd drive by with the tractor up here and we'd shovel that in with sand and water.

AL: So were you in a building, or you were outside?

VG: No, no, no, outside.

AL: You were right outside, near the pit?

VG: There was a roof. There was a roof over our head, but just a roof. No walls, no, no, that's right outside, so when it was kind of chilly – that was the worst part of it – getting going in the morning for about ten minutes, and you know.

AL: Cold.

VG: Yeah, it was cold in the mornings, in the spring, and then in the fall, naturally, same story, because the owner wanted as much brick as he could get out of us for the season. In the fall, the brick is not drying enough in the fields so they can get that dry clay so that we can shovel it in, and now it has to absorb and mix good with the sand so it will be ready for morning. So as long as we could, he could keep us out there and the weather permitting, we'd be striking until there was ice on the puddles again. We'd start

with ice – I've seen ice in the spring and ice in the fall on the ground, you know, when we'd quit. But like I said, it was fun.

AL: Now did you stop and eat lunch during the day?

VG: Yeah, we had a short break, somewhere around nine o'clock we'd break maybe fifteen minutes, depending on the weather. If it was cold and windy, it was maybe five minutes. Of course we had other guys working on our – it's a three-man team. But since this was cables, we needed somebody to put a new palette there every time we dumped our bricks. So one guy would dump the pallets, so one guy would have to bring the pallets with a forklift, ready for this guy. And then we needed men with some sand over there – they would throw sand on every pallet so that when we dropped the brick on there it wouldn't stick. Then we needed two guys down the other end of the conveyer to take the pallets off and put them on racks. That's a nine-man crew there, counting the forklift, we had a nine-man crew there.

AL: And so the bricks were still burned on the kiln. The kilns were built? They built kilns?

VG: Yes, I've never worked on kilns.

AL: But you never worked on those – you never worked on the kilns?

VG: No, that's quite a process. That's a very – a lot of people don't look at it as – it's quite a science. I mean, everything has to be done right or you don't get that beautiful design in that brick and – there's more to it than I even want to get into it because I don't have the experience, but I do know that I've watched them. And the precaution that they take in building these is unreal. And if you would speak to someone that has built these kilns from the start, I think they build those things about eighteen feet high, maybe sixteen, eighteen feet high, couple hundred feet long. It's enormous, an enormous pile of bricks there. And they have a roof, metal roof, of course. That's a process and a half. Making the brick isn't quite, there isn't that much to making the brick itself, but after it's dried up and when they stack them up to build a kiln, how they place all the brick is where the pretty part of the brick making comes in. But again, very, very laborious and hard labor, you know? All of it was hard labor.

AL: Now do you recall the owners that you worked for? Who were they and what were they like?

VG: Fred Morin was my boss, and he was a gentle old man and a very, very nice person. I liked him. The other Morin, he took care of the yard down at the other end. That one was – I can't remember who that one was, but my boss was Fred. He treated everybody very straight. He was good. He just wanted all the brick that he could get out of us, which is, you know, that's what we were there for. We were there to make

money, so the more brick he wanted – except when it got so cold in the fall that it was almost unreal. It used to get to a point where we wanted to quit, but there's next spring – we're going to need a job next spring too, so you know, we agreed that we're going to start this spring, and it's important that once you make a commitment, there's two other guys there – it's a three-man team. You got to make sure that the three of you can get along all summer working that hard. And so you don't feel so good one day, that doesn't cut it. You get in there and you pull the bricks out, because these other two guys want their pay. Just because you don't feel good one day doesn't mean you're going to stay home and take it easy, because there is nobody by now that is broken in that's going to take over what I'm doing all day long. The other guys that are striking, they've got their three-man crews and they got their three-man crews. All of a sudden you're short a guy – you can't find a guy to step in and pull out forty cars. I've seen some guys casually come in, especially when there'd be a wedding on the weekend or something, they'd come in Monday, I've seen that often, but it got done. It's too bad that it couldn't be done. The way I look at it, if it could be done on a small scale, get that old brick back, but there were a lot of steps to that. For instance, all the wood that it used to take to burn this stuff for days and days – I can't remember if it was three or four weeks, steady, day and night. They'd pump (*unintelligible*) into there. Now we had a lot of sawmills around. There were sawmills everywhere and there were (*unintelligible*) everywhere, so now there are no sawmills. Where would you get the wood to burn all this time? You wouldn't have the wood in the first place, so that's one of the things that – I'm sure there are plenty of old machines laying around that could be put to use, and you could still pull off some bricks. In fact, Harvey wants to do it.

AL: He does?

VG: Yeah, I think he's got a machine that's been given to him, and it could be done. It's got a big electric motor on it, and it would just mean mixing a small batch of clay and water. It could be set up in here. Of course, you couldn't cook it. I guess you could if you had a big baker's oven or something, that might work.

AL: Well, that's a neat idea. Were there quite a few people who started for two or three days and then just left? Was that part of the job that you saw, people come and go?

VG: There were. And they would watch the new team. There were four machines over there, so most of the time there was one machine that would always be three new guys or possibly one new guy and two old hands. They'd be breaking in a new crew. Well some guys, all they'd be interested in was a couple of weeks' wages and to go out and party. Now that would leave the other two guys not in a very good mood. Right now they've lost a partner, now you've lost a couple, maybe two or three weeks. Now you should be cranking them bricks out and you're going because the weather's nice now and this is only a seasonal job. So now you got to train another guy. Well, like I said, it's important that three guys get along and they have an understanding that it

doesn't matter whether you feel like you don't want to work or not, you've got to be there in the morning from spring until the end of the season.

But on that fourth machine, I started out, I had a very good – we all wanted to make it, you know, so we'd have a good team, but I can't remember exactly what happened the first year, and we had one guy that was kind of slacking off so what we would do is help some of these other guys finish over their quota, which gave us experience and speed. So I finished the year. My first year we didn't exactly make a killing over there, but I got the experience and I could handle it, so I found there was an opening on machine number two, so I spoke to the guys – I had gone to school with both of them, in fact – Berube and Giguere – and I told them, I says, you know, I'd like to jump in with you guys if you haven't got anybody for next spring. Well, they're not sure of themselves. They want a guy that's fast and they want a guy they can depend on, and they don't dare say no because they know now that I'm broken in. I know what I'm doing. So next spring is just a matter of, do I want to jump in there and stick the season out with them, and I'm not going to be out every Monday and crying about this and crying about that or bad back. I've seen a lot of them, the back went out – they just ran out of steam. They'd make excuses. Well, what can you do? A lot of guys liked it, but they just didn't have the steam. So I went in with Fuzzy and Henry the second year and I got kingpin that year – I made more brick than anybody.

AL: Oh, wow.

VG: All four machines. That was pretty good, because somebody would be out or they couldn't finish the day or something, I'd go help them finish their day. So a few hundred brick here and a few hundred there and, you know, by the end of the year I didn't know it and the time keeper says well Vic, you're the kingpin this year. We tallied up all the bricks made by every single man and he says, you got it this year. No trophy of course, but.

AL: Well, that's great. I bet that was a lot of bricks. You probably don't know the number.

VG: Oh, I don't know. I don't even remember how many we used to make a day. All I remember is forty cars, forty-eight cars when we were hot and we'd bank the pit. What we called bank the pit is we piled up clay on the edges of the pit so that we could fill it up an extra foot or so and that's -

AL: So that way you could make a few hundred more bricks that day?

VG: Yeah. I can't remember how many more hundreds it was, but it was what we called banking the pit up. If it rained, if we were lucky enough to get the clay off the field and fill up the pit, you know. In the open yard, any kind of bad weather, they were out of work. And sometimes they lost – let's say they worked all morning and if it rained bad in

the afternoon, if we had a downpour in the afternoon, they lost all the brick that they had laid on the yard over here. I think it was five thousand or ten thousand. They'd have to pick all that brick up again, you know. The brick was soft. I mean, you can't even pick it up. That's how soft it is. So you put it on the yard and you leave it there in the sun with a little sand on it, and it hardens up a little bit. Then there's what they call a hicking (*sounds like*) machine. It's a rig that takes and lays them up like this.

AL: Oh, from flat to standing?

VG: Yeah, flat to standing. It's a little rig that they take and it's got all kinds of little pallets here and you go to the next pile – so now the sides are dry and then they wheel them off and stack them. But if they had a downpour or if it rained all afternoon after they laid their brick out on the field and during the night, the next day they had to pick all that up, because that field had to be kept clean for the next day's work, so they'd bring the brick here and lay it down here – and I think they have two, one for drying and then they'd use another part of the field.

AL: Well, what did they do with all the bricks that got ruined? Did you just make a big pile?

VG: They're just back in the pit, I guess. I don't know what they did with those bricks. It's the same with bricks after they've been cooked and everything. These brickyards had mountains of brick that were either broken or not perfect, not good enough to sell. Then they found out that they could put them in a chipper and crush them and make that stuff for lawns around the bushes and stuff, like mulch. So now these brickyards had mountains of these bad bricks, so they got those machines and they crunched them – what was junk that had been laying there in piles for years. Then they sold them as – not mulch, but -

AL: I know what you're saying. I can't think of the word either.

VG: Yeah, it's red. It was crushed brick anyway. And then they had the white stones or they had mulch for around the bushes.

AL: Well that's a good way to re-use.

VG: Because those bricks would have been just – they'd still be there. And it's like sawdust now. You don't see any more sawdust piles. There used to be sawdust piles half as big as this mill all over the place. I remember a lot of them. They'd be out in the back forty or something. They used to set up these sawmills all over the place and they'd – ten, fifteen years, maybe twenty years, there'd be a sawmill there, there'd be mountains of sawdust. You don't see any more sawdust piles around. It's all used, which is – see, that's another thing, there were slads (*sounds like*) all over, because I told you before there were sawmills all over the place so we could get slads, you know,

without hauling the stuff a ridiculous amount of miles to get to the brickyard. So now there are no more slads, and I still say it would pay to open up a small brickyard and make that brick. Because you look at brick, and you can tell a water-struck brick by its nice little round design, almost the length of the brick. And you've got seven or eight different colors in that brick. That's a water-struck brick. It goes from black to brown to hues to pink, red, bluish, and you see that little ring – it's about almost the whole width of the brick and different colors as they go into the middle. You watch on buildings and you'll see.

AL: I'll have to start looking.

VG: That's water-struck. When they're all nice and plain and all one color, that's usually wire-cut, what they call wire-cut. That's all done on a machine. But it's still wheeled around by hand and stacked up in sheds until it dries enough to burn it.

AL: Are there other people that you know that would be good to interview about brick making?

VG: Have you interviewed Harvey?

AL: We've interviewed Harvey, yes.

VG: Henry Berube?

AL: I don't know. I'll have to look on my list.

VG: Henry would be good. Giguere passed away. The Chamberlains passed away. Foley passed away. Oh my god, they're all dead. Henry Berube – I worked with Henry, so I'd say him. And I have no idea where the rest of them could have disappeared to. Of course, I moved out of the community for a long time so I haven't been in contact with a lot of those people.

AL: Well, I thought I'd ask because our list is pretty short and we're just trying to find more people who did that kind of work.

VG: Well, Henry might – I think he spends his winters in Florida. I don't think you'd be able to locate him. But the one to find out from would be Harvey. Harvey's got a fantastic memory. He remembers everybody. If the guy made brick, Harvey knows him. So you have Harvey make a list – you can't see – you'll have to talk to him.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about, about brick making, that you think is important for us to add?

VG: Not really.

AL: All right. Well then thank you very much.

VG: You're quite welcome.

End of Interview
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