

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

John Allard
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

SWOH #029
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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is June 19th, 2009. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and I'm here with John Allard, at the museum. John, could you start just by giving me your full name?

JA: My name is John Allard.

AL: Where, and when were you born?

JA: I was born in Brunswick, Maine.

AL: And your date of birth?

JA: December 31, 1951.

AL: You were a New Year baby.

JA: Yes. No, not New Year's, New Year's Eve

AL: New Year's Eve, yes. And did you grow up in Brunswick?

JA: No, I only lived there as a baby, and my parents moved to Lewiston, and remained in Lewiston for most of my life.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

JA: My father's name was Antonio Allen, and my mother's name was Rose Anna Allen.

AL: And did you have any brothers and sisters?

JA: Yes, I have three sisters.

AL: What part of Lewiston did you grow up in?

JA: The lower part of Lewiston, Lincoln Street, right in the city area.

AL: And what did your parents do for work?

JA: My mother was a stay-at-home mom, taking care of the kids, and my father was a mechanic.

AL: How did you come to go into shoe work?

JA: I needed a job. I quit school and I was looking for work, and my sister got me a job at Clark Shoe.

AL: Was she working there?

JA: Yes, she was. She was working there, and she got me a job tack pulling, so that's how I started.

AL: What age was that, about sixteen?

JA: I lied about my age. I was actually fifteen.

AL: And they weren't as strict with following up with age at that time, or did they just need workers? Do you have a sense of how you slipped by?

JA: No, I think it's just plainly, when you do this, they don't really look at it.

AL: So your first job was a Clark Shoe. And how long did you stay there?

JA: I was only there for a couple of months and then I got a job someplace else. Again, I lied about my age later, and I got a job, actually I got a job at different places, it wasn't a factory. It was Carl's Supermarket, and then when I left there I went to work at Lown Shoe. They wanted you to be seventeen years of age, I lied about my age again. I was actually sixteen.

AL: And did you do different work there?

JA: Over there I did maintenance, all around helping, doing different things.

AL: You went from shoe shop to shoe shop in the early years. Was that because you'd get better money in different places, or what was your reason for moving?

JA: Well, I went to work at Eastland Leather. The owner owned Eastland Leather, and also Maine Stamping, and I went to work over there, I needed a job. The boss's

name was Junior (*name*), and I told him, I says, I really need a job, and he put me doing laminating. And then when I got used to that job, then he put me on hand cutting with a mallet. When I got to be eighteen years of age, he says, you can go on machine now. I didn't want to go on the machine, because I enjoyed with the mallet, just hitting the die with the mallet. So he says, no, you're eighteen, you're going to go on the machine. So I did, and getting paid about minimum wage. Then a friend of mine told me that they were hiring at Falcon Shoe, for shoe cutters. I didn't know how to cut shoes, but I said, well I'll go over there, then I said, I'm willing to learn. So they talked to me and they said okay, we'll teach you, and if you can make it, you can make it, and if you can't, you can't. They saw that I had potential, and I was fast, so they kept me. I've been at Falcon shoe, probably four times, I went back, after quitting, went back, got fired once, went back, and then quit again. So I worked there four times. I've just recently been laid off from there again. So, I could say that I've spent most of my life working at Falcon Shoe, as a shoe cutter, and I also became a leather assessor.

AL: A leather what?

JA: Assessor. That's taking care of the whole thing.

AL: Making sure of the quality?

JA: Making sure of the quality of the leather, as well as the cuttability, and also the inventory that's taken there, so that you have enough leather to manufacture all the shoes.

AL: So, you quit and came back, then what led you to keep coming back to Falcon? Was it because it was one of the few places left, or?

JA: Yes and no. I came back because I was used to cutting children's shoes, and I enjoyed cutting children's shoes. That was the first reason. But then, yes, because there was very few places left. But later on, that's the reason why I came back. And also, familiar grounds. When you're used to something, you know, you hate change.

AL: In terms of the owner of Falcon Shoe and the management, did that change over the years, or was it fairly constant?

JA: That's changed. The owner, the original owner was Ted Johansson, which I admire very much. He was a very good man, and very fair. I worked right underneath him as the leather assessor, because that was his, he called, his baby, that certain job. So everything came right straight from him to me. Even though I had a foreman that was my boss, Ted had the last word. So if I wasn't sure of something, I went straight to Ted, and talked to Ted. Ted was very reasonable and just told me, do this, and I did it, and that was it, no matter what management would say.

AL: What time period was it, that you saw the shoe shops declining, and something was really changing with the industry?

JA: I would say the real time that was really, really changing, was about 1980. I think it had been changing all along, but it really drastically changed about 1980. That's when I saw shoe shops just dropping out real quickly. That was too bad, because all manufacturing now is gone. If there is manufacturing, there's still Falcon shoe that's open, and there's places where they make shoes that are more expensive, that somebody's willing to pay a lot of money for, and those places are still surviving, but there's also greed in that, where, why can't we go overseas and have them done, and still sell them for a big amount, you know. So, those are leaving too.

AL: Tell me about what it was like growing up in Lewiston. You were in the Lincoln Street area, and this was in the 19-?

JA: Nineteen sixty, I'd say around there. It was kind of nice. It's not like today. Back then, you had a lot more to do. The fire department on Lincoln Street used to, there was a little park there, which had a swimming pool and all sorts of accessories for the park. In the winter time they would water down the inside of the park and make a skating rink out of it. They even gave secondhand skates to the children that didn't have skates so they could go ahead and skate. It was just, basically, we had a lot to do. It's not like today, where kids have video games and they stay on the TV all the time.

AL: So there were a lot of kids in the neighborhood to go outside and play.

JA: A lot of kids. If you had friends, you had maybe forty, fifty friends. There was all sorts of friends to hang out with, and everybody went out to play. They weren't kicked out to play, they were anxious to get out to play.

AL: At that time, the mills were still going.

JA: Yes.

AL: So you had, probably your friends and neighbors, some of them worked in the mills, being in the Lincoln Street area.

JA: Yes. My parents were not in the mills, or the shoe shops, but my friends, their fathers, even their mothers, worked in the mills and the shoe shops. Most of Lincoln Street and Lower Lisbon Street, and different places around, like Park Street and stuff like that, all these people worked in the mills. You could see them walking to work. There was like traffic going on the sidewalks, walking to the mill. I remember seeing them come out of Bates Mill. They used to have this little cabin, which was a watchman

right there, and you'd see the little bridge going across the canal, and see all the people crossing, hundreds and hundreds of people. That man that was in the little cabin would just wave to them, have a nice day, it was a community. It was people who all worked together, and knew each other.

AL: And your family, did they shop on Lisbon Street a lot? Where were the food stores? Did you have a car? How did that work?

JA: We had a car, and we used to go to, there was a place called Butcher Boys, which was where you'd go and buy horse meat. Back then it was cheaper, so you used to eat whatever you could get for cheap. There was a First National store, there was a Samson's food store. My mother was one to look for bargains, so she used to drag my father around just to save a couple of pennies in that place, and a couple of pennies in the other place, and do the groceries that way.

AL: Were the department stores still open on Lisbon Street at that time?

JA: Yes, the department stores were all open at the time, and it was, I think, compared to today, it was very enjoyable. It wasn't as fast to go in and out, but it was enjoyable to do it. Especially at Christmas time. They would decorate the whole street, and you could go from one store, go to the next door, to the next door, to the next door, similar to a mall, but you'd go outside instead of inside. And there was Kresge's, Wards, there was Ward Brothers, there was a lot of places. You'd do your shopping, picking up a little something here, a little something there, and it just made Christmas and shopping so much more enjoyable, that you'd like doing it. Being a male, well, males don't like to shop, but I did like that.

AL: In terms of the shoe industry, and you said currently you're laid off, do you see yourself going back and working again?

JA: In a shoe shop?

AL: Yes.

JA: I've been going back to Falcon Shoe at least once a month to speak to them, to see if things are happening, will they be calling us back. I don't know if anything is going to happen, whether it's going to stay small like that, or eventually just disappear. Currently, right now, I'm working for the school department as a sub for a janitor, and I just put in a proposal to go full time. So I'm waiting for results from that. When I get results from that, I believe, in a couple of weeks, I'll be working full time.

AL: Talk to me about shoe cutting, in terms of the details and what your work entails. What was it that you learned, that you were good at?

JA: Well, one thing, and shoe cutting is one thing, leather assessing is another thing. Leather assessing actually helped me out because of getting to know what the hide looks like and why it's like that, and the reasons why there's imperfections there. Shoe cutting is a trade, it's not just a job, it's a trade. If a steer hide, it's just like your very own skin, your skin is tighter some place, and some places it's not. So where you put that part of the skin, in what we call a die, which cuts out the pieces for the shoes, has to be a certain strength. On the top of your foot it would have to be very strong because your foot bends, and because it's bending, it's plying that leather. The plying of the leather, it weakens it. So if you've got a weak piece of leather, your shoes are not going to look very good. If you've got a tough piece of leather, it will look good for a lot longer. Of course everything wears out. And there's the backside of the shoe, on the left and the right, which we call quarters. The reason why we call them quarters is because there's four of them. There's two on each foot. Those pieces go from the heel towards the front of the foot, and that part has to be so-so, it doesn't have to be perfect, but it has to be strong. And you have, of course, your tongue of your shoe, which that don't matter too much, because that's just going to be a tongue with laces over the top of it. You've got other parts, like backstays, foxings, depending on the type of shoe that you have, you may have split vamps, a vamp with a tip. The styles that they had, some styles had almost eight pieces to the shoe. Some had twenty-two pieces to the shoe, depending on what the look would be. Every piece had to be a certain type of thickness and strength, so that the wear and tear of the shoe would be, the quality of the shoe.

AL: What were some of the hard parts about cutting?

JA: One, it was basically, at the time it was piece work, which, in order to make good money, you had to be fast. So the more you cut, the more you make. So that was one thing. Another thing, not everybody can do it. You have to be fast, for one thing, you have to be able to cut close, for another thing. Leather is very expensive, and if you didn't save any leather, it would cost the company a lot of money. So, fortunately for me, I was very fast, and also very close at saving leather. So I profited both ways. I think that it's like doing a puzzle. It's not everybody that can do a puzzle, so, I was told when I was learning to cut shoes that maybe one in twenty makes it. And I personally think, because the type of people that were working in a shoe factory, not to say that they couldn't teach, but I think I had a better way of teaching than they did, because later on, when I had to learn how to cut shoes, I would say, one out of every five people would become shoe cutters, with my training. While I was being trained, there was one out of twenty, because I have more patience. Some people just don't have patience.

AL: So, you say so many percentages don't make it, does that mean they have tried to learn, and had been working but can't meet quotas? Were there quotas? How did the dropout rate occur?

JA: It's kind of a, it's economics. It's seeing if you, if somebody's going to make it, the person's going to end up, at the end of the job, having all his vamps cut, his quotas will be all cut, and everything is going to be all cut. But he's not going to say, well I still have vamps to cut. That's a no-no. You have to have your lesser quality cuts, left to cut, before you, you still have to have some of those in the end. Your vamps have to be done first. That's one thing. Another thing is, you're allowed so much leather, and if you come back and you say, well, I need some more, each foot of leather, at that time, back when I started cutting, was only a dollar seventy a foot. A dollar seventy a foot, you would go back, and you'd get thirty feet, that's quite a bit of money. Especially for back then, because back then minimum wage was only a dollar eighty. That was an hour's work, just for one foot. That was one thing that we looked at. And if the management saw that you came back for X amount of feet, we can't use you, sent them home. There was a quick turnaround. Somebody got a job, hope to keep it, and hope I can make it. The ones that made it, they made good money. The one's that didn't, they went home looking for a job. It's not a profession that everybody can do.

AL: I've heard the same thing from hand sewers. It's not a job, it's a trade. You really learn it, and there's a (*unintelligible*) piece to it.

JA: I've done hand sewing. I tried it out for three months, I ended up getting trigger finger. I know they all have it. It's not something that I prefer to do. That's a trade, and it's a very hard trade. Cutting is more in the art of cutting. Hand sewing is an art too, but it's more like you've got a pattern to do, and you continue repetitiously to do it, but it's hard on your hands. I wouldn't even want to attempt it anymore.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you, that you think is important to talk about in terms of the shoe industry and your recollections, observations?

JA: The only thing I think is, the way people feel about jobs going overseas. Seeing all these things going, that the United States is just going to be a big telemarketer, and service jobs. And even these service jobs are going to go someplace else. What do we have? What will we have? Are we all going to be homeless, or what? We're going to be helping all these other countries, but we won't even help ourselves. That's kind of a sad thing, because there's a lot of hard working people in every culture, but here, just to talk about Lewiston and Auburn, there's a lot of French people that never had a handout. They worked hard for what they got. It's like somebody just came over and said, okay, we've used you, you've done your part, and now we're going to give the job to somebody else, and leaving you in the cold. Then you have the thing of, well, you have to go and find some more work. I'm doing something that I prefer not doing, but I'm learning to do it, because I'm not a house cleaner, and what am I doing. Washing floors, sweeping, dusting, all this kind of stuff. It's not what I'd like to do, it's what I have to do to survive.

To me, it's degrading, because when you have a trade, like my father was a mechanic, he was a mechanic and that's it, he had a trade, and I have a trade as a shoe cutter, now it's almost like you're living in Russia, where you're told what kind of job your going to have. Basically it's like that, because you're not told, but you have to, you can't pick and choose. And at my age, I'm really not keen with a computer. Even in applying for a job today, things have changed. You have to do it by computer, which I find, that's not right. There should be a written application as well. Right now, I'm also trying to put that in place, where maybe there would be a law written against that, because it's prejudice. It's prejudice against age, because these younger kids are taught how to use a computer. Somebody my age was not taught. Neither do I want to learn, to be honest with you. I think that it's not only losing the culture, but losing a way of life, where you can't really do what you want to do. You can become something if you, one, you've got money, two, you come from a rich family where daddy's going to take care of you, or you go to college and you learn something that you can get into. Like I said, at my age, by the time I get out of college, I'd be retired, so why would I want to get into something. That's what I see is happening.

AL: One last question. I was thinking about the social aspects of working in the shoe shops. Did you build and maintain friendships from the shoe shops? Were you working with people in a way that promoted going out together after work, that sort of thing? Or were you by yourself?

JA: The social part was kind of nice. Away from home you had your friends, you had people to socialize with. And yes, sometimes after work we'd go and do something. Whether it was, most of the time it was somebody going to the bar and having a few beers. Yes, I have to admit, there was a lot of alcoholics. But sometimes it was something to do with somebody, wanting to go bowling or something like that. Some activities.

AL: I know there were quite a few private membership, social clubs on Lisbon Street. Are any of those still there that you were familiar with?

JA: No, no.

AL: I know there's like the ACME Club.

JA: Yeah, those, I never belonged to the ACME, but I did know somebody that belonged there. Most of those clubs are now gone. The one that most people, from Falcon Shoe, would go to was called the L&A Bowler's Club, which was on Lincoln Street. Because it was a few minutes away from Falcon Shoe, that you could actually go there at noon time, have a couple of beers, run back to work, and try to get back on time.

AL: And that was called the what?

JA: The L&A Bowler's Club. Everybody seemed to have congregated around there.

AL: So there were, I'm sort of getting a sense of what it looks like now, and back then, in the seventies and the eighties. It has a lot more of these clubs on Lisbon Street and Lincoln Street, and that area.

JA: Yes, yes, and if you date back, and look at anything to do with that, there was a place that was on Lisbon Street called Blanche Turcotte, it was an ice cream shop, next to the pawn shop. These two older ladies that were working in there, I remember as a kid going in there and having an ice cream, would tell me stories about Lisbon Street and the mills and stuff. And they would tell me about, I think it was Blanche, her name, she and her husband moved to Lewiston from New York, and brought their marble bar with all the ice cream and everything else, little tables and stuff, and they started an ice cream shop, before the bars were on Lisbon Street. Back when it was a nice little community, where everybody went to church, and they went for an ice cream on Sunday, stuff like that. But then, she says, the bars showed up. And one bar, and then two bars, and then three, and then the whole street was bars after awhile, which brought down her business and the social life wasn't the same. It became very rough.

AL: Oh, did it?

JA: Yes, it became very rough, and you had people from out of town going there, and there were a lot of fights. I actually lived in a building which now is Country Kitchen, which was right across the street from my house, was a beer joint called Red Rail, and every Friday and Saturday night, me and my sister used to look down and place bets on who was going to win the fight. A couple of drunks coming out of there, and they don't even know how to swing, and they're just flying all over the place. That the kind of entertainment there was.

AL: Did they start fading away, the multitude of bars, as the mills and the shoe shops dissipated?

JA: Yes, it did, but it wasn't because of that. It was because the city was giving out less permits for bars, trying to clean up Lisbon Street. I think they've tried and tried to clean up Lisbon Street, but it's not going to be like it used to be, because today we've got big malls, and even the malls that we have, those are going to disappear, because there's going to be, there's the WalMart, and sooner or later they'll be bigger people than the Walmart, until you only have one store to go to, which is a monopoly. And that takes away, again, the enjoyment of shopping. Like I said, men don't like to shop, but women love to shop. I know, because I used to own a pet shop, and I used to have women coming into the pet shop, and I'd say, in my mind, behind the counter, oh, I'm

going to make some money. Then I'd see them walking out empty handed. Only I found out that they came back in a month or so and bought. They were window shopping. That's something that I've learned, and I wouldn't have learned if I hadn't opened up my own shop.

AL: Well great, thank you so much.

JA: Good.

End of Interview

swoh029.allard.wpd