BRICK WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE

Roger Bertrand
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu) October 26, 2007

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Brick Makers Oral History Project. The date is October 26th, 2007, and we are at the Museum L-A in Lewiston, Maine. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and I am interviewing Roger Bertrand. Could you start just by giving me your date of birth?

Ralph Bertrand: Yes, 10/15/36.

AL: And where were you born?

RB: I was born in Auburn, Maine.

AL: Is that where you grew up?

RB: Yes, I grew up in New Auburn.

AL: And what did your parents do?

RB: My father worked for Country Kitchen, and my mother worked in a shoe shop.

AL: How many kids were there in your family?

RB: I was the only one in the family.

AL: And so how did you come to work in brick making?

RB: Well, we were young and in high school, and we were looking to earn some money in brick making. We started working in the brickyards. Brick making was a way to make more money in the brickyard, because work as an individual team. We did our own work, and we worked by piecework, and we made, we got paid by the amount of bricks we made. We used to make ten thousand bricks a day. And so, and we worked seven days a week, as long as it wasn't raining. And we could make more money that way, than working by the hour in the yard. There was a lot of other guys that worked by the hour in the yard, doing all kinds of various things, like wheeling bricks and stuff like that, but we used to make the bricks, and like I said, we were our own boss. We'd make our bricks, our quota for the day, and we were all, we'd fill our pit, and pick up the previous day's bricks, put them in hicks, and then we were all done. We'd start about

five in the morning and be done by noon.

AL: And would you come back later in the day?

RB: Sometimes, some of the, would, instead of picking up their bricks right now, they'd come back later in the afternoon to pick up their bricks. Other times we'd do it all at once. We had to pick up, the bricks were laid down in the yard with the molds, and then they'd dry in the sun there, and like the next day that we'd come in, we'd make another ten thousand bricks, and then we'd pick up the previous day's bricks. We'd pick them up and put them in a, what we used to call it a hick. It was just a straight pile of bricks, piled one on top of the other. Then the guys from the yard, that worked in the yard by the hour, would come and get them with wheelbarrows. So we'd pick up our share. There was three of us, we'd work as a team, so we'd all had to pick up our share, it was about thirty three hundred bricks, you know, each. It went pretty fast. We used to have a, I remember but I can't remember what we used call it, but we used to, it was kind of wooden thing that we used to lift the bricks up on the side, you know, and then we'd just take five bricks and two with this hand, take five and put on our hand, our arm like this, and take two from this side, and we'd put them in a pile, put these in a pile, put that in a pile. So we got, most of the time that was hardest part about the job was picking up the bricks, we hated to do that for some reason. We didn't mind making them or filling the pit. Filling the pit used to take an hour or two, just about. We'd shovel the clay in a, in a box with water, and it would stay overnight and be all mucky in the morning, you know.

AL: And then you'd add the sand after?

RB: We'd add the sand with the clay. We would be adding that in, shoveling it in the hopper. We'd have one guy, we would swap around, we'd be three, just about every thousand that we would make. One guy would go up in the pit, he'd come down in the front, and there would be two in the front, filling up the molds, putting them on the wheelbarrows, we'd wheel them down. While one, while one guy was laying the bricks down, the other was filling his, so we were always running back and forth. We'd work in a bathing suit, barefoot, and we'd always be running back and forth. So when we'd start down on the end, it was a longer ways, you know, to go, and then we'd have to hurry back, because the quicker you could get them, the clay out of the machine, the better it was, because they wouldn't com-, compact in the machine and be hard, you know. So if you could keep it going, keep it flowing, that's why we used to keep running back and forth, and fill our molds *(unintelligible word)*. I think we had five molds, if I remember right, on the wheelbarrow, seven bricks apiece, I think, and they weighed about sixty pounds when they were full, and we would put them on there. We had a way of flipping them, putting them on the ground, and pull the slide, lift it up. And like I said, we'd swap around. That's where I learned to shovel, both hands, I can shovel left hand or right hand, because when we were in the pit, we had to shovel one way for this corner, and then the other corner, we'd have to swap around, shovel the other way. Especially

when the pit was starting to get empty, you'd have to go way in the corner to get it, so you, you really had to shovel to keep up, you know, to keep up with the two guys in the front, so that's why we swapped around.

AL: Right, and so you've worked, you had to really work as a team?

RB: We had to work as a team, two in the front and one in the back, and swap around. And like the team that I worked with, Andy Poulin and Ray Labbe, I worked with them, I can't remember now, it was three or four years with the same crew, you know, we got used to each other, we work. Yeah, it was, it was hard work. We'd, if you remember, I used to play football in high school, and I'd go, after, and when we'd get done in the fall, I'd go out and play football, the coach would be wondering how come we lost so much weight. We'd lose about fifteen pounds working like that in the full sun, and seven days a week, if it didn't rain. I remember one summer there was like this summer, hardly rained. We were praying for rain to get a day off, because it was so hard, but we kept going. We'd get in shape, and it was good, it was good work. People don't work like that today, I'll tell you. It was hard work. Well, you figure like you do ten thousand bricks a day, and you handle those molds a good part of the morning, they're sixty pounds apiece, lifting them up, putting them on a wheelbarrow, running down, unloading them, putting the empty ones, running back, filling them. You see what, so the clay, we wanted the clay at a certain consistency, because we had to jump on what we call a machet. It would put our mold into the machine, and we'd lift the handle up and the mold would go in the machine, and then we would jump on this, it's like a big pedal, we call it, we'd jump on that, and that would press the clay in the mold, and then we'd pull back, and the mold would come back out, we'd had a little stick there, we would scrape the extra mud off it, and then we'd take that and put it on the wheelbarrow, and take the next empty one and put it in there, lift it up, jump on the machet, pull back. If you do that all day long, all summer long, it's hard work.

AL: Was it dangerous? Was that machinery -?

RB: No, it wasn't dangerous, there was no danger there that I know of.

AL: Now, you said, after you hick the bricks, that people who worked in the yard put them in wheelbarrows. Is that when they took them to build a kiln?

RB: They, they, right, they took them to the end of the yard, and they had a conveyor there, and they put them on the conveyor, and then there were some guys in the building the hick. Bricks would come up on the conveyor, and they'd pile them in different ways, crisscross them, and pile them, and build what they called the *(unintelligible word)*. Yeah, one year, Dennis Brickyard, I can't remember what year it was, but it was the year we had hardly any rain, we worked so much, we had broke, me and Ray Labbe and Andy Poulin, we had broke the record there, I think. We had made about a million bricks. So, we had, it was quite a lot of work.

AL: Were the owners visible during the day?

RB: Oh yeah, Mr. Dennis used to come around. We used to call him, old man Dennis, but he'd come around every day and inspect the bricks. He'd walk down the rows, you know we had ten rows, right, of a thousand bricks. We'd always make a few extras too, fifty, sixty, a hundred bricks extra, because sometimes, in those days, they were very fussy. If there was a little round corner, where it didn't compress hard enough, there was a round corner, they didn't like that. So he'd go down the rows and inspect the bricks, and he'd let us know there's some bricks there that are bad. Today, they'd sell any bricks, but in those days, they had to be four corners perfect, so we'd make some extra bricks all the time, just to make up for those bad bricks. Oh yeah, he'd come around and inspect the bricks all the time.

AL: Did he have sons working there too, or -?

RB: Yes, he did. Oh, sons? Well, yeah, one of them their had sons. They had brothers, they were three brothers at Dennis Brickyard, there were three brothers there. I remember William and Larry and I can't remember the third one now. But anyhow, they'd been working, they worked there all their lives, from the time they were kids. Too bad you couldn't interview them. They would be a lot of knowledge in the brickyards, they had, the Dennis'. We were doing one segment, making the bricks, we were concerned with that, and the rest of brickyard was something else. But if I remember right, I think we used to get, I don't know if somebody, maybe Ralph would remember, Ralph Metayer, but something like thirty dollars a thousand, split three ways. I think that's what we used to get, so we'd make like ten dollars a thousand, and that would include making the bricks, filling the pit, and picking up. So what, in those days, that was good money. Ten thousand would give us a hundred dollars, a hundred dollars a day.

AL: That is good.

RB: In those days.

AL: Yeah, so this was in like the late '50s, mid to late '50s?

RB: It was, yeah, mid, mid '50s, yeah.

AL: And you were there for five years?

RB: Yeah, I kept going after high school, I did two more years after high school. I went to another school in Boston, and I'd come back in summers, and I'd still make bricks. It helped pay for my schooling, and it paid, yeah, it was, it was good, because even when we were in high school, we made enough money, we didn't have to work the

rest of the year. Bought a car. It was good, it was hard work, but in those for the money, that's what we were doing it for, and we loved the hard work too. We were all a bunch that liked to work hard and do physical work.

AL: And keep you in shape?

RB: Oh yeah, we were in shape, I'll tell you, great shape then.

AL: Were there others that worked in brickyard that you got to know over time, that you could describe or recall?

RB: Yeah, there's some people that used to work in the yard, Bob Morin was one of them, I don't know if you ever interviewed him. He worked in the yard, and one year when Ralph and I, when we were making bricks, I think we were making bricks with Andy Poulin, and Andy left early that fall to go to school, and I think Bob Morin came to shovel the pit. I don't know if you've talked to him or not.

AL: Not yet.

RB: Harvey, Harvey knows who he is. Yeah, I remember him. Some of the others, I don't remember who they were. They hired a lot people to work in the brickyard. Like I said, we were a team, and we did our job, and we didn't associate too much with the rest. Yeah, we worked at Dennis there, several years. We did one year at Morin, I think.

AL: Do you remember a father and son, who worked there together? I think they were woodsmen in the winter?

RB: Yeah, that was *(name)* Bonson.

AL: I can't remember their names.

RB: Yeah, old man Bonson (Bonsaint) and his son used to work in the brickyard, and they made bricks. See, there was brickyards in Yarmouth, at Auburn, Dennis and Morin. There were some Readfield. There was some all over, and they, so there was brick makers everywhere. So whoever paid the most, that's where we'd go. Because one year, we tried to go up to Sidney, that's where I was, Sidney, and we didn't like it very much over there, even though we were making more money. We were living in a camp, and we weren't eating right, and working hard, just, it was terrible conditions. Used to go washing the, in the river down there, in the Kennebec River, so it wasn't good conditions, but Dennis was good. We worked down there, and Morin was good. Morin was different, because when we worked at Morin, they were starting, they putting them in the racks then. And we would put the molds on the pallet, and the pallets would down in the racks, and there were some guys working in the racks, putting them in the

racks. They wasn't being put on the yard, it was all covered over, so we didn't have to pick up the bricks, so we liked that. So all we would do is fill the pit, then make the bricks there, and we didn't have to run down the yard, we'd just fill the molds, we'd work back to back. One guy was filling the mold, the other one was just dumping it on the, on the conveyor. As soon as you dumped it on the conveyor, you turned around, and he would turn around, and we'd, we'd, he would put it on the conveyor and I would fill the mold up. So that was, we did that for one year, I think, if I remember.

AL: Were you able to buy a, make more bricks a day that way?

RB: Yeah, I made more bricks a day, because you just kept moving, kept making the bricks. The guy in the pit really had to shovel too, because, to keep up. We, I have a picture, one of the pictures, I don't where those pictures are, but there was me and Ray and Andy together. It was a picture of that at the Morin Brickyard. Somewhere here, she's got it, Rachel's got it. You might want to look at it.

AL: Yes, hopefully it will be in the exhibit. It'd be nice.

RB: Yeah, yeah.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about your experience brick making, that you think we should add?

RB: Gee, I can't think of anything. I do remember we, in the morning like, when we started in the morning, at five o'clock in the morning, it was pretty cold, the water was cold. But once we got going, it was pretty nice. Like I said, we worked in a bathing suit, all day long.

AL: And I've heard, in the spring, sometimes you had to crack the ice a little bit on the water.

RB: Right, that's right, I remember that, in the spring or in the fall. We didn't work when it rained. We worked right up, well, right up in the fall until frost, we couldn't work anymore. In the spring, it was usually the rains that would stop us. Because if it rained on the bricks when they were flat on the ground, it would make all, sprinkle them all up, and they would call that wash brick. They would still use it, but they call it wash brick, but seconds, they didn't like that.

AL: So did you make exclusively wire cut bricks, or did you -?

RB: No, water struck.

AL: Water struck.

RB: Water struck. When I first started in the brickyard, Dennis used to make wire cut bricks. They had a machine there, where they make wire cut bricks, and you had to wheel them in the racks. But we were making water struck. That's what they called it then. Because we, we would flip our molds, we had a big wooden tub next to the machine, I don't know, maybe about four or five feet long and eighteen inches wide or something, and it was full of water all the time, and when we came back, and when we came back empty, we would take the empty mold and flip it in the water, kind of just flick it in the water to get, wash it a little bit, you know, flick it in the water, that's why they call it water struck. And we would throw our mold into the machine, and there, we would lift it up in the machine, and jump on the machet, the big pedal, and that would press the clay in, and then, and then we'd do that with the next one. We kept flipping our molds in the water. It was all, we did it so many times, that it was just automatic, everything was automatic. Grab the mold, flip it, throw it in the machine, lift the handle, jump, you know, it was done that fast. And then we'd just throw it back, we'd throw them on there, and put the next one in. And then when we'd run it down in the yard, it was automatic there too. We just had, that's where we'd pick up the speed, is in dumping the molds. You had to take the mold and flip it. You know, a sixty pound mold, we just took it, flipped it, put it on the ground, pull the slide up, lift the mold up, throw it back on empty, and go to the next one. It was, it took a while to learn how to really be good at it.

AL: Yeah, so you didn't mess up the bricks.

RB: Because, so you didn't mess up the bricks and you could do speed too, so you, so you don't want to do this too slow. This took a while to learn it, but once we learned it, we, we got good at it.

AL: Well, sixty pounds is kind of hard to manipulate just right.

RB: Right, to take that mold, take that mold, you really have to see it to believe it. We just took the mold off the wheelbarrow, the mold was on the wheelbarrow like this, a little bit lower than this. We would slide it and tip it, slide it off the mold, and just go like that, and it would just flip, and put it on the ground. We really didn't handle the whole weight. It's not like if you took it, we just turned it, *(unintelligible phrase)*. (After a thousand bricks, your back would be dead. We just had a way of doing it, just flip it, put it on the ground, and then you'd pull the slide, and the bricks would stay there, you'd lift the mold up and throw it on. We'd never stand up, we'd always be bent over, to go and back up bent. You'd put one mold down on the ground and back up, and get another mold down on the ground. You never stand up, that way you're always moving. It was the same way when we did them on the machine, I remember that. That took some time to learn on how to do that, but once you got that, you picked up speed, and then we could really make the bricks faster. The quicker we made our quota of bricks and got out, the better we liked it.) Oh, I remember when I first started, the first year there, gee, at the end of the day, I'd go home and I'd just hit, I was so tired, I'd just fall asleep in the chair or on a couch or anything, I just, I had to have a break. But then as the

summer went along, you'd get, getting tougher and more in shape, it wasn't quite as bad, but it was hard work. Yeah, a lot of brick makers were people that worked in the wood in the wintertime. They worked in the woods in the wintertime, they made bricks in the summertime. But us, me and the crew there, we, we didn't, we were going to school and then making bricks.

AL: And I heard some people did the mills in the winter, worked in the mills.

RB: Some of them did probably. That's about all I can remember about making bricks.

AL: So did you go onto different sort of career that you wanted after brick making?

RB: Yeah, I went into, I went to school in Boston, I went into electrical, and I started off working as an electrician, after I went to school for a couple of years. That's when I finally quit making bricks. I still made bricks while I went to school in Boston, but then after I got done my schooling, I started working as an electrician, and that's when I finally stopped making them. I worked for an electrician for a number of years, and then, then I went into teaching, and I finished my career at Central Maine Community College now, and I taught school there, retired from there, in the electrical, electronics field. Yeah, so I went from brick making to electrical. How do you figure that?

AL: Yeah, well, great, thank you so much for your time.

RB: Yeah, I'm glad to.

End of Interview
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