

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

Ray Berube

(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

August 30, 2007

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Brick Makers Oral History Project, at the Museum L-A. The date is August 30th, 2007, and I'm at the home of Ray Berube, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could you start just by giving me your full name and spelling it?

Ray Berube: Raymond C. Berube, B-E-R-U-B-E.

AL: And when were you born?

RB: June 22nd, 1937.

AL: And where were you born?

RB: Danville, Maine.

AL: Did you grow up in Danville?

RB: I was there probably until the age of two, and then we moved to New Auburn, on the corner of Third and (*unintelligible word*).

AL: And so, that's where you really grew up, in the neighborhood?

RB: I grew up there, until the age of eleven. I went to Saint Louis School, then we moved to old Auburn, near the old Auburn police station on School Street. I went to school at Chamberlain School, and then I went to school at Webster and the old Edward Little.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

RB: Blanche Berube and Leon Berube. They both worked in Bates Mill all of their lives.

AL: They did? Now what did they do in the Bates Mill?

RB: My father was a machinist, and my mother, I forget over the years just exactly what her job was, but I know it was lifting over her head, something that she lifted over

her head and put on hooks. And she came here from Canada, when she was a young child. And they were actually, her entire family of about fourteen, grew up in Danville on a farm, they lived off the farm.

AL: What was your mother's maiden name?

RB: Dionne. She was supposedly related somehow to the Dionne quintuplets. So, I've never researched the family background, but that's what I was told by my cousin who did.

AL: Now, how many brothers and sisters did you have?

RB: I had two brothers and four sisters. The eldest of the family was a boy, Richard, he died at nine years of age of leukemia. In fact, he died the same year I was born, so I never, never got to know him.

AL: Now, growing up in New Auburn area, and the other areas of Auburn, you got a sense of the different communities. What was it like to grow up doing -?

RB: New Auburn was very, very French Canadian. If you walked around the streets of New Auburn, when I was a child, you would not hear anyone speaking English. It was a French speaking community, the same as Lewiston. New Auburn was the same as Lewiston, and actually separated from old Auburn. Old Auburn and New Auburn were like two totally different communities, because of the Yankees in old Auburn and the French speaking in New Auburn. In fact, when I moved to old Auburn, it was rough, in the beginning, because there weren't that many Canadians there, and we spoke real broken English so you had, you had a hard time to cope until you made a few friends, but eventually -.

AL: Now, what brought you to brick making? At what age did you, were you introduced to that?

RB: I'd have to say around twelve or thirteen years old. We had a, I was taught a real value, insofar as working for a living, and we started really young. I had a paper route at around ten or eleven years of age, and then I don't remember how I really got introduced at a brickyard. I know my father used to burn bricks for Morin Brickyard, and I heard stories from him and my uncles, who also worked in Morin Brickyard, making brick. When I first went to Dennis, which was closer to where I was living at the time, I was living on Washington Street, southbound, which was First Avenue at the time. There was no turnpike or interstate ninety five, or anything else. And I remember going down there, and I wanted a job, and I weighed about eighty pounds soaking wet, so I was really, really wasn't big enough or strong enough to do the type of work that they did. So when I started, I started by sanding brick. You had a little sand box with a handle on it, and when the brick makers made the brick, they laid them out on yards,

and they had to be sanded so that the sun would not dry them too fast or they would crack. And that's what I first started doing, when I first moved to the brickyard.

AL: Now, that was at like age twelve, eleven or twelve?

RB: About twelve or thirteen.

AL: Twelve or thirteen. So, how much, how often did you work during a week, say?

RB: At the very beginning, it was probably three hours a day, six days a week. Then as I grew older, I started learning the intricacies of the brick making business, because I still wasn't big enough or strong enough to do the wheeling of the wheelbarrows and (*unintelligible word*) kilns and everything else, so I learned from the bottom up, how they made the benches, what you did to make the benches, the difference in the brick, how you started, all the way to the top of the benches, and then your kilns were built on top of your benches, after your benches were done. And Lawrence, the oldest of the brothers, there were four Dennis brothers, showed me how to burn. I was only around fourteen or fifteen years of age, and I was burning, burning the brick, actually, supposedly, a head burner, and I had men that were doing the actual (*unintelligible word*) work. And when you burn the brick, when you first started, you had wood that you had put in between the benches, and you had an opening from one side of the kiln to the other. The kiln was probably thirty feet wide. So, when you first started the kilns, after they were built, you started by burning that wood inside, and that probably took, maybe twelve to fourteen hours. As you burned the brick, you had to slowly, in the beginning, dry the brick. So you had to fire it, then let it cool off, so that the smoke and the steam could go out through the top. If you actually tried to burn it too fast in the beginning, with the soot and everything, you could actually totally plug up a kiln, so that you wouldn't be able to burn in it. You had to be very careful, because otherwise than that, you would have to rebuild an entirely new kiln and take that brick and transfer it all to a new kiln. It was, it was quite a, quite something back then. It took fourteen days and fourteen nights, continually, to burn brick, nonstop.

AL: And then, would you have to build another kiln?

RB: You would, you would build a kiln every time you made new brick. The brick, the brick making, the brick burning itself, was started from the ground up. You're the one that actually built the kiln. Today, it's all automated. They have kilns that they can actually put brick into and it's, it's a, it's much, it's just a sight. It's almost like making bread. They have belts, where the bricks go in and go through a cycle of heating and cooling off. The same, the same as when, the way you make bread today.

AL: And which, I know there are different kinds of bricks. What kind did you make at Dennis?

RB: You have what, they made both water-struck and wire cut. Morin, in Danville, only made the water-struck. They had a secondary brickyard in Westbrook, that made the wire, the wire cut. The wire cut was a lot easier to make than the water-struck. The water-struck was made one hundred percent manually, and it had to be laid on a yard to dry, and then it had to be hicked, then it had to be put in rows to dry, and it was a really long process. The wire cut actually came out of the machine in the form of a brick. When it would hit a pallet, you'd cut it with wires, with a handle that would swing back and forth. Then you'd take the pallets, put them on the wheelbarrows, and wheel them into the racks. You had, you had long racks, probably numbering a hundred with shelves. You would actually put the pallets on shelves, maybe ten or twelve high, where they would dry. Then after they dry, then that's what you'd do, your next step after they were dry, you would, after your benches were made, you'd start putting your brick up and, and making a kiln. You'd have, normally, two guys at the top setting the brick, that were actually building the kiln, and maybe three wheelers, that were constantly putting bricks on the, on the belts. And it was all for fourteen days, fourteen nights, all done by wood. And you'd fire from one side of your kiln, close the doors, put mud around the doors so they were airtight, then you'd go on the other side and fire from the other side. And you kept switching, every day, from side to side, so that your kilns would burn evenly. You had, it's, I would have, probably would have been better off writing this down so I could go on step by step through the process, but as I'm speaking I'm remembering some of the things that we did. Like at the beginning, you had a row of bricks that you put on the top, which you spaced, in order to let the soot and the steam and everything else come out through. Once this process was done, you had to climb up on top of the kiln, it probably took three or four days if I remember right, and you'd go up there with bars and you'd put wooden, wooden shoes on your feet, because you had fire there for four or five days, now it's getting warm. Well you'd have to go up there and close all the spacers, so that you'd be able to keep that much more heat inside your kiln. So, you'd probably be two or three guys up there, and you had to bring brick up there with you, so that as you're closing these spacers, you'd tighten them, you're needing more brick. So it was a very, very warm job. As a matter of fact, the wood that was on your feet would sometimes catch on fire, and you'd have to throw it off on the side, and go on this side and pick up another pair. It was a hot job. Not, I don't, I think it would be very difficult to get people who would do that today, because especially when you, when your kilns got real hot and you were taking off these doors, the heat was completely unbearable. You would wear longjohns in summer heat, that's seventy five, eighty degree heat, you would wear longjohns, a pair of long pants, and a leather apron, to keep it from burning your legs. That's how much heat that was coming out of there. In fact, you'd have some brick makers, which, who were really heroes, who were going to show how tough they were. I remember one particular guy, I think his name was Andy Burgeron, and he was making brick, like when (*unintelligible phrase*), water-struck, where they used to do that in a bathing suit. Well, he was going to show how tough he was and actually push the wood in there in a bathing suit. And he did, and he was out of work probably for a couple, three weeks after that, because his leg was all blistered from the heat from, from the kiln, but he did it, he was tough.

But I mean they did a lot, a lot of foolish things like that, and most brick makers, or I should say, probably a good percentage of them, were very heavy drinkers. When I first started sanding, as a, as a young man of twelve, thirteen years old, there was a gentleman and his son, well, I won't say what their names were, but they used to come to work in the morning with a case of Schmidt's Ale, twenty four ounce bottles, quarts. By the time they left that morning to go home while the brick was drying, the case of beer was gone, and when they came back in the afternoon, they'd have another case of beer, and when they finished their work in the afternoon, that was gone. So, they were, they were definitely some tough customers that worked in the brickyards. They had to be, because the work was grueling. They worked in the brickyards in the summer, the majority of them worked in the woods in the wintertime, out in the woods.

AL: Well, talking about wood, was it difficult to keep a good wood supply on site?

RB: No, you had, I don't know, if it was lumber companies or who was piling it, but we used to have in Litchfield, out in the fields, we had piles and piles and piles, as far as the eye could see of what we called slabs. It was the outer pieces of when they, they, in the sawmill, you're cutting the outer strips, in order to get your two by fours, boards and everything else, that would be piled out in Litchfield, and we used to haul it, all day long with trucks. And we'd have some piled in the brickyard, way ahead before we even started burning, but as soon as we started burning, we started hauling wood at the same time. It was never, never a shortage of wood.

AL: Now, did your job change as you got older? How long were you there working at the brickyard?

RB: Oh, I'd say, all the way through high school and probably a year or so after high school.

AL: Did you go full time during those summer months?

RB: Oh, yeah.

AL: When you got older?

RB: Oh, yeah. In fact, my, when I was in high school, in the summertime when we were burning, myself and two other guys had worked, well, you could work as many hours as you wanted. There was no, there was no time and a half, for one thing. There was no overtime, there were no benefits, it was absolutely nothing. At the time, we were making a dollar an hour. We worked a hundred and thirty two hours one week. And as a matter of fact, I remember bringing that paycheck home, and my paycheck was more than my mother and father's paychecks together in Bates Mill. So, people

complain about what they make today, they should have worked in the mills and shoe shops. In fact, I'd say the shoe shops, they probably made a little more money than they did in the mills. The mills were really, really bad. When you talk about slaves in the south, we had slaves in Maine, big time. The French Canadians built the city of Lewiston on nothing. I mean these people made absolutely nothing. I, I find it hard to believe that Saint Joseph's, Saint Mary's, Saint Peter and Paul's Basilica, Saint Patrick's, these places were all built with the money that people made back then. Because I know, I grew up back then and we had plenty to eat in the house, but I never saw any steak, and I never saw lobster. In fact, I didn't even know what steak was. We had hotdogs, we had hamburgers and macaroni, Chinese pie, you just, you didn't eat the way your kids do today. Kids don't know how well off they are. I mean, you try, you can't hire somebody for ten dollars an hour to dig a ditch. Even my grandchildren, when I was doing a roof, one of them was eighteen, I think the other was seventeen, they wanted one hundred dollars to work for the day, helping me on a roof. They have absolutely no value of money, none, it's unbelievable. Well, that's why their credit cards today are maxed to the, to the hills, and these kids are going to have what they want, even if they have to put it on credit cards. But I mean this is something that children today just, they have no work ethic. It's gone by the wayside.

AL: Now, can you talk about any brick makers that you worked with? I know you mentioned a couple of stories, but were there any ones that had been there a long time, or did they come and go? Did they, what was the sort of the feeling of the workers in the brickyards?

RB: It was mostly the same crews, the same, especially the ones making the water-struck brick. That was a real art. I mean not everyone could do this. When they took the brick out of the machine and put it on wheelbarrows, they had like a mold with a board underneath the mold. When they put that brick on the yard, it had to be in one swift motion. That brick had to come off the wheelbarrow, it had to be turned upside down, just before it hit the ground, and it had to be done very softly, so that when you took your board off, your brick wouldn't just splatter all over the yard. It had to retain its mold. And that had to weigh, god, it had to be between forty and fifty pounds, and they did that hours on end. Most of them were very, very big boys, and like I said, it, it was an art, taking the bricks off the wheelbarrows, because not everybody could do it. A lot of people tried, and you'd end up just dropping your bricks on, on the ground and having to pick them back up and throwing them back, back in the machine. So most of them were, like I said, worked with the same men over and over again. Harvey Desgrosseilliers did it for years.

AL: I interviewed him.

RB: Yeah, Rachel's husband. And he was one of the best, one of the very, very best, he was fast. And there were two of them that would wheel from the front, and one would generally shovel in the pit. And if one was faster than the other, and they didn't

get along, somebody was going to run all day. I mean that would happen a lot, where the better man took advantage of, of his, of his position, and could really do it fast, so he was actually back up at the machine, before the guy had finished loading his wheelbarrow, so he had time to rest a little bit, the other guy had to constantly move just to keep up. But, yeah, it was mostly, mostly the same guys, summer after summer after summer, until eventually you could see where it was getting harder and harder to get people. Because where they could rotate three guys that could do the job well, could rotate, and the one that was shoveling in the pit, you could actually rest. But if you didn't have three guys who could do the wheeling in the front, and one guy stayed in the pit, the two guys in the front had to find somebody just to shovel the mud out, so they never got a break. Towards the end, mostly it was two guys in the front that were doing all the work without any breaks. So, it was, it was tough, it was really, really a tough business.

AL: And then you went on to something else after *(unintelligible phrase)*?

RB: I didn't really, I shoveled the pit a few times, but I could never get the trick of flipping those bricks onto the ground without damaging them. You know, you could do it maybe a half a dozen times, but then if you plopped three of them down, it just wasn't worth it. I mean, the other guy who could do, you'd, you'd just be holding them up. I mean, I, *(unintelligible word)* I guess.

AL: All right, and so you were saying?

RB: So, I, I never really, I did some wheeling and a little bit of shoveling in a pit and brick making, but because I was never that big, I learned the intricacies of the, of the brick making business, so I was *(unintelligible phrase)*, making the benches, doing everything that the bosses would be doing, and, and I was doing the burning when they were burning kilns at night. I worked with a couple of their sons burning brick, and I learned from bottom to top the brick making business, because I was too small to do anything else.

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

RB: You don't get your coloration in your brick today the way we did back then, because your coloration in the brick came from your wood. Your *(unintelligible word)* you just get a flat color. You're not getting the real pretty colors, like you did back then. When they first started burning with oil, you would still burn with wood at the end, for three or four days, that would give you that coloration in the brick. Now, they don't do that anymore. Like it took fourteen days and fourteen nights, now I think they do it in probably even half that time, if not less, because it's a more even temperature. I mean the temperature was really warm, but it would vary quite a bit doing this by eye, watching the top of the kiln. It was all done by whoever was burning. You had to really

watch and see what you were doing and how hot the kiln was on both sides. Actually, just to show sometimes how hot it was in there, we would take an empty bottle and push it in there, and it would totally melt, you know, a real thick, what was at the time, real thick coke bottles or soda bottles.

AL: Or beer bottles.

RB: Beer bottles, oh yeah, had a lot of those kicking around. But it was totally, completely melt, I mean that's, that's how warm it was. I don't know exactly what the degree is to melt glass, but it's quite a bit.

AL: Well, great -.

RB: I can probably show you here.

AL: Thank you.

End of Interview
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