

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

Dick Courtemanche

(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

May 16, 2008

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project. The date is May 16th, 2008. We're at Courtemanche Insurance Agency, in Lewiston, Maine. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and I am interviewing Dick Courtemanche. Did I pronounce that correctly?

Dick Courtemanche: You did an excellent job, very well.

AL: And could you tell me where and when you were born?

DC: I was born in Lewiston, 1945, in Lewiston, Maine.

AL: And is that where you grew up?

DC: Yes, in Lewiston, Maine, yeah. Oh, I'm one of ten children. Okay, I'm the second oldest. We had a small little farm on College Road, in Lewiston, Maine, and my dad was a shoe factory worker, hand sewer. And from there, we all expected to be hand sewers, followed the dad's trade, which we did.

AL: Yeah, now, were both your parents from the Lewiston area?

DC: My dad was born in Canada, so was my mother. They, my mother moved to Rumford, Maine, and my dad had to go work in the woods back in the '30s. He'd walked from Canada to Jackman and work in the woods all summer, and I think he used to walk to Rumford. That's how he met my mother. They got married in Lewiston and stayed there ever since.

AL: Wow, now, did he ever talk about why he decided to come to the US from Canada?

DC: Jobs, an opportunity in Lewiston, Maine, to work in a shoe factory probably, and being, feel very comfortable, because in Lewiston in those days, there was probably ninety percent all French. He couldn't speak a word of English, neither my mother. So by doing this, so he was comfortable living here and working here.

AL: And you said he came in the '30s?

DC: I guess he went to, when I heard in the '30s, I'm trying to think now, when did he

move to Lewiston, Maine. I think in 1940.

AL: Okay, I was wondering if it was before or after the '37 shoe strike.

DC: No, it was after the shoe strike, yeah.

AL: Now, so did your dad, your dad thought that probably the kids would go into the shoe making?

DC: That's right, it was, well, my dad did it, his brothers did it, my wife, my mother's brothers were hand sewers also. So I thought the whole world was hand sewing, work in a shoe factory. So because of this, back in those days, if you were crafty with your hands, you could make quite a bit of money. He supported ten kids, the only one working, working in the shoe factory, hand sewing.

AL: So it was pay, piecework?

DC: Piecework. If a person, now, it's hard to explain piecework. Back in those days, if you would do, well, he used to do, I guess he was a good hand sewer, he used to do about thirty pairs a day, at a dollar a pair, in the '50s and '60s. So he was making about thirty dollars a day, okay. Supporting ten kids, he had to. But, and the job, how, how do I say it, if you worked harder, you'd make more money. Now, in comparison to what people were making back in those days, today's economy, he'd be, it's like making about sixty thousand dollars a year, back in those days, doing the same type of work, because the cost of living was much less.

AL: So that was a really good -?

DC: Good paying job. It was clean, it was inside, the weather was always the same, and it was fun, it was fun. Because when he taught me, I went to a local shoe factory, it was nice, because you don't have to compete with the weather, and it was a comfortable job.

AL: And so your father taught you how to hand sew?

DC: Myself and four of my brothers, yeah, doing the same thing. I, I had a god given talent. I was young, and I used to, because it was piecework, you could race with your people. In equivalence to today's rate, if I would be doing the same thing today as what I was doing then, I'd be making approximately around eighty thousand dollars a year, hand sewing in a local shoe factory, no education. Didn't need to, as long as you're, you're good with your hands. You had a, it's a skill as well as crafty, and the job itself is, was fun, enjoyed it. And the sad part of it, and all of the sudden, shoe factories started moving out and they were going out of state, out of the country, so the skill was moved out to Mexico. A lot of people in Mexico, a lot of hand sewers would go to Mexico and

teach them how to hand sew. Myself and my dad, we worked for the same, the same factory, which was the Bostonian Shoes. Because it was well known, very high grade shoes, you'd make good money. Also he hand sewed for, so did I, for Billen Shoe, Sebago Moc, Bostonian Shoe, and LL Bean's. They'll still doing it over there. So it's, whether you go from one factory to another factory, it's the same job. The leather was the same. So the quality of the person and how fast he could produce the job, because it's piecework, the more money he'd make. So hand sewers would shift, go from one factory to the next, it's nothing to pack up his tools, go from one factory to the next. Why would he want to do that? Because from one factory to the next is the, they'd pay a little more per pair for one factory. So doesn't make a difference where you work.

AL: Now, were there hand sewers in the area that were well known as being really -?

DC: Myself, because of my, see an average hand sew, back in those days, in '60s, would probably do about twenty pairs a day. A good hand sewer would do around thirty pairs a day, as he was considered to be fast. A real fast guy, we're talking, you know, because thirty five to forty pairs. I would do around sixty pairs a day, for many years. Myself and Vern, Vernon Daigle, locally, were probably the fastest hand sewers. That was unheard of, what we could do. We did it because it was, it came natural, what other people would do, unnatural. So he was a good man. I learned from him, because he used to hand sew quite a few years before me. I used to watch, and I'd say, I can do the same thing. And then from there I picked up the tricks that my dad used to show me, then I picked up some others, then after that, I loved it. And you could make good money, uneducated. So you could do extremely well, make a good living locally, in Lewiston, Maine, and that's what was wonderful.

AL: And you said you'd had a lot of family that were involved in the shoe making.

DC: That's right. My brothers, they were very fast too and they liked it. Unfortunately the jobs got scarcer, so people (*unintelligible word*) at the shoe factory and were sad because you could almost see the handwriting on the wall. No job security and factories were moving out of the country. For a while, I think, I, I told, I was told that it was over two thousand hand sewers in the twin cities, Lewiston-Auburn, Maine. That was incredible, doing the same work. In my factory, when I used to work at Commonwealth Shoe, there was about a hundred and fifty, side by side, doing this, day in and day out. All of a sudden, they started laying, laying people off. Gradually, they closed the factory. It was sad to see that. I was fortunate. What I had going for myself is that going to parochial school you always learned how to sell Christmas cards and to try to make a little dollar here and there, I could speak French, and I had an opportunity, see back in those days, if you, when a shoe factory would slow down, instead of laying a lot of people off, these, you, you'd, most of the factories would tell the people, you do your twenty four pairs, that's a good day's work, then you could go home. So at nine thirty in the morning, I was done, nine thirty, ten o'clock in the morning. So from ten o'clock all day what do I do? That's when I went into this business that I'm doing now,

selling insurance, investments, you know, so I gradually went from part time to full time. It took, it took me quite a few years, studying, going to school, and so on, so on, insurance school. Here I am.

AL: And so how many years have you been doing htis?

DC: Thirty five years. I've got seventeen agents working for me full time. So I'm doing extremely well. I've won all kinds of awards as you can see on the wall, and it's been fun. And thanks to, not knowing then that the, the advantage of speaking French, because it was a French community, I could speak French or English. In high school, I didn't need to speak English locally, but you had to learn quick. So I as say it came naturally to sell, understanding what people's needs are, and so on, so on, this is where I am at.

AL: That's great. Now, did any of your siblings stay in the shoe industry until the very end?

DC: My brothers, my, my youngest brother, he was the tenth one, he worked for LL Bean's, he did extremely well, but the problem he had, he had carpal tunnel, so he had to leave. He was the last one in my family. He had to leave the shoe factory, then he became a male nurse, he to school and he's doing very well now. The unfortunate part of the job is that because you worked hard, it was hard on your body, your shoulders, your fingers. My father passed away, he was forty seven years old, of a heart attack, cholesterol, poor diet, standing in one place all day didn't help, not knowing what was going on back in those days. So that was the unfortunate part. You could see a lot of hand sewers with bursitis in the shoulders, because it was hard on your arms and shoulders, not knowing because you had to pull a set of strings with both arms and pull it as long as, as hard as you can and as wide as you can. This was, not knowing, (*unintelligible phrase*). Of course, I was young, I didn't know the difference.

AL: Now, can you talk about the process of hand sewing?

DC: I have pictures, a matter of fact, that I was (*unintelligible word*) was my father, it's the taking of two pieces of leather, put it on the collar you last, which is a form, a shape of a shoe, and tack it in place with a thumbtack, then taking a string, making a hole and stitch it together. By the time you get done, the two pieces of leather shapes the shoe, the, the form of, and what the, the another process was to take the pieces of that shoe put it in a dryer that would shrink the leather to the shape of that form, you know, it could be a size six, size seven, size eight, size depending. Now, the only thing that the rest of the factory would do is put glue on the sole and glue it on, now the shoe is done. So it was simple, but it, it looked good, it was a nice looking shoe. The beauty about hand sewing on top, when you put your foot in the shoe, the, the shoe would mold to your foot, it would be comfortable immediately, because the stitching was on top. From what I gather, the guy that really, really deserves credit, I used to hear about him, a guy

by the name of, he passed away a few years ago, Alden Grant. I think he, he passed away he was nineties, okay. I think he learned that watching Indians doing moccasins, and he took it a step forward and he said, why we can't we do moccasins with a sole underneath and make it look, so you can instead of (*unintelligible word*), it looked like a slipper, it would be comfortable, and it caught on. What happened is Bostonian Shoe was well known, so they would take the best hand sewers, and they, it was funny because they used to ship them to, they would go to New York, all these big windows like Macy's, and demonstrate it in the window. They would sell, because people were amazed that a shoe worker, a shoe could be done in front of them, and they would buy. It's nothing, people to watch them all day, and, and sell a thousand pairs in one day at Macy's. It was just to see the quality was beautiful. They're stilling doing it now, yeah. Roger Dufour is still doing it. He demonstrates in windows at different places. To see how it's done, people get so amazed they want to buy it, because it's, it's, it's a craft. It's not everybody can do it, because it's tough on the fingers, and you need a special tool to puncture the leather and then put two needles in it, interlock the stitch, go around the shoe. An average shoe would have around sixty stitches done by hand. It's impressive. They still do it at LL Bean, they demonstrate it quite a bit. It makes a, when a person sees how it's done, they want to buy that pair, (*unintelligible word*) and besides that, it's a very comfortable shoe. It's sad that we don't have this anymore. Well, I'm sorry, there's still one company in town still doing it, very expensive shoes. I think they're selling it for five hundred dollars a pair, so all the elite wear it because it's very nice, comfortable, and he uses the very finest leather, calf leather to assemble together, it makes a beautiful shoe, yeah, it's nice.

It, it's, this picture of my father brings up, because what he used to do to keep us going, he used to bring, back in those days you could bring a bunch of leather at home and hand sew at home at night on weekends. So we were five kids, but (*unintelligible phrase*), five of the kids would learn how to do this at home in the cellar. He'd get paid to do it, so that was, it was a way of starting, yeah, so it's learning a trade, and he, my father would get compensated to do this. So he could make, it's funny, I can remember, I'd say he made an average of twelve pairs a case, that's twelve dollars. All of us would be hand sewing, he would assemble it, we'd hand sewed it, in an hour the case is done. So it was nice, see he'd be happy making money, we'd be happy learning the trade.

An average hand sewer, I was told and it's true, it would take to be a, what do you call it, a, a bonafide hand sewer about three years to do it right. A lot of them would, would try to do it and it's, they have special tools to observe if the shoe would stay together after the person would put his foot in it, the stitches would breakdown. So some people would abuse the job and so obviously they got fired, so he'd go next door, because they do the same thing. But after a while, all the factories knew who was a good hand sewer or not. It was cute to see that, it was funny because we'd say, oh my god, he's trying to get a job in here. We used to call them butchers. They'd massacre the shoe. That was, so I'd say, oh my god, he's not going to last. So we'd watch him, how long he would last, until the boss would go around, he'd say, what kind of a shoe is

that, because. The funny part is that a shoe, every, a good hand sewer would do five stitches to an inch. They had what they called a stitch gauge that could measure how many stitches on that inch. You could get away for four and a quarter to five stitches. A lot of them, we called them the butchers, would do three stitches, so the shoe would do, were done faster, but the shoe would not keep it together, it wouldn't hold. So those guys would get terminated. I stayed in the same place, but we had to learn how to do good shoes at Bostonian Shoe, Bostonian Shoe, because that was the ultimate shoe back in those days.

AL: Did the process of hand sewing change at all over time?

DC: No, it's the same basic, even now. I tried it last year and it was fun, just to see. It's just like riding a bike, you don't forget. My hands are more delicate now, but the process is the same. The only thing to do it now, it's a, people that wear hand sewn shoes are very expensive if it's done in, in the States, so they're using the finest leather, very expensive, so and it's remarkable the cost of the shoe. Back in those days, you could buy a pair of shoes for twelve, fifteen dollars. Now, they're, I've seen anywhere from four to five hundred dollars, but the quality is much better. You don't have to do as fast to make a good living now. They just want quality because it's a very selected, the people who buy it, can afford it, so they want the best. You cannot have even a scratch on it, so.

AL: Is, was there also, I mean leather is a living thing, was it -?

DC: Okay, it's a good point. It's funny because Alden Grant used to talk about that, so he used to sit down with you, he'd say, let me explain leather now. They would, the leather, cow for example, the top part where the spine is, is the quality leather. Around the stomach, the belly part, you could not use that for shoes, because it would stretch, it would come back, stretch, and the cow would lay down. He used to explain, oh my god, we didn't want to listen to this stuff here, because we just wanted to work. So inexpensive shoes would use the -.

AL: And we were talking about the cow and the belly part.

DC: Okay, right, okay, so if a cow, a lot of shoes was made from the cow, but there's, the cow or the calf, they would not use, it's funny because he used to talk about that a lot, they would not use the belly for the shoe, because it has to be stiff, so they used the back part. So what do you do with the, the other part? They would take, make strips of it, around the opening of the shoe, or else put a double layer. The two pieces of leather put them together and glue them together, because the shoe would not stand up by itself. It's crazy, yeah? So, or else put the leather that the, and the cutter would do this in a shoe factory, he had to know that the soft part of the cow should be underneath the shoe, the good leather parts of it, I have to explain that, would be used on the top part, so it wouldn't cave in if the guy would put the shoe on. So it was, he used to try to

explain this and we didn't want to hear this, we just wanted him to get away from us so we can make money, but we had to know that. That was Alden Grant, but I respect. I can see now why he was trying to explain this, because, you know, hand sewers, some of these guys, they would've put thirty, forty, fifty years, I know some guys that are still doing it now, and they'd been doing for fifty years, right after the war. They used to have all kinds of places in town to teach you how to hand sew, and the government would help these factories to teach them, give them an incentive. If you teach them, they would get compensated, the factory and the individual, until he could go on his own piecework. So but he was probably the individual that needed a lot of credit, but nobody seemed to know that. My dad used to talk about him all the time, he said, he's a pain in the neck, but he knew his leather. Now, I can see it because he, he did talk to me about that. I said, I didn't want to talk to him. You know, I'm a young guy and he's an older guy trying to explain to me about the, the calf and the cow, and the thighs, leather, I didn't hear any of that. Okay.

AL: But see that's one of the things that these oral histories do is give some recognition and to those people who were -.

DC: Yeah, it was fun. The, the, the, the beauty about the hand sewing is because of within forty feet from each other, we're surrounded, we only had a three, approximately three feet cubicle, so I could hear a conversation twenty, twenty feet from me about what's going on over there and so on, so on, so we knew each other very well. So and this is where I, I used to enjoy, I've got pictures of them. If a person, the fun part of, of, of hand sewing was because it was competitive, we started a softball team in my shoe factory. Then he said, how do we compete against another? So I knew some people from other factories, then we came out with a shoe shop league, softball league. We had up to fourteen teams, different teams, then after that we'd, Knapp Shoe was involved, it didn't have to be a hand sewer, Knapp Shoe, as long as you worked in a shoe factory, you would compete in the softball league, and at the end of the year, who is the best team, so on and so on. Good year, back in those days, was very popular, which is Bon-Ann, Bon-Ann Shoe. Okay, so I remember when we used to compete against them quite a bit. Commonwealth, we had our own team, and the stipulation is you had to work in a shoe factory. So we had fourteen teams. What happened is as the shoe factory, and I was president, I started the, the softball league, and we had to change the name, because as the shoe factories left, other teams wanted to come in, so we changed it to Twin Cities Softball League. So now, we picked up another, I think we had twenty teams, it was phenomenal, but we did this. They had bowling leagues in the shoe factory. I started a hockey league, the Shoe Shop League, okay. That was funny, because the big rivalry was Koss Shoe. It was funny, because (*unintelligible word*) used to sponsor them, you know, in the nice outfits and all that stuff, they looked, they looked the best, so everybody wanted to go, all the ringers wanted to go play for them. Commonwealth Shoe, Bost-, the Bostonian Shoe, yeah, it was funny because they would pay for the ice time, Bostonian Shoe -.

AL: And where did you play?

DC: At the Colisee, right here, inside. We'd have our time allocated for us, and we had a league of our own, and that was fun. So I started a shoe shop league, hockey, softball, I didn't play bowling, but it was big.

AL: Was this in the '60s and '70s?

DC: Sixties, '70s, then it started dwindling in the '80s. But yeah, there was. In the mid '70s, it was unbelievable. Even some teams from Portland shoe shops, Sebago Moc wanted to participate in our league, they, they were in Westbrook, because it was a big rivalry between shoe factories, and they're were a lot of good athletes. See, back in those days, if you're a good athlete, and the only way you could make good money is to go work in a shoe factory and learn a trade, so and that was the only good paying job around, unless you got educated, then move out of state. And that was the sad part, some people would move out of state.

AL: Now, is there anything that I haven't asked you yet that, about shoe working and your times that you feel is important?

DC: The shoe working, the funny part about hand sewers, this is the, Vern Daigle and I, we talk about this sometimes, he's a good friend of mine, if you were fast, and I, my father used to tell me, he says, if you're fast, keep your mouth shut, you're going to have a lot of jealousy, because they think that you're going to take the work away from them. I've seen, I, I heard about, it never happened to me, because I kept my mouth shut, slicing tires, putting sugar in your gas tank, if you're too fast. When I, hand sewing went down over here and I went to Freeport to hand sew, I remember because I was known to do a lot of shoes, they all gathered around my work area and they told me, if you don't, if you produce more than so many pairs, your tires are going to be slashed. So I had to control myself to you know, I said, that's too bad. But I can, I can see what they were talking about because they had no education, they were, they wanted to conserve their jobs. Then in those days, why did you want to do that? It's because if, if I was doing the work of three people, if I would slow down to, to their level, they'd have to hire two other guys to take my place. So they can control me, they couldn't control all three of them, that was my way of thinking, but their thing is just well, you know, I can see where, I can understand why they didn't want me to produce a lot of shoes, because they were afraid to lose their job, you know. So there was, there is, there was a lot of jealousy in a shoe factory. Hand sewing was probably the most popular, shoe cutter was another one, that was a trade in the industry that was well known, they'd pay almost as good as hand sewing. It was noisy though. But the rest of the jobs, the stitching room ladies, women would work on piecework. They deserved, they'd stitch around the shoe to make it fancy, they were getting paid very well, but they worked hard. So they had the same problem with the women. The women would do the stitching. It's like a, stitching is like a sewing machine on clothes, but it would be on

shoes. So by the time it goes from there to us, we'd take the shoe, put it together, you just put a sole on it, it's gone. Somebody else would polish it. So it, it was quite a trade.

A person should go see at the L-A Museum all the, the tools (*unintelligible phrase*) are there, and you, we, they could demonstrate in front of you, because we, I brought a lot of leather there and it's amazing how attractive. Some people, just as well, they think a shoe just fell out of the sky, and that's it. But how it's made, two simple pieces of leather make a shoe and make it fit your, your size. The funny part about piecework is that we can observe what's coming out. Everybody wanted to hand sew a size six, size seven, size eight, sometimes you get size fourteen, size fifteen, sometimes you get stuck hand sewing that, so it would take you twice as long, because the shoe is bigger, the more stitches. So it was funny because hand sewers, they, they'd watch what was coming out, they observe, they (*unintelligible word*), they go to the bathroom and see what's coming out, slow down accordingly or speed up accordingly. But that's the trick of the trade. Every job has its own handicap. But all in all, it was fun to do this.

AL: Great, thank you very much.

End of Interview
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