MILL WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE

Emile Frechette **MWOH# 019**
(*Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu*) February 7, 2006

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History project. Today I'm speaking with Emile Frechette on 395 East Avenue in Lewiston. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and the date is February 7th, 2006. Could you start by giving me your full name?

Emile Frechette: My name is Emile A. Frechette, and I live at 395 East Avenue, lived there for a good thirty eight years.

AL: And what's your date of birth?

EF: December 1st, 1915.

AL: And were you born in Lewiston?

EF: I was born and brought up in Lewiston, in downtown Lisbon Street.

AL: What was it like at that time, the Lewiston community?

EF: Oh, I mean first of all it was all big families, and very friendly to each other. Living in an apartment house, about six units, and mostly all French. And families of, we'll say from six to ten or twelve children. And usually, I still remember when we used to go out, either play ball or do something that, to pass time away. At mealtime, though, we all went home for lunch or dinner and then right after that we would get again, all day we would be outdoor playing, doing things to kill time. But we always had friends that we could play with. Never a dull moment, because there's always a big group of young kids that we could play with.

AL: And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

EF: I was, in my family we were ten, we were seven brothers and three girls, yeah, and we were, I was one of the seventh in the family, seven boys, and we managed to have good times, bad times together. And Mom always, Mom was home, at home most of the time, to take care of us. Dad used to work seven days a week, and we saw him when he came back from work and then he would go back, he'd be working twelve hours a day at the time.

AL: And where did he work?

EF: Over at the Androscoggin Mill. We lived close to that Androscoggin Mill, and he worked there, and besides sometimes he had a part time job because he had quite a large family to feed and dress up.

AL: What did he do at the mill?

EF: He was a watchman. First of all he was like a janitor, I mean work in the boiler room, and then he was a watchman for a good many years. And he always enjoyed his work, he enjoyed talking with people, and he kept busy most of the time. And as a kid, whatever time Dad came home, well, we didn't see much of him but were always happy to see him.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

EF: My father's name was Joseph Frechette, and then my mother's name was Clarina, and they were both, they came from Canada, the two of them, at the age of ten and twelve years old. And then apparently when they got to be eighteen, twenty, I don't know what year, they got married, so they got married in Lewiston and us kids were all born in Maine, all in Lewiston. And these kids today, they're all grown up. Out of ten, there's only three left, myself, I've got a brother Willie, and a sister Cecile. Brother Willie's 91, going to be 92 in September, and I just turned my 90s, and my younger sister, she's 86. And she's full of it, she talks.

AL: Now, did your grandparents live in Lewiston, or were they in Canada?

EF: My grandparent lived on Park Street for a good many years, and when she passed away she was still living on Park Street. But they're all, well my grandfather died, he was only 49. I never got to know him. But my grandmother lived to be 90 and, well, saw her quite often because Dad was going over, I remember I was just a young boy and I used to follow Dad, go see grandmother. This I still remember, yeah. Every time I go up there she had something good for us. Maybe that's one reason I wanted to go so badly.

AL: And did your dad have a car when you were growing up, or did he walk? Did he walk to the mills to go to work?

EF: Oh yes, yeah. I did walk to the mill. When I worked at the W. S. Libby, started there in 1938, finally got a job as a weaver and I lived up (*name*) Hill, which is maybe a good mile and a half from the mill. We walked back and forth, the wife and I, we walked back and forth every morning, be up at five in the morning, we had, started work at six in the morning, six, and then at two thirty we were all done, our day's work was over. But we did walk, morning and night. Didn't have a car before I was thirty five years old. Had an old bicycle that I could use around, but once I got the car, well I felt like a big shot. (*Unintelligible phrase*), a brand new car.

AL: And so can you tell me about your time in the mills and what you did for work?

EF: Oh, my time in the mill, I was a weaver, I was at the Libby Mill, I worked there a good six years, and then I was (*unintelligible word*) WWII, and I was fixing looms for a while. And then the, they had a hard time getting help as weavers. Most of these weavers left their job to go work in Portland, Maine, building these Liberty ships at Portland, so really they had to shut down one department. The department that I was a loom fixer, they shut that down. So my overseer asked me if I wanted to go as a weaver, that's going downhill instead of being a fixer, less money. I said, okay, just for a while. But I did it over three years.

And then finally the Army got me into the, I went in in 1944 and '45, went in for service. When I came back from the service I said to myself, instead of going to work the Libby, Bates Mill was a little bit closer and a bigger mill, as I wanted to try my luck there. Well, I went in and applied for a job, and I finally got in the same day, they hired me right off as a weaver. I told them I was a loom fixer, and within a few months I went in as a loom fixer and I did that for a good maybe five years, six years. Then finally they needed a supervisor on the third shift, the supervisor was sick and he may be out for a month or so.

Poor guy never came back because he passed away, so that job was offered to me, and I took the job and I did that for fifteen years, on the third shift. Had a crew about forty five to fifty people I had to supervise, and it was the nicest people to work with. They help each others. Any problem that came along, I mean, I was around to help and other, older fixers were around to help also. (*Unintelligible phrase*) worked a good many years there, I spent over twenty-five years at Bates Mill. At the end, well I was kind of fed up, looking toward retirement, and I bought a few apartment buildings, had about eighteen

units to maintain, and I enjoyed the, well I went in as a landlord for fifteen, twenty years, and as of now I'm still a landlord in this, my own building, and I still want to hold off to the last minute because I just enjoy being with the people that I have. Especially older people that I have here, to my apartment building. So I enjoyed myself during my lifetime, yeah.

AL: And you said your wife worked at the mill, too?

EF: She also worked at the mill. Before I married her she was working there, at the mill, and she was a (*unintelligible word*) girl, which was kind of a skilled job, I mean it's, she did that for a good many years. Then when I married her, she was still working, we worked together for, at the same place. And then when the boy was born, I mean when she got pregnant she, we had an agreement that she would, she wanted to stop working for, until the boy grows up. So when the boy was seven years old the wife got tired of being in the house all the time, she says, I'm going out looking for a job. I couldn't believe it. I says, you're going to, now, well, go ahead.

So she did, went out, she got a job the first day, so she was happy about that. Funny (*unintelligible phrase*) the first paycheck that she got, she came home with, she had the paycheck, what am I going to do with that? I says, it's yours, Yvette, do what you want. So she decided, well, I'll put it in the bank, so she did. Then after she had a good amount of money, she said, how about buying a new car? Well, I was all for it, I says, I agree with you, so we bought a brand new car. And we had that car, we had this for a good many years, we enjoyed it, the two of us.

And as time went on we were happy together. We were married for fifty-eight years, and now she passed away just about eight years ago. Yup, missed her for a good couple of years, it was awful. But then you finally get used to it, and I started going out and met a lady friend, which she was, she had lost her husband. As of now, we've been going out for about five years and we both enjoy ourselves. She live at home, I live at home, and she stays home and I stay home, but we meet weekends, go out to eat. Not a word, never a dull moment. (*Unintelligible phrase*), I get the phone, call up. Yeah, so it makes it nice, so.

AL: You were talking about, before we started the interview you were talking about the hockey team. Can you talk a little bit about that?

EF: Oh, the hockey team. Once I talked with Rachel, over at the festival, Festival de Joie, Rachel was there. Well, I knew her from way back, because when she, see, she came out of the hospital, she was a nurse, a head nurse at St. Mary's. So she was looking for an apartment. She lived in to one of my building, this is where I got to (*unintelligible word*) good. So I started talking about the hockey team that we had in 1930, '32 we'll say, winters '30, '32, we had, we were a group of young men, most of them were mill workers, but we were out of work. That was during Depression, and we had, those kids were looking for work, every morning we'd go and look for work and after that, well we used to meet and, we'll say late in the fall, we says what are we going to do this coming winter? I says, we need a place to, we all like to play hockey, so we said why don't we get together and build a clubhouse.

So finally we got together, we built our clubhouse and a skating rink, we did that ourself, we maintained the whole skating rink and also the clubhouse. And then we form a hockey team, we had good players. So finally we had a good hockey team, so okay, we'd play, practice a lot. And then all through the city there was other young men, group of young men like this. They all did, well, we copy from them, let's put it that way. They had clubhouse, like there was the Mapleleaf, and so why don't we just do what the Mapleleaf did, build a clubhouse and a skating rink (*unintelligible phrase*).

So there were four of us clubhouse like this, and so we finally had a meeting and we decided we'd form a hockey league. So we had a hockey league and we could play (*unintelligible word*), we would meet at least once a week on the rink, and who's going to be the best at the end of the winter, so would be the winner.

And there was a jeweler, and I think his name was Sturtevant or something like that, I forgot. But anyway, he offer us to, a nice trophy, and that trophy would go to the winner of that league that we had formed. There were four teams, the Mapleleaf, and we had the Mohawks, they were up by East Avenue where the YWCA is, well that's, the clubhouse was right there, and there was The Flying Frenchmen by Thorn's Corner. And boy, they were flying, we had good, rough time with them. But we had good times, good clean fun.

AL: And what was your team called, was it Bates?

EF: The Lewiston Derbies. That's the original, I mean we had that incorporated by the lawyer, we had the name, it was our name. And then right after the war, our clubhouse was all, I mean were all gone, because most of these men, half of them never came back to Lewiston. They found work somewhere else, and some of them died during the war. But the (*unintelligible word*) original Lewiston Derby I'm talking about, in 1932 and '35, '32, yeah, '32 and '33.

And anyway, we finally played a final game late in March, and the Lewiston Derbies were the winner. We played overtime, the last game that we play, we had to play it at the old ice arena, which they didn't have artificial ice and it was kind of melting, there was water on the ice, but we finished that game and we finally won that trophy. And I still own that trophy here at home, I still have it, the picture of it and the, yeah. So that was really interesting, and we had good, clean fun.

And that skating rink that we had, we also had public skating at nighttime, and it would help us to pay our own expenses. I remember one time we didn't have music for outdoors, so we finally had enough money to buy an amplifier. So we bought the amplifier and then we had all kinds of, (*unintelligible phrase*) came out every week, we would be looking for the good one, we'd buy the new record, mostly every weekend we had new records.

A lot of these young men and young women, they were seventeen, eighteen, twenty, twenty two years old, quite a few of them met their wife out there at the public skating. And beside, this is where I met my wife, because she had a brother and I kept after him. I knew he had a sister, I said why don't you bring your sister skating. So he did one night, he brought my wife in, well, Yvette, (*unintelligible phrase*) I started skating with her and things went along fine. I kept (*unintelligible word*) her to come back and I finally, at the end I was going out to her house to pick her up and make sure she'd be over. So we skated all night, we really enjoyed winter. Yeah, those were the good days and we really had good times, good clean fun, yeah.

AL: And I wanted to ask you about some of the relationships between the French and the Irish in the mills, do you have recollections of -?

EF: In the mill, there wasn't much problem in the mill. I mean, they got along fine, French, Irish, Polish, I suppose, what they were all good, and most people got friendly, they were helping each other, that was good. They were mostly young boys, when they were twelve, fourteen, fifteen years old, Irish, French, sometimes they would argue.

AL: In the community?

EF: Yeah, yeah, so Knox Street, they had the Lithuanian and Polish, and the French, sometimes they didn't, I mean they would start arguing. But it never got into a big fight. But we like, they, we liked to beat the Irish, we played baseball and we were trying to beat each other, trying to be better than the others. But it wasn't (*unintelligible phrase*) fight. I've seen some people, they were throwing stones at each other. But that wasn't that bad. Of course it probably was worse when I was there, I mean before I got to be with these kids, I was just a little boy, but yeah.

AL: When you worked in the mills, a lot of the French who worked in the mills didn't speak a lot of

English.

EF: Yeah, quite a few of them couldn't speak English. So this is what made it nice in my case, because I could translate. They would come to me, they weren't happy sometimes about the job that they had, and I had fixed a job according to first and second shifts, or the third shift would be the same, amount of work that they would have to do. But they just couldn't, wasn't happy with that, they wanted to talk to the higher up, the overseer. So I would bring them in the office and ask my overseer, they'd like to talk to you. And they would talk to the overseer over there, I would have to translate. They just couldn't speak English enough to let him know. They would tell me what they weren't happy about, so I would tell my overseer and then they would translate to me, and at the end we would be walking out of that office, they would be happy because they had their say. And at the end, their jobs were mostly, most of the time they were evenly divided, but sometimes they just couldn't see it that way at first.

Every week it would change, you know, just the job set up would change. They had so many machines to take care of. I always made sure that my shift would be the same as the first or second shift, but sometimes I had to make a different, there would be a different machine but it would be using the same amount of yarn. It wouldn't be any harder to take care of this machine, or this other machine. So that's what, sometimes that bothered them a lot. But at the end there were no fight, they would (*unintelligible phrase*), but sometimes they would, at the end they just, they were happy, because they had their say, they told the overseer what they thought about the job, (*unintelligible phrase*).

Because actually, a woman working in there, well older women sometimes they work slower than the young one, and all job were evenly made for a certain person. And these older women were kind of slower, so what they had to do to keep up with their work, they should have had a fifteen, twenty minutes lunch time, but instead of having a lunch they would carry their sandwiches in their apron and would take a bite, you know, take a bite, put the sandwich back in their apron, and then keep on working, they would keep up with their work that way. If they would sit and eat for fifteen minutes, it would be, they wouldn't be able to keep up with the work at all. But I've seen that, it wasn't nobody's fault but they were getting old and slower. But finally managed to.

I always tried to make them happy. Most of them were happy, because I had people in my shift, they were on third shift for a long time, good many years. And they had chance to go on first shift by seniority, and they refused, no, I'd rather stay on third shift. So they enjoyed being on third shift, that's what I said, I always said that. And we're always friendly, friendly together. They would talk to me as if I knew them from way back and (*unintelligible phrase*), they had anything to say they would just say it.

AL: Do you, what strikes do you remember, the years that you were at the mill, that there were any strikes?

EF: Strikes, oh, they had one one time. A big strike. I don't remember too many out there, because I went in right after the war. They just couldn't keep up with the work, they're working six, seven days a week. I don't remember any big strike that we had at the mill. The only big strike I remember was 1937, the shoe shops strike.

AL: What do you remember about that?

EF: Well, I was working in the shoe shop then, that's 1937. See, I started '38, 1938 in the mill. Well, in 1937 I had a job there, I was working in the shoe shops, and the CIO came in. That was something new, they wanted to unionize the shoe shops. So they came in, and I remember going in the first day of the strike, I went in to work just the same, I didn't strike, I went there for a couple of days. I was single then. And then the, the first day I went in there and maybe I was on piece work and I made an average maybe, I don't know if I made maybe a couple of dollars. So the next day I went in again, and it wasn't any better because there was hardly any people coming in. So they had me working, you know, all over, doing odd jobs.

And so finally the third day I didn't go in there, so the boss (*unintelligible word*) called me at home and he wanted me to come in. Well, I told him, I'm not happy over what you're giving me, I'm making just two dollars a day. And, well just come in, we'll take care of that. So I went in for a couple of days after, they were giving me five dollars a day, and they wanted me to come in. But I said to myself, all these other people are out of work, it's not right for me to come in and work, know that they're striking, so I went out, I didn't go back there. So that lasted a good three or four months, and that's a long time.

And then my shoe shop, what happened, disappeared, they just closed down and they moved to, I think it was (*unintelligible word*) Portland, they moved to Portland. So I was out of a job, completely out of a job. This is where I had to decide what am I going to do. Then I went in as a weaver at the W. S. Libby. But that was really, the shoe shop really, it didn't help much, the CIO didn't help much for a long time. It did cause a lot of problem, but finally they did do much with that.

AL: And then was it around 1950 when the United Textile Workers Union came into the Bates Mill?

EF: Yeah, when they came in, it was 195-, was it 1950?

AL: Forty-eight, '50, something like that?

EF: See, I don't remember when they went in. I don't remember when they went in, but I didn't join the CIO, I didn't join the Textile Worker. I was a weaver at the time, and I remember because I didn't join some of these older people in there, they joined. They got after me quite a few times to join like they did, and I finally decided to join. Because if you don't come in there's a chance that we won't be there to help you, this and that. I said to myself, well, I might as, why don't I join them. So I joined them. But it was a big help in a way.

It was so funny about this union. These are loom fixers. They made, most of these loom fixer in the weaving department would make up their own rules. We'd have a meeting, and that would be the new law that that's going to be a certain way. But if they did attack some of the loom fixers sometimes, they would go back to another meeting, they would change a law that they had made a few months ago, because it didn't suit them right. They probably lose a few dollars. So this is what I didn't like about the union.

But once I was in as a supervisor, I was out of that, I couldn't join the, I was out of the union then. I did that for fifteen years and that, that was good for a good many years, but at the end I was fed up and I was more interested, see, I started (*unintelligible phrase*) quite a few building, you know, renting units. So that was interesting, being a landlord, and I made good on that because I could maintain all the, anything that comes up, carpentry, electrical work, anything that came along I took care of my own building. Very seldom that I would have to ask someone to come over. I should have been a landlord years ago.

A lot of these people, same way up here, I have older people up here, they're all in their eighties, eighty six, they know I'm turning ninety, they know well enough that I'll be, I'll be gone soon. They keep telling me, hold on to the building to the last minute. And I do intend to keep holding on to the building to the last minute, because I enjoy being a landlord, and I enjoy being with these people. They're good. They're all older people, they did own homes before, they sold their home because the wife couldn't take care of her house, her house was too big so they moved here. And the only time they go is one of them disappear, and would have passed away, either the man or the woman.

I had a woman in here, passed away, her husband stayed here maybe a few months after she passed away and then fell down, couldn't take care of himself any more so he moved into one of these nursing homes. Yeah, I enjoy my life for a good, good many years.

AL: Were there any social events or other sorts of things that the mill did over the year? I think there was like a -

EF: We did our own, though especially around Christmas time we would have the Christmas parties at the Knights of Columbus. We had there, we have good friends in there, we would meet there and had good times on that.

AL: Were a lot of your friends people who worked in the mill, or, you know, your social circle, was it people you met in the mills, or people you knew outside of the mill?

EF: People that I met and work in the mill, we got together. Most of these people they worked in the mill, some that I knew they had worked into other mills that I worked with, and some of them had worked at the Bates and then they transferred to another mill. That were all people that I knew very well, and they were nice people. But we had nice evening -

AL: Did any of your brothers or sisters work in the mill?

EF: My, yes, I have a sister and brothers, that was years ago, though. My sister Cecile, she worked in the mill for a good many years, yeah. She enjoyed her work. I had brothers that worked, and then they finally decided to go work out of state. They left the state of Maine and went in Cape Cod as a chef, as a cook. They made good outside of Maine, also. But I stayed in Maine the most, for a lot of my lifetime.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about regarding your time working in the mill that you want to add?

EF: Over in the mill?

AL: Yeah, about your time in the mill. Is there anything that I have not asked you that you think we should add.

EF: Yeah, I know what you mean now. There isn't too, too many things that I can think of.

AL: What was the air quality like where you worked? I know some people have talked about the cotton in the air. Was it in the room you -?

EF: Well, the humidifier that they had kept spraying spray, but it didn't bother me that much. I was, the weaving department wasn't that bad. It's the noise that got the best of us, because I'm hard of hearing today, because I blame it, because that was an awful, awful noisy department, the weaving department is one of the worst for noise. And a lot of time, well at the end I was so used of that noise that I would be talking to people, I would read their lips as they talked to me. I could hear what they were saying by the moving of their lips, I could tell, I could translate what they were, so came a time that I could read their lips better than what I could hear through my hearing.

AL: Did the mill supply you with earplugs or anything?

EF: After twenty years, I would say. The last two or three years that I worked there, finally they came over and they took, they gave us a test on our hearing, and then they would supply the ear plugs. If I remember right, I didn't like the idea of putting earplugs. Sometimes I would wear them, other times I wouldn't wear those because I would keep on reading their lips and I could make out better with hearing, seeing their lips move and I could tell what they wanted. Especially the impression on their face, I could tell they were happy or not happy, so they were smiling, I was smiling, but they weren't smiling, I was serious, listen hard what they had to say. But most of the time I finally made out what they wanted to know and try to settle things so they would be happy. I always tried to make them as happy as I could. And most of the time I did succeed.

As of today, I have people that worked for me at Bates Mill, and I call them and they call me. We talk about the mill, wants to know who's living, or where is she. I went to see the (*unintelligible word*) woman there, (*unintelligible phrase*), is she still home, or is she still in a nursing home. And Cecile Lessard, she worked there, I get good information from Cecile, and she's in a nursing home. (*Unintelligible phrase*), well she, I knew she was sick, that she was on a dialysis machine, so I called up Cecile a few months ago and she told me (*name*) passed away. I do check the paper every morning, but that one there I missed. So I get information from these old people, whoever's left, but there isn't too, too many left that worked there when I was there. Still quite a few, though, I can call and get information, I still do that. And I do enjoy it when they call back, yeah. Sometimes I tell them, if you don't call I'm not going to call you back, so they do call. Because they want to hear, they want to know the information as much as I do. After, we still, we've been there, I worked there over twenty five, and I know Cecile worked over thirty five, forty years. And her friend (*name*), Rachel's aunt, I mean niece.

AL: Emma, Emma? Her aunt.

EF: Emma, (*unintelligible phrase*), have you met her?

AL: Yes.

EF: Oh, she's nice. Yeah, Emma.

AL: Great, thank you so much.

EF: Oh, you're welcome.

End of Interview
frechette.int.wpd