

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

Henry Gilbert

(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

September 24, 2007

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Brick Makers Oral History Project, at the Museum L-A. The date is September 24th, 2007. Today we're interviewing Henry Gilbert, at his home in Lewiston, Maine, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could you start just by telling me where and when you were born?

Henry Gilbert: I was born in 1925, November 1925.

AL: In this area?

HG: This, this area, I was born on the corner of Walnut and Pierce Street.

AL: And did you grow up there?

HG: I, I, no, I grew up right next door here from my place. We moved here when I was four years old. Yeah, and I've been here ever since, except for the time I was in the service.

AL: Oh, wow, and now, how many kids were there in your family?

HG: There was, let's see, Jackie, myself, Clement, and, and Wilfred. Both of my brothers have passed away.

AL: And your parents, what did they do for work?

HG: My, my mom was just a housewife, and my father worked in a woolen mill, the Calvin Mill.

AL: Okay, so he was a mill worker?

HG: He was a mill worker, and he did the inside work completely, that's why I always stayed outside. I worked in a brickyard, I worked in the woods, and then I started construction, and I've been at it ever since, and I hate to quit.

AL: That's why you keep going.

HG: That's why I keep going.

AL: And your parents, were they born here, or did they come from Canada?

HG: My, my mother, I think, I believe was born in Brunswick. My father was born in Lewiston. I think he might have been born on Pierce Street, where my grandfather and grandmother lived.

AL: Now, how did you get interested in the brick making? Did you know somebody, or?

HG: Not really, I thought I'd give it a try, because my parents think the money was better than working in a mill, which I didn't like to work in a mill anyways. So, that's how I started in a brickyard, and I started as a striker right off.

AL: And what year was that?

HG: It was 1947.

AL: You were how old?

HG: I was, let's see, probably twenty eight, twenty nine, something like that, after the service.

AL: After you went into the service?

HG: Yeah, yeah.

AL: Now, what branch of the service were you in?

HG: I was in the Marine Corps.

AL: During World War II?

HG: During World War II, I was in the South Pacific. We made the landing on Iwo Jima, I don't know if you've heard of the place, but that's where my division landed, yeah.

AL: And then you came back, and you started as a striker right away?

HG: I started as a striker, and then in the wintertime, I'd go in the woods, I worked in the woods. I'd buy wood lots or work for somebody else, you know, as a lumberjack.

AL: What kind of, what were your days like, as a striker? How long were they?

HG: They, well, we started about six o'clock in the morning, and we used to strike ten thousand bricks. It was a three man crew, and one was in the pit, shoveling the mud and sand in the, in the mixing, big mixing machine, and there was two people in the front striking the bricks out, carrying them down the yard, on a, on a cart. There was five molds in each, in each cart. And the two of them would keep that up until the thousand bricks were out, then the guy that was in the pit would go up front, and another guy, the other guy that was up front would go in the pit and start shoveling, just to change their routine, you know. My crew, usually, we strike twelve thousand bricks, because we, not that we enjoyed it, but we enjoyed the money.

AL: So, you got paid extra if you got more?

HG: Well, it was all piecework, it was all piecework. I'm trying to remember what it was now, but I can't remember if it was seven dollars a thousand, or something like that, I can't remember exactly what it was now, because that goes back about sixty years.

AL: Yes, it does.

HG: Yes, it does, yeah, yeah.

AL: Wow, and so you had a pretty good team going?

HG: Oh yes, oh yes, yeah, yeah.

AL: Did you have that same team for quite a while? Did you all stay?

HG: I had it for like two years, three, three years, I think. I made bricks, by the way, with, with a guy by the name of Willie Baker, which was Harvey Desgrosseilliers' uncle. I thought I'd throw that in.

AL: Yeah, that's great.

HG: Right, right.

AL: So, what, can you talk about the process of brick making?

HG: Well, say, say that the pit is empty now, we've struck out the ten thousand bricks, which was (*unintelligible word*). Usually the process is three shovelfuls of mud, with one shovelful of sand, and there's a big mixer that mixes all that, that the, the mixer is probably half the size of this room in here. And at night, before, after you've struck out, that means your pit is empty, so then they come in with a, with a tractor and, and, and clay. They bring it on this ramp, and in the afternoon, we shovel that, that clay in the pit with water running in it, so it will form mud, and we fill that pit up. It's usually good for another ten thousand bricks, which will be struck the next day. And that's the process

of, yeah, it's usually three or four shovelfuls of mud with one shovelful of sand, and that goes on until about two o'clock, that's when we finish striking the bricks. And then the, the bricks that were struck the day before or two days before, we have what we call an edger, which is, you put it in between the bricks that's already on the ground and you pull on that edger and it brings the bricks sideways, and that way you can pick them up, and you put them on planks, you stack them up probably about four feet high, and they'll dry there for probably a week, and then they're ready to be wheeled into the kiln, where they will be burned. The kiln will hold anywhere's from five hundred thousand to even a million bricks, because they're stacked way up, you know, yeah. And the process of burning is quite something too.

AL: Yeah, did you get to observe that?

HG: Oh yeah, because we, I never burned because I was a striker, but of course we've seen the process of it, you know, which, there was holes in between every, every foot or two there was a hole in the brick, and they would, that hole went right straight through, and that's where they put the, the wood in, to get the flames going. Of course now it's done by oil and everything. See, it's different now.

AL: But at that time, did they have to have somebody feeding wood twenty four hours a day?

HG: Oh yes, yes, all the time.

AL: Oh, so there were people there at night?

HG: There was people there twenty four hours a day, yeah, yeah. At night there might have been, I don't know, maybe two or three guys, I guess, yeah, yeah. And when the bricks were wheeled in there, we had these special wheelbarrows that you'd put a hundred bricks on them, and actually a wheelbarrow weighed, the thing weighed probably four or five hundred pounds, but it was so easy, the way it was balanced, how to handle it. You brought it up to the kiln, and there was a guy there, you'd, you'd throw the bricks up four at a time, and the guy would grab them and stack them, and they'd go up probably twelve, fifteen feet high, and that kiln would be probably half the size of this house here. When they'd burn it, it probably would take, I'm going to guess this again, but probably ten to twelve days for burning. The way the chief burner would tell if the bricks were pretty well ready to, to stop the fires, was he'd go up on the ladder and look, look in the top of the brick, and if it had settled so much, that would tell him that it was almost time to stop, to stop the burning. So, it was an interesting process.

AL: Now, at the Morin Brickyard, did you do water-struck or wire struck?

HG: No, water-struck.

AL: Water-struck.

HG: Water-struck, yeah, that was the one that was on the yard.

AL: Okay.

HG: Yeah, the wire cut was not on the yard. We're the ones that was on the outside.

AL: Do you have any recollections of stories or things that happened, while you were working in the brickyard, that stuck in your memory?

HG: Well, one time the machine, the motor that was running the mixer was four hundred and forty volts, big, humongous motor. It was inside a small building, and there was a trapdoor, where you went in to shut the machine off. So, one day I went in to shut the machine off, went in through the trapdoor to shut the machine off, and it had malfunctioned, it had short circuited, and it dragged me right in, and I hung onto that machine, until I was able to pull myself out. And I had to go to the doctor's, they gave me a couple of shots, and that was kind of scary for a few minutes. Four hundred and forty volts, and actually you're in a bathing suit, and you're in the water, while you're, so, so you know that's stacked up against you quite a bit. But we made it. I got a few burns out of it, but that's it.

AL: And the people who ran the kiln, did they have to be real, I mean that was a very hot area. What did they do to protect themselves?

HG: Oh yes, well, not too, too much, not too, too much. You don't have to, you can't stand too much in front of the kiln opening, the openings, because that's where a lot of the heat is. What they did, in order to get the wood towards the middle of the kiln, because them kilns are big, like I said, they're probably the width of this, this house here, and they're way up, probably ten, twelve feet, like I was saying, and they had long poles, and they'd push them, that wood, right inside there, so it would go. And the openings are on both sides, on both ends, so you push on both ends to get the, the wood in there, and they used to burn, Morin Brickyard had a sawmill, by the way, and they used to burn all the slabs from the, from the soft wood. That's how they got all their burnings done, in them days. Now of course, it's all, it's all oil and you know a fast process now.

AL: Oh, I interviewed Norm Davis.

HG: Davis? No, see it must have been after my time.

AL: He, yeah, probably, and he works there now.

HG: Was he a striker, do you know?

AL: No, I think he was more, well I think he did a lot, he learned the whole process, and now he's management, but yeah.

HG: Right, I see, okay.

AL: Now, are there any brick makers that you know of, that you worked with, that are still around?

HG: None that I know of that are still alive, because then they'd all be eighty, or eighty two, eighty three, they'd be up there.

AL: And so you worked at Morin, and then did you work at other brickyards?

HG: I worked at Morin's for three years, then I went to the Dennis Brickyard, which was off Washington Street. You probably interviewed somebody from, that worked there, I'm not sure. And then we took over a yard in Yarmouth, (*name*), and we'd done everything there, yeah, and that yard was a Gagnon brickyard, and I worked there for one year, and then I believe I went back to Dennis, Dennis Brickyard, and that was it. Then I just stayed in the woods until I decided to go in construction.

AL: And you've been there ever since?

HG: I've been on construction for about thirty six years, and I hate to let go. As a matter of fact, I don't intend to.

AL: No?

HG: Which of course, you're going to die with your boots on.

AL: Now, is there anything that I haven't asked you about brick making and sort of the whole thing, that you think is important?

HG: Well, the, one thing, if you, say you've struck your ten thousand bricks on the yard, and that night it should rain, it actually ruins the bricks. It, it, it melts the corners of the bricks, and therefore you can't sell them for as first quality bricks. You can sell them for, for what they use for the inner brick, when they have a two brick wall or something like that, you can use them for that. And when you, after when you're striking, there's a young kid for the sander, and he sands the top of the bricks, and that's for, so the bricks don't crack when the sun hits it. That protects the bricks temporarily, until you pick them up.

AL: And was it really hard to get the mixture correct? Did you lose a lot of bricks?

HG: A lot of times, not a lot of times, but sometimes, either the mud is a little too hard

or a little too soft. So when it's a little too soft, you add more, you shut the water down, you add more mud and, and sand, and if it's too hard, you add more water. So, the guys, the two guys in the front will tell you what the, what the mixture is. But usually, it always comes out pretty good, because you're so used to it. Usually when you first start in the morning, you're on a piece of wood, on top of there for the shoveling, you start shoveling from the top. By the time you get to the fourth or fifth thousand bricks that you've struck out, you're in the bottom of the pit, all the mud is around you, see. But it makes it a lot easier, because you're right on, on the wood floor of that, of that pit, see. But then the hardest part is you have to pick up your mud, shoot it in the mixer, in the mixer.

AL: Hard work.

HG: Oh, it is hard work, that's why a lot of strikers were hard to get in them days. But the ones, the ones that was doing the striking were real good people though, yeah, yeah, endurable.

AL: Thank you very much.

HG: You're quite welcome, young lady.

AL: We're going to add just a little bit more here.

HG: Okay, look, there was a brickyard down in the bottom part of Basswood Hill, where the bus depot is now, that was a brickyard there. We made bricks there off and on too, and it was the LaChance Brickyard, they were tied up with the Morin Brickyard, they were related.

AL: And you were also mentioned some of the bricks that you were making a certain kind?

HG: They were, they were what do you call Colby bricks, they were sent to Colby College, when they made their additions.

AL: Was it that they were made a little differently?

HG: Well, some of them were rounded, there was a special mold, they were rounded, for when they made their corners, I guess, or whatever it was.

AL: Oh great, great, thank you.

HG: You're quite welcome.

Break in interview

HG: Okay, sometimes, when the mud was a little too hard, the corners of the mold of bricks wouldn't fill in, so what we'd do is, you put your finger in the middle of the brick and press hard, and that would fill the corners. Then you'd pass your stick on it, and you'd have a new brick. Nobody would know the difference.

AL: Wow, that's great, I never heard that before.

HG: And there's a lot of people who haven't. We'd done it off and on, you didn't have to do it too much, but yeah, it worked.

AL: Great, thank you.

End of Interview
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