

Joe Mailey
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

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

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Brickyard Workers Oral History Project at the Museum L-A. The date is February 11th, 2009, and I'm at the home of Joe Mailey in Auburn, Maine, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Joe, could you just start by giving me your full name?

Joe Mailey: It's Joseph Mailey.

AL: And where and when were you born?

JM: I was born in Brunswick, Maine in 1964.

AL: And did you grow up in Brunswick?

JM: No, I grew up mostly in Lewiston-Auburn.

AL: And what were your parents' names?

JM: Hester and Duke (*sounds like*) Mailey.

AL: And how many children were there in your family, growing up?

JM: We had a family of four.

AL: So two kids and the parents, or four kids?

JM: Four kids in all, yeah.

AL: Okay. So what part of Lewiston-Auburn did you live in?

JM: I lived on Bearce Street, which is right down the street from here, when I was a little kid, and then I lived on Knox Street for a few years, in my teen years, and then we moved back to Auburn right across the street Beal's Laundry, in a building that's no longer there, and then I stayed in Auburn from then.

AL: What was Auburn and Lewiston like when you were growing up? That would have been the sixties and seventies.

JM: Well, mostly the seventies. Geez, what was it like.

AL: In terms of what you see today, how was it different?

JM: Well, it was definitely a lot less crime ridden. I mean it was still, Lewiston was still rough, but it was different, it was a different kind of rough. I mean, you had to go looking for trouble a lot of times. Nowadays, you don't even have to go looking for it, it finds you. As far as Auburn, Auburn is still Auburn, it's quiet for the most part and, you know.

AL: Were you in a neighborhood with lots of kids around?

JM: Yeah, yeah, we used to play down at Webster School a lot. My mom, she was always good about letting us stay out, especially in the summer time, so we used to play basketball and foot-, kickball, that was big back then, dodge ball, God forbid. I think there's a lot of scarred kids now because of dodge ball. But yeah, we played, we rode our bikes around. But most of us generally stayed right in the neighborhood where we were brought up, so.

AL: And what did your parents do for work?

JM: My mom worked at local heel shops, and my, well actually it was my stepfather, and he was a welder and he worked at various places.

AL: In the community at that time, did you, well, did religion play a big part in growing up?

JM: No, no.

AL: So it was the social aspect that you can't do today, just sort of run around in the neighborhood and be with your friends that's not the same.

JM: It's not the same. I mean even with my son, when my son was fourteen I asked him, he was complaining to me one day on how he was bored, and I said well why don't you and your friends go out and build a cabin. And he looked at me like I was a space man or something, he said a cabin, what's a cabin? You know, they don't, you know, they just don't do that stuff any more. I'd buy him a bike, and he didn't even want to ride that around, he's just happy playing video games and being on the computer and stuff.

AL: I'm interested to know if during your growing up, the downtown Lewiston area was still vibrant, or had that moved away?

JM: No, no, I remember, geez, I remember Kresge's and the, I can't remember the

name of the hardware store that's in the, where the, I think it's the courthouse now. Is that the same building? I can't remember, I think it is. But anyway, geez, that was a busy place. Because that was before the malls, or, yeah, Zayre's mall was there, Bradley's mall was there, but there was still a lot of downtown, you know, I remember all the stores down there. It was different.

AL: Was Peck's still there?

JM: Yes. No. No, Peck's was empty that far, as far as I can remember back, Peck's was empty.

AL: Now, at what age did you start working in the brickyards, or how did that come to be?

JM: Well, I'd been working, I was working, geez, I remember when I was six years old, I was living over Bisson's Market in Lewiston, on Lisbon Street, and I wanted to make chocolate. He used to have these big chunks of chocolate, and in order to get the big chunks of chocolate I had to shovel the porch, there was a community porch on the building upstairs, and he told me, he said, you shovel that and I'll give you chocolate. I always had chocolate in the winter time. I was, I would help the next door neighbor, he was a, him and his wife owned a couple of apartment buildings and I would help them paint, or what I thought was helping, you know, how much of a help can a six, seven year old be, but -

AL: Oh, that young.

JM: Oh yeah, oh yeah, I mean I was, when I was six years old I was playing on Lisbon Street around where the drunks were, around the bars, because that was back when the bars were, there was a, that strip was nothing but barrooms, and I was down in there. But then, you know, as I got a little bit older, I started carrying newspapers, and then when I turned fifteen I really wanted a "job" job, so I went to work at mom and dad's carwash, I did that for one winter, and then I started working at the *Sun-Journal*, in the mailroom.

AL: Well, where did you get your work ethic? All these jobs at such a young age. Was it part of, come out of your family, or?

JM: No, no, I think it was, well yeah, it was a result of my family. It was, I wanted to be out of the house as much as possible. It was a working class family that had a lot of issues, social issues, and I just wanted to be away from that. So I chose to work. But I did, I think I learned a lot from my mom, though, in that, geez, I remember her going to, she'd go to work at the heel shop sicker than a dog, because she was worried for her job, you know, she was always saying, you know, got to be there every day, got to make the boss happy and, you know, so I picked up a lot of that ethic. But not all of it,

because now I'm, if I'm sick, I don't work, you know, I'm different in that way.

But anyway, I worked at the *Sun-Journal*, and then when I turned eighteen I needed full time employment, they didn't have any at the time, so I wound up going to Enterprise Foundry, over on South Avenue, and I talked to the gentleman – well first I had filled out some applications in all the mills, and to this day I'll never forget it, I went into Libby Mill and the woman told me, after interviewing me, she said, well I'm sorry, but I just don't think you're mill material. And to this day, almost thirty years later, I'm not quite sure what she meant, but in a way I'm kind of, if I ever got to meet her I think I'd have to thank her. Because from what I, as I grew, I found that once you get in that mill environment it was very difficult to get out.

AL: Did you have friends that worked at the mill?

JM: No, no, I didn't know anybody that worked in the mills. At that time, the biggest places to go to work was like Clark Shoe, and a lot of the people were working up at like DeCosta's and things like that. I didn't really know that many people that were really into full time real employment yet. But then when I went down to Enterprise Foundry, I was in that Catch-22 deal in the sense that, well you don't have the experience, and I told the guy, I mean, I'm only eighteen years old, well if I can't work, how do I get the experience, to get the experience to come to work for you? So, but he brought me on, and it was back breaking work.

AL: What kind of work was it?

JM: I was doing, I started off on weights and jackets, what they call weights and jackets, it's a metal foundry, they pour castings, so you put these big heavy jackets around the molds and then you put weights on top of them so when they pour the iron, the mold itself doesn't collapse from the weight of the iron. Then I moved into the grinding room, then finally into the core room. And then I left there in 1986, because of the financial situation. I started out at making \$4.25 an hour, about two years later I was only making \$4.75 an hour. I was able to get into the brickyard at I think it was like seven or eight dollars an hour, piece work, bundling brick. And that's where I spent the next nine years.

AL: And so that was, was that year round, or how did -?

JM: Yes, while I was there it was year round. They had the, just as I started there, they were bringing in what they called the water struck, the old hand molded brick process, inside a building, they had mechanized it so it was all under a roof in a semi climate controlled environment. I mean, they didn't go out of their way to heat the building, the only source of heat in the winter was the kiln. So you'd get about thirty feet from the kiln, you were cold, you know, you stand in front of the kiln and you were hot, or on top of the kiln, you were hot.

AL: Well tell me about the process that you were involved in, the bundling, is that what you did the whole time you were there?

JM: No, I, geez, I did quite a few different things there. Bundling, basically they had the bricks, they would set, what they called set the brick, the brick would come out of the extruder and through the wire cutter, and people would set them on what they called cars, and I think it was like forty-three hundred and twenty brick per car, and they would go through the drying, after the car was filled it would go through the drying cycle, which would take a day or two, and then it would go through the kiln system, another day, two days, two and a half days depending on how fast they were going, and then they were ready to be bundled. And basically what you would do is, you'd take the fired brick off from the cars, have to sort them, have to get rid of the garbage brick, we called them brick bats, B-A-T-S, and you'd throw them up on a conveyor belt that would take them out, dump them in a dump truck, and you take the good brick and you put them in what we called a cube, and there was five hundred, twenty-eight brick per cube, and there was a standard way of building them so a forklift could pick them up, and you'd do your cube and then you'd strap it and send it down a little conveyor, and then it would go outside, and then the forklift would come by and pick them up and put them on a truck or put them into piles.

AL: And off they'd go.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

AL: They were ready to go.

JM: And that was extremely hard work, physically demanding. A lot of the times the mentality was, strong back, weak mind. The weaker the mind, the better, because anybody with any real intelligence really wouldn't want to do that type of job all too long, because it was physically demanding. At the height, at one point I was the fastest bundler, and I could bundle anywhere between twenty-five to thirty-five cubes in an eight-hour day. And when you start thinking about, you know, there's five hundred and twenty-eight brick per cube, each brick weighs approximately three pounds, you're moving some serious tonnage. And that's not including the brick that you're bending down to pick up, to throw on the belt. And you'd do this, you know, you'd have a break at nine, nine-thirty I think it was, and then you'd have your lunch, and you'd, you know. And it didn't matter if it was ninety degrees out or twenty below, you had to do it, you know, very physically demanding.

AL: And how *did* you do it? Because I'm speaking to you, you're very intelligent, and how did you, you know, separate the physical from the other?

JM: Back then – you might have to edit this – but back then the big thing was, the

bundlers and the setters, most of the younger guys, at break, before work, at break, at lunch, would have beer, would smoke pot, whatever it took to get them through. And management was well aware of it, but they didn't really, they didn't go out of their way to stop it. Because they had a basic understanding of what they were dealing with, as a general rule, for a manpower that they had. They knew that the guys were going out back at break, in the shed, smoking dope. You know, as long as they were back when the (*unintelligible*) started up, you know, they more or less turned a blind eye. In retrospect, I mean I look at it as being, you know, that's corporate America for you, they didn't care about their employees, they just cared about their product.

And it was a rough group. I mean, and like I said earlier, it was a strong back - weak mind situation, so you really, as a general rule, you didn't really have a lot of the cream of the crop, per se, of the work force. You had a lot of the dredges of the work force, transients, people that couldn't hold a job in any other environment, just because of their basic attitudes or whatever. But they could move brick, or they, you know.

AL: Was there a lot of turnover?

JM: Yes, yes.

AL: And this was Morin Brickyard, right?

JM: Yes, down here in Danville. Extremely large turnover, especially on the bundling side. The setting side, they had a turnover rate but it wasn't nearly as bad as the bundling side. Just the nature of the way the bundling went, it was a, once you started you didn't have to stop, very seldom did you have to stop to wait for a machine breakdown or something. Opposite of what the setters had to deal with, they, you know, if the (*unintelligible*) broke down or the clay wasn't coming in correct, or you know, if the clay wasn't right it would still be running but they'd just, the guy at the end of the line would throw them in the dumpster, because it weren't good brick to set. Their work was physically demanding, but they had some, a lot of down times in between, so they could stretch their backs and whatever, where the bundlers, it was, it was a lot tougher, in my opinion.

I did, I ran the bundling crew when I came back from Saudi, in '91, and it was incredible, I mean we would hire four or five guys in the morning, and by coffee, if you had one of them left you'd be lucky. The old saying was, well I got to go to the bathroom. Well the bathroom was over here to the right, and you'd see them walking to the left, because that's where the door was. And it was hilarious, I mean I would say to the guys, don't forget your lunch box, because it just became so -

AL: A pattern.

JM: Yeah, business as usual. And you know, just to give you an example of some of

the mentality of some of the people that were working there, and I'll never forget it: I had come out of rehab in '93, '94, and I was still running a brick line, and a kid come up to me, we'd just hired him like a week before that. And he come up, he says, Joe, I heard you used to smoke dope, I says yeah, I used to. He says, I got a whole new respect for you. And it was at that point that I really knew that I was going nowhere working at Morin Brickyard. It's like, o-kay. I mean at that time, you know, I had been to Saudi Arabia, I'd been to Honduras, through the military. I was in my early, early thirties at that point, and you know, I had run the brick kiln for about two years, and, well, this isn't working.

AL: So you, so where did you go after that?

JM: After I left there I joined the sheet metal workers union, which I'm still a member right now, even though I'm not working.

AL: Now, I have some questions, like you talked briefly about the management at the brickyard. Were there people in management, well what were they like overall to work with?

JM: Well the general manager, Norm Davis, he was a businessman, he was a businessman, that's, he was there to get brick made and packaged and sold, and that's his, at the cheapest possible cost, right, wrong or indifferent. He was a no-nonsense type of person. He had the sense of humor of a rat sometimes. But then you had the plant manager, Gene Roy, very intelligent man, I learned so much from that man.

AL: Is he still living?

JM: Yeah, and as far as I know, he's still working now. He's very articulate – we had our run-ins with each other, but overall I learned a lot from him. But again, he was under, he was brought up the old school, he worked the water struck system when it was outside, he worked his way up through the ranks, but he had the sense of getting the most out of a person that he could for the least that he could, that was his job. As well as keeping the plant going. Even though he wasn't a licensed electrician, he did a lot of the electrical work there, because he had a good working past, he had a good past knowledge of electricity through the military and stuff, so.

And then there was Armand Turcotte who was the maintenance, head of the extruder side of the system, but he was also the maintenance guy. He was the guy that was, he was only, he's only like five-foot-five, tall but five foot wide, you know, he's a bulky guy, and hard worker and he knows his craft when it comes to mechanical things. Very intelligent person in what he does. But the way he talked to a lot of the guys, he really knew how to put people down, because again, it was a situation to where, hey, if you don't like it, leave, that was the attitude. They didn't care, because they knew that they had people waiting. They would always have a stack of applications, so it didn't matter,

you know. He would holler at the guys and call them names and the whole nine yards, belittle people, and most of the time the guys put up with it because either they didn't understand what he was doing, or they were fearful for their job, because they knew they had to have some kind of income. There was a couple people that put him on the spot with it, though. He knew who he could pull his crap with and who he couldn't.

AL: What stories did you hear over those years about the way they used to do it in the "old days," from Gene or others?

JM: Oh, extremely hard work. They'd start sunup and they would work the water struck – apparently what they did is, they would make the water struck brick, and they had these long wooden sheds, and when I say long I'm talking a couple hundred feet long, probably, I don't know, twelve feet, twelve, fifteen feet tall, if I remember right, and there was just rows of them. And they would put these, put the mud into molds, or the clay, whatever they wanted to call it, and they would put them on plates and then they'd put them on racks, and then they would fill these racks up and put them in the sheds and they would dry them, it was all air dried then. And then after they were dried, they would actually take the brick and they would stack them up and then build a wooden encasement around it and fire it. That's how they dried their brick, and that was before they had the kiln system in, and that's how they fired the brick. And from what I understand, we had it lucky compared to what they had to do. In a way, I kind of wish I could have seen that type of operation.

AL: I've seen pictures of the men out there in May, in bathing suits, in the clay pits, and you can only imagine how different that was.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Well even when they brought the mechanics inside, the setters were allowed to wear shorts and stuff, only because of the heat, you know. They were standing, well, the way the system was set up is, the end of the kiln was pretty much directly in front of where the setters were working, so they always had this blast of hot air coming at them. And if it's ninety degrees out and you've got this blast of hot air coming from your backside, it wears you out real fast. You had the stories, though, I've heard a lot of the stories about how hard the work really was then. But again, even back then it was a strong back - weak mind mentality.

AL: Are there others that you worked with that worked for a significant time, or worked during the old system, that you knew there, that you think we should talk to, or you have recollections of?

JM: Yeah, actually there's a guy named Woody, he lives right over here on James Street, as far as I know, he's been there forever.

AL: And he's still there?

JM: Yeah, yeah. There's Gene Roy, there's Armand Turcotte, I can't think of any of the other old timers that might still be there. I think Robie Porter is there. Not Robie but, yeah, Robie Porter is there.

AL: So some of them started in the old system and went to the new?

JM: Well Armand and Gene and Woody definitely, yeah, yeah.

AL: And what's Woody's last name?

JM: You would ask me that. I only worked with him for nine years. Because every-, his name is always Woody.

AL: That's okay.

JM: If I didn't want to think of his name, I'd think of his real name right now, too.

AL: I can find it out some other way, that's fine.

JM: Yeah, Norm Davis would know, yeah.

AL: What is that I haven't asked you about the brickyards that you think that we should add in talking about this and getting the history?

JM: Good question. Good question.

AL: Because I figure you know more about your experience, and I may not ask all the questions that are pertinent.

JM: As far as the history goes, like I said, when I started there, they were just bringing everything inside. Morin Brick originally weren't where it is now, it was down on I think Brickyard Circle. But I'm not privy to that history part. There's a lot of the history that I'm just not privy to because, I know Rachel asked me last week, like how did they build these buildings, and a lot of times, my understanding was, from talking to some of the old timers, is when they would build a place like Bates Mill, they would actually go in and build a little brickyard right there.

What they would do is, they would bring their clay in, their clay and sand and stuff that they needed to make the brick, but everything would be right there on site. Because of the logistic situation back then, and the sheer volume of brick. I mean you're talking, when I was working at Morin Brick, they were putting out I think it was like a quarter of a million bricks a year of something. No, it was a quarter of a million brick a week. And when you're looking at the size of a building like Bates Mill, and this is all mechanized now, there's no way that they could do that back then, so what they'd

do, they'd do it on site and as the bricks were dried and cured and fired, they would install them.

I'm trying to think of any other, I can't think of anything.

AL: Well great, thank you so much.

JM: Yeah, my pleasure.

End of Interview

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