

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

**David Nelson**  
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

**SWOH #043**  
April 16, 2010

**Andrea L'Hommedieu:** This is an interview for the Shoe Industry Oral History Project at Museum L-A., the date is April 16th, 2010, and I'm at the home of David Nelson in Auburn, Maine, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. David, could you start just by giving me your full name.

**David Nelson:** David Roger Nelson.

**AL:** And how do you spell Nelson?

**DN:** N-E-L-S-O-N.

**AL:** And where and when were you born?

**DN:** I was born here in Lewiston, July 2nd, 1937.

**AL:** And did you grow up in the Lewiston area?

**DN:** Yes, I lived in Auburn all my life.

**AL:** And your parents, were they from the area?

**DN:** Well, they were originally, since I was born they were here, but my father moved up here with my grandfather to be in the die business, and then they started their own business in 1937, so the family's been in the business ever since I can remember.

**AL:** So going back to your grandfather.

**DN:** Oh yes, yeah.

**AL:** And what was your grandfather's name?

**DN:** Gustav.

**AL:** Gustav Nelson? And what were your parents' names?

**DN:** My father's name was Werner, and my mother's name was Ruth, and my mother

is still alive and she's, well, she'll be ninety-five next month.

**AL:** And does she still live near here?

**DN:** Yeah, we've lived on Turner Street since the time I was three years old, and before that we lived on Court Street, so my life has been here in Auburn the whole time.

**AL:** Well talk to me about what Auburn was like? Well, you wouldn't remember the thirties, but you'd have memories from the forties and on, what was it like then, when you were a child?

**DN:** Well, the first I remember now is when I was in the, well probably around the third grade, it was war time, and I can remember my parents listening to the radio with the war, because my grandfather had four sons and three of them were in the war, and my father and my grandfather had an exemption because they were in the shoe business supplying things to the shoe companies so that they could make shoes for the war. And so the thing that I remember is that he would work like eighteen hour days, because even though they were at war, they also had worked in the business so they were gone. So they had to make up for those lost people, and they worked and worked all the time.

And after that we moved up to Turner Street, and I can remember from there I went to school, and I decided that I'd rather go to the Air Force than go into the family business, because we had uncles and uncles and uncle-in-laws, everybody was in the business, so I went in the Air Force for four years and decided that I'd come back and get in the business. I was in there in electronics, and I came back and went into the business.

**AL:** And as kids, what did you do for fun, growing up in the area?

**DN:** Well, we played most of the time. We went to the Y, played basketball, went out in the backyard and played baseball, my folks had a barn and they set up a basket there and played basketball when it was raining and baseball outside when it's sunny. And in the night you played around in the neighborhood with people, playing kick the can or playing tag. Just had a great time, it was a great time to grow up, after the war, it was very interesting.

**AL:** What sort of changes did you see in Auburn over the years?

**DN:** Well of course, I can remember all the buildings that were torn down with the urban renewal.

**AL:** In the sixties, was that sixties?

**DN:** Yeah. Of course all of those buildings are gone, and I'd go get my hair cut at the

Elm Hotel and that was torn down, and go to the dentist in the building across from the courthouse and that was torn down, and we'd go to the movies across the street from the courthouse, I was trying to think of the name of it, I can't remember the name of it, Auburn Theater, I guess. But even then, some of the shoe shops were being torn down, or going out of business and other people were using the buildings and things like that. That's about what I remember of it. And you know, we'd go to the Y and that's still there, had dances at night and things like that. That's about it.

**AL:** So would you go to the shop with your dad, as a kid, and sort of learn the business?

**DN:** Yeah, we went to school, and the shop was on the corner of Turner Street and what is Union Street Bypass right now, and before they put the bypass in there was a road there, and I went to Webster School just around the corner there, and sometimes after school if I had football practice or basketball practice, I'd walk down to the shop to get a ride home with my father, and you know, visit the shop and the people and stuff like that. And then when I got to high school I'd work in the summer time in the business. So I'd go there, visit quite often, and I can remember going in and my grandfather would take me next door to a store called Soro's (*sounds like*) and he'd buy me a lemon blend drink, and that was a treat, that was a real big treat. Sometimes an ice cream, but he would come and visit.

**AL:** So can you talk to me about the history of the company, and your evolution with it and your father and grandfather?

**DN:** Well my grandfather came here when he was fifteen with five dollars in his pocket, and he ended up in Massachusetts with a family that was his sponsor. And he learned about, from what we found out looking back, Janet has done a lot of the, what do you call it -

**AL:** Like the genealogical research?

**DN:** Yeah, that type of thing, and we found out that he went to New York afterwards, and I remember him telling me that what he would do was to go and carry steamer trunks up, you know, when the people came in from Ellis Island and things like that, they had these steamer trunks and he's have to take them up six or seven floors, up in these tenements and stuff, and that's what he did for a while. And apparently he met my grandmother there, but they moved back to Massachusetts and he was in the die business. And my father quit school in the eighth grade, because they had nine children, and he had to help support the family, he was the second oldest. And so he was a mechanic for a while, and then he got in the die business, and in 1939 they decided that they would come up here to Auburn, because that was where a lot of the shoe industry was.

So they came up here and they went and started to work in a die shop down on Main Street, and then when they came here, actually when they came here they lived in a camp over on Taylor Pond, over there, they rented it, in the winter time even, they rented it. And then they started a business, in the same business where I sold it, in the same building. They rented a basement, the basement was dirt floored, so we started there, and my father and my grandfather and uncles all worked in there. And then as we went along, and of course I was still in school, and when I came back from the Air Force I started to work and I was being taught by my grandfather and my father, and my uncles as well, so that I knew the whole business with all of that.

And in the beginning I would deliver dies to the shoe shops that were done, pick up patterns from the shoe shops that we made the dies from, and generally got to know the people that were in the shoe business by delivering and talking to the people that were in the shoe shops and stuff. And then eventually I became the general manager and ran the business, and then I bought the business from my father.

**AL:** What year was that, do you remember?

**DN:** I don't remember what year it was that I bought it.

**AL:** Decade? Around 1978?

**DN:** Yeah, that would be about the time, because I don't remember those things. But you know, so I built up the business and I decided that, I had a salesman that was a friend of mine and went to school in Lewiston, and we decided together to start another business which was a pattern making business, in the same shoe business, and make the patterns for the shoes, and then when we made what we called machine dies, which was another part of the die business, and it was a business that I had bought because the man was going out of business so I bought it, and the parts that we were buying to put in those dies, the little tubes that cut the holes and things like that, the guys were getting out of that business so we couldn't find them, so I went to Germany and got the franchise to sell, the company that was making them in Germany, sell them over here in the United States to other die companies. So I had all those businesses going at one time.

**AL:** And your business is really dependent on the larger shoe making business being active.

**DN:** Right.

**AL:** How did the closing of the shops around town affect you?

**DN:** Well, the way it started, and the way you could see it coming, was the fact that some of the die companies would close, and I would take some of the people that were working there. And what was happening is that as the shoe companies were closing,

the people that were supplying the companies were closing, and it was just shrinking down to where we ended up having just two die companies in town, after the other die company bought one, I had bought on, and we were competing between the two of us. So that was what was leading to the fact that it was going away because all the shoe manufacturing was going overseas.

Even we, I mean I was selling, when I first started the business, or in the business, I never went out of Lewiston-Auburn to get business, there was enough there. And there was die companies all around, and they were busy. But as the shoe business started to go away, I had to go to the rest of the state to get more business, and then I had to go the rest of New England to get more business, then I had to go to the rest of the country to get more business, and then we were getting business from out of the country, Santo Domingo, Mexico, places like that. But eventually those people learned how to make dies themselves, so then they weren't buying from us anymore so then it started to shrink even more. And that's what was happening is that everything was going, all the shoe manufacturing was going overseas, so all the suppliers, if we didn't go overseas for what we could get, then they were closing up to.

So we ended up just shrinking to the point where the guy that was competing with me, we decided that there's no sense in beating each other over the head, so who's going to buy who? And I decided that I was ready to get out of it, I could see it coming probably more clearly than he could, and I had like thirty-eight people working for me, and right now I understand that he's got two working for him. So that's shrunk to that point. Of course we were making dies for the glove industry, the handbags, puzzles, a lot of different things, but even those things were going overseas, things like that.

**AL:** Now, for the benefit of researchers, younger generations now and in the future learning about the shoe industry and what it involved, can you talk about what a die is and the process?

**DN:** Well, the die is like a cookie cutter, and each part of the shoe has a separate piece that sticks together. And what we do is to bend a piece of steel to the shape of the pattern. The patterns were made originally by hand, and then by a machine, a mechanical machine that graded each piece up for the size. In other words, if you had a size six and you wanted a six and a half and a seven, each piece grew as you went along. So we had to make a die for each one of those pieces and each one of those sizes.

So when we got to the point where a lot of the – I remember when I first got in the business, the shoe company would give a small sample of what they were going to have, and they would make that shoe and I remember going into the shoe companies and waiting to get patterns while the designer was fitting a shoe onto a woman who was working there, and her size was size four. That was the standard size, was size four. Well now I think the standard size is eight or something like that, because we've all

grown to the point where there's none of the small stuff anymore.

And what we do is to take a piece of steel and bend it to that pattern. And depending on how they're using the, like leather, if you're taking leather, you have to take a piece of steel that has two edges, on the top and bottom, so when you bend it and they put it on a machine that presses it down into the leather, and it's like a cookie cutter, the piece of leather comes out. Well if you turn it over, you make a right foot one way and a left foot the other way, so you have what you call a double-edge die. So you make that die so that it's sharpened on both sides.

Well sometimes pieces of shoes are made out of cloth or something like that, you don't need to do that because what they do with the cloth, they take the cloth and they put one on top of the other and reverse them, so that when the die comes down it cuts all one piece but it only has one edge, so it cuts the rights and lefts at the same time.

So then we bend the die to the shape, then we take and weld it together so that it, you know, because you can't bend it, there's a machine that you take and it has a cam on it and two tools that keep bending the die and you shape it, it's kind of hard to describe, but after that's done you heat treat it. You take the steel and put it in a 1600 degree furnace, then you take it out and quench it in oil, and then you take it out – that makes it brittle and you can't shape it after that, you can't pound on it or anything, it'll shatter, and so it's like they make glass or something. So then you put it in a salt solution which draws it back to the point where it's the temper that you want in the die, so that you can manipulate it but it won't wear very much. So it's a process like that.

And then when you do that, you have to fit it back because it takes it out of shape a little, so you have to try to fit it back to the pattern, and then you grind an edge to it so that it's sharp, and then you put, before that you put nicks in it so that when they cut it, the little nicks tell you what size it is, what width it is, things like that. And then you grind the edges sharp, and then you sharpen it with a file, and then you paint it on the edge so that it shows what width it is and things like that, you know, each company told you what they wanted for those things.

And then of course you had shoe soles that were made out of five and a half inch 1/4" steel, and when we first started making them you had to put them in a cold forge, heat them up, and you had a hand machine that shaped them to the shape of a sole, and then you welded them up and put them in the forge again, and put them on an anvil and shape the edges with a hammer all the way around, to a pattern, to a tin pattern, and then you made it so that the back was bigger than the edge, so that when the sole was cut it would go up through the die and they'd just dump it out. And then you'd have to heat treat that the same way and put it in a thing and do that. And you had smaller sole dies that cut cloth that were only an inch and a quarter thick, but basically that's about what it is. There's a lot of little things in between that it's kind of hard to describe, but that's the basic way that you did things.

**AL:** So your business would be that a shoe company would call you and say, we want this new die for a new style, and here are our patterns?

**DN:** Yeah.

**AL:** And then you'd work together?

**DN:** Hmm-hmm, we'd make the dies for them. But of course, that's why we, and my partner there, decided to get into the grading business, because even those people that were in those shops, they had designers already there, and they worked for the company. Well eventually those people either died away or never got into it, or they became individual people, they didn't work for a company. So they were looking for someplace for somebody to finish the rest of the operation, like making the different patterns from their first models. So then we advanced from that mechanical procedure to a computerized thing that would take that first model and make all the sizes from that. And then for quite a while, because we couldn't buy the laser cutter that would cut from that, we would go to Falcon Shoe and they would allow us to rent their cutters, because they had their own people making that and they had a cutter, so they were good enough to rent us the machine so that we could cut those pieces for other companies.

**AL:** You had probably quite a few people work for you over the years.

**DN:** Yeah, over the years, you know, they came and went, and some of them are still alive, and most of the ones that started with my father and grandfather have passed away by now. But it's been a long journey from going like on the machine dies that we made, we used to do that by hand, and on a milling machine that people had to adjust with their hands going one way and the other, and then we advanced to a CNC machine, and my son came into the business and he learned how to operate that machine and taught other people to use that machine, and we used to do a lot of things on the computer.

And we were advancing along, but we came to a point where the people that were in the industry, it was very hard to make them change, to sell them the point where, because we could make it on a machine, you know, digitized and all that, we could save that information. And before, they'd have to save a tin pattern, and we'd have tin patterns all over the place and we'd have to give those things out and make a new one for everyone, and then with the other process, with the computerized process we could go and they could call us and say, look, we broke this die, it's a certain size and it's a certain pattern, we'd go into the computer, get the thing, put it on the machine and duplicate it right away. And some people just couldn't grasp that concept, or they would, some of the competition that couldn't do that would tell them that that wasn't the way to go. We were fighting that process the whole time. But mainly it was that we were advancing to the point where some of the people in the business wouldn't advance

with us, or couldn't or whatever. But I mean, if the business was still going, then that would have been a thing that would eventually catch up. But it was kind of late.

**AL:** Yeah, there are a couple shoe makers left in the area, but small.

**DN:** Well, like Falcon Shoe, they were advanced, because they would always get the new equipment. The die business changed even then, because like Falcon Shoe would have a computerized stitching machine. Well that piece that was cut by the die was put into a holder that would hold all the pieces together in the right way, and a machine would automatically stitch everything together. Well if those pieces didn't fit in that holder, then they had problems. So now you even had to be more accurate than you ever were. So it was advancing along, and that's what, some people couldn't advance, other shoe companies didn't advance. And they may be small, but at least they're surviving, or at least in a small niche that they've got. Kind of difficult, but still.

**AL:** Did you spend time over in Lewiston as well, growing up? In terms of like the downtown area?

**DN:** Oh yeah, well when I first got married I lived in Lewiston for a few years and then moved back to Auburn. But we were all over Lewiston anyway, it was like it was your own town.

**AL:** Well I wondered, because you probably saw how much it changed over the years. When you were a young person, I'm guessing it was a very vibrant downtown. What would your memories of that be?

**DN:** Well of course, as you remember, I can remember when I had my license and I was driving in Lewiston, when you came across the bridge, don't come across the bridge at four o'clock, because all the mills were getting out and people were all over the place. But it was, you know, the movie theaters are gone, a lot of the downtown was very vibrant, Peck's Department Store was one of the nicest department stores for a long time, you always waited for the Christmas decorations in the windows and things like that. But it was just like the town of Auburn, it was, you know, you had rivalries between sports teams in school, from Lewiston-Auburn and things like that, but it was good. And you might have fought hard with the people that you were against in the sports, but afterwards, like one of my partners, he played for Lewiston and I played for Auburn, it was like a big family eventually.

Of course, I remember all the tenements that were downtown in Little Canada, down there, people all over the place, because they had jobs. You could walk at night. I mean even as kids in Auburn, we'd go down to Pettingill Park and skate, and you know, you'd walk down, it would probably be, what, two miles from my house, and we'd walk down and skate, come back at nine o'clock and walk down, or walk down to the Y at night and walk back. And Cub Scout meetings, you'd walk, you'd go there, and go

down to the church at night. You didn't worry about kids walking up the street or in the street by themselves or anything like that. It was a different time. But it was an enjoyable time I don't think I'd want to grow up in these times right now, but it's very interesting to see how much it's changed.

**AL:** Now, is there anything about your business and the history of the shoe industry in the area that I didn't ask that you think is important to add?

**DN:** No, I don't think we were any different than any other, the mills went through the same thing that the shoe industry went through. And you know, you could see it coming, my father could see it coming, and when my son went in the business, came into the business, we decided that when it was time to sell, we talked about it, and I could have bought the other guy and we could have gone on for a while, but we figured that he at his age would probably be fifty years old and it wouldn't be a business anymore and he'd have to start out some other way, you know. So he decided that would be the best, and we both decided that would be the best, to sell, and he's now in a business that he is enjoying very much and they're doing well. So finally, it was probably the right thing to do, so I'm glad I did it when I did.

**AL:** Was it difficult, given that generations of your family, that's what you had done?

**DN:** Well, if the shoe business was still here it would have been difficult, but at the end it was so difficult because the shoe companies were squeezing us for everything, because they were being squeezed, so were we being squeezed. And they were working, you know, when we had three or four die companies around they'd work one against the other and, you know, they'd pinch the penny down to the last thing and it was very difficult. And some of the people that were left in the business were not that, how shall I say, cordial, or whatever, but you know, some of them. Some of them were great people, but it was just, that changed, the atmosphere changed between the supplier and the buyer. It was a hard thing to do, because I could understand that they had a problem too, but it was squeezing everybody. And when I sold and I walked out the building, that was it. No regrets.

**AL:** Thank you so much.

**DN:** You're welcome.

*End of Interview*  
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