MILL WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE

Lucille Barrett **BCOH# 003**
(*Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu*) June 23, 2005

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview with Lucille Barrett at her home at 42 Louise Avenue in Lewiston, Maine on June 23rd, 2005, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. This is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History Project. Lucille, could you start just by giving me your full name, including your maiden name?

Lucille Barrett: It's Lucille Gastonguay Blais Barrett. My first husband passed away, so I, I worked in the mill for a long time on Blais, Lucille Blais, and then I married and my name became Barrett.

AL: Is Blais, B-L-A-I-S?

LB: Yes.

AL: And so, when and where were you born?

LB: I was born in Lewiston, on River Street in Lewiston.

AL: And your birth date?

LB: 4-20-25, I'm eighty years old.

AL: And did you grow up in that area of Lewiston?

LB: Yes, yes I did. What they call Little Canada?

AL: Yes.

LB: That's the area where I was born, I was raised, and I married there. Lived there until, well fifty years ago I moved here, we built this house here and I moved here.

AL: Oh, you built, you and your husband?

LB: No, not my husband, my brother did, my brother built this house. But that was fifty years ago, 1955, so I've been here fifty years.

So I started working at Bates in 1952. That was, what, fifty two, fifty three years ago, fifty three years ago, but I stopped about three or four years, when they closed down anyway, I was there until they closed down. Because I retired in 1990, I was sixty-five and I said, this is it, you know, my forty hours a week, and then I stopped. And then a year or so later they asked me to go back. They closed down the area where I was working, I was a stitcher, and they closed down the finishing room and being a stitcher, I guess, I retired and six months later they closed down the area. And then I guess they decided they wanted samples and there was nobody there, so they called me.

And I went in to do a few samples, and then later on this lady, they started picking up business,

they started needing stitchers, so then this lady was sick so they called me in again. So I replaced this one and then I replaced that one, and then I go home and I work for two weeks, three weeks, and then I was out, and then, out for two or three months, then I was back in again. Anyway, I worked until it was 1995, whatever.

It was great, you know, I didn't mind it. You know, if it's something you learn when you get older, it's hard. But if you've done it all your life it comes so easy, it's just a repeat of what you've been doing all your life. So I worked there for about fifty years. I stitched about maybe forty-eight years, I was a stitcher on bedspreads. I loved it, I enjoyed it. And I was better using my hands than I was with my head.

AL: Can you tell me what Little Canada was like during the days you grew up there?

LB: Oh, it was very, I would say congested, there were so many people there. There were apartment buildings, and some of these apartments had four apartments, you know, four families, and some of them had eight, and even twelve families would live, and it was so, you know, one house next to the other. Everything was so close by that five or ten feet between the buildings, so it was very dangerous for a fire hazard. They were very afraid of fires in that area because they were so congested, you know, so many people living there.

But they were all friendly people, and I'd say ninety-five, ninety nine percent of the people were French. They were all French Canadian, come from Canada. Most of them was working in the mill, they worked at Bates, the Hill, the Androscoggin, you know, all these mills around town. A little, maybe ten or twenty percent worked in the shoe shops, but it was mostly a mill town with people working in the mill. I mean, the money wasn't that good, but it was steady, you know, very few layoffs and people stuck to it.

So it was a good life. I enjoyed it, really, and you enjoyed that you knew all the neighbors, and people very, very friendly, we'd to one another. And we knew everyone, and I guess I enjoyed it, I really enjoyed it.

AL: Your parents, did they both come from Lewiston or Canada?

LB: No, no, no, Canada, my parents came from Canada, way down Quebec, way down, where they call it Riviere (*name*), close by in this neighborhood, what back when. Well, my mother would be, what, a hundred and, my gosh, twelve and five, seventeen, I think she'd be a hundred seventeen and my father would be a hundred and twenty one years old. So that was quite a family. We were a large family anyway.

AL: How many children were there?

LB: There was nine of us, so I was one of the last. I had a brother younger than I was, but, so, but I had a brother, the oldest brother and the other one worked in the mill, and the others were, the two, I had two sisters that worked in the shoe shop, and then they went in the service, coming back from the service, well, one was an electrician, one was a carpenter.

I guess I started working in the, I went to high school and when I come out I was working in the office. But there was something wrong with me, I didn't know what was the matter, I could not, I had a hard time to type or shorthand. The moment she'd say go, I'd start shaking and I couldn't keep my hands on the board, so I mainly passed it but, you know, it's ironic, never knowing what it was then. But it didn't stop me from stitching, though. I mean, no, you know, so I enjoyed using my hands where I could do it, so I did well.

AL: Did your father work in the mill, too?

LB: Yes, and then he had an accident and then he became an insurance agent. My mother never worked. With nine kids.

AL: With nine kids, that was work, wasn't it.

LB: I tell you, it was a time, yes it was, especially without, you know, they didn't have too much of facilities or anything gadget to work with as you do today. But great, we had a good family.

My father died young, my father was in his sixties when he died. And my mother died, she was eighty-four when she died of an accident. I think she could have lived longer if she hadn't died. So, that's the name of the game.

AL: Tell me about being a stitcher in the mill, and how did you get your job there? Because your brothers were there, or?

LB: No, I just, at the time I had worked at the Androscoggin mill in the office for two years, and then I said, the heck with that, I want where the money is, and stitching was a pieceworker, so I went in Bates, I applied at Bates and I got in right off and they gave me as a general hand for a few months, and then I went on stitching. That's where the money was, and at the time we had built this house, so we needed the money.

And I stayed there, I thought I would be there for a few years, but God, I stayed until I was seventy, well seventy-five. God, it just, a long life, isn't it? But, you know, it kept me going as I started, after I retired I started going to the Y, I go swimming every morning. I'm in the Y, at quarter to six in the morning I'm in that pool. I love it, it's great.

AL: Well, being at the mill, were there social groups that you developed with other women?

LB: The union wives, the union wives, yeah, the union wives. And I think, I think, I lost my first husband in 1971, and naturally I got involved with the union. It was a, you know, way out, I needed something to keep me busy. So at the time I had two girls gone, I had two girls who were married but then I had two more at home, and I decided to start working for the union as a shop steward, and I got to be secretary and then I got to be, what is it, well, I was president for ten years. I enjoyed it, really.

AL: What were some of the issues that you had to work with in that time?

LB: Well, you know, most of the issues would be seniority rights, you know, people, I mean sometimes they'd give a job to somebody that was a junior, just came in, and then they give them the best jobs, and naturally the older people that had been in, they wanted their turn. Hey, you know, I got seniority and I should be entitled to that job. So you used to, it was more like a, crazy as it may sound, it was more like a lawyer. You were there as a shop steward defending these people that couldn't defend themselves, you know, you'd say, well, hey, you'd go to the office and say, well, this person was here first and I don't see why you don't give him a chance to get on that job. Or, you know, little odd jobs.

And sometimes fights between two people, that they didn't agree. That was hard. You know, you had two members so it's, one had to be right and the other one had to be wrong, so you didn't favor either one of them but when the outcome would come out, you know, it was, one was right anyway so the other one would be (*unintelligible word*) bitching against you because you didn't help her out.

But it was mostly, especially I was in the finishing room and it was mostly women, ninety percent of the people in that room was all women, and sometimes there was a little envy or resentment, a little here or there. But, I mean, it wasn't a union duty, union duty was more to take care of the work, you know, worker, or else somebody would be assigned more than a hundred percent of a job, so then you'd

go in and then say, hey, she's got too much work.

And fair play, about who was going to get the good work and the bad work, and who was dividing the work. And mostly that's it, or somebody didn't get paid for a holiday and then you had to go in and say, how come she didn't get paid, the reason for. And sometimes, you know, it was right, but you had to be fair play. You just didn't say for the people, say every time the people was right, sometimes the people weren't right. But you had to make them see that they were not, and that was the hardest part.

But another thing, you couldn't bear down on the company too much, because if you did you could close down the place. So you had to be fair-minded and, like pollution, people would complain about pollution. Naturally there's an awful lot of lint, in a textile mill there was an awful lot of lint and they complained about the lint. But you can do so much, but you can do too much where it would cost the company too much that their profit would just go down the drain.

Another thing I think that did close down these mills was that workmen's comp. People were having carpal tunnel or any of these injuries, and they'd sue or, and the company was, you know, at a loss all the time. I was told once that, the president told me once that from January until April 1st, all the money that they had profit, that they made in these three months, went to workmen's comp because of all the cases they had.

And a time for a while, I guess, we had three cases of AIDS, and you were not supposed to say anything but I remember one meeting the president started to say something, he says, yeah, our cost has gone up because we have three cases of AIDS, and then he took back. I guess he wasn't supposed to say anything, but I picked that up right off. And he says it was expensive, you know, the treatment would go sky high and, what else can you do.

They had a good insurance program, though, really. Yeah, for a while they had Union Mutual, and they paid pretty well. But, otherwise it was a good time, and good work. I loved it, really, and I really enjoyed, oh, some days were bad, like everything else. You work with a machine, sometimes the machine works and sometimes it don't work. I mean, you're not bucking with people, you're bucking with a machine. And, you know, it went pretty good. All in all I can't complain, I had a good time, it was a good time.

AL: So all your years were at the Bates mill?

LB: From 1952 until 1995, yup.

AL: Were there sports teams at the mill?

LB: At the time, a little bit I guess. They used to have a baseball club I guess, and then they had -

AL: Hockey?

LB: Hockey, they had hockey, and then they had bowling, they had bowling clubs. I did for a while and then I stopped. Naturally, I was working on the second shift at first when I went in, so it was hard for me to join. But for a while I did some bowling, and then all of a sudden it dropped out, not enough people signed for it so they had to drop it. But as far as, they had hockey, I know they had hockey and they had baseball. Otherwise than that, I don't think there was much of anything else. Not to my knowledge.

AL: Did you work with any other union representatives that represented different areas of the mill?

LB: Oh yeah, I had, there was a fellow, I mean the business agent was Mr. Denis Blais, you know Denis Blais? Yeah, he was district, not only district manager, he was vice president of the union at the end. But then I worked with him, and there was another fellow that you should contact was Roland

Gosselin, he was very involved with the thing. He was a business agent for a while, he was business agent for Bates mill. And once I was offered the job of being business agent, but at the time I had two kids at home, I had one fourteen and sixteen, and it was too much going out of town.

I had two girls that were married, but the other two were too young to really be off and on. Fourteen and sixteen, that's a stage you got to watch out on them. The girl wasn't bad, but the little boy, whew, gave me headaches. Boys do anyway, you know, on bicycles and dirt bike and whatever, (*unintelligible word*) and whatever. But, it went pretty good. Can't complain, had a good life.

AL: Did you have any interactions with Louis Jalbert over the years?

LB: Not too much, except we used to be in that, in politics, we were in politics I guess, yes, the, what the heck did they call it? I was involved a little bit in politics. It was mostly in Lewiston, though, I didn't go too far with them. But it was mostly when they had elections, we used to be in front of the mill with whoever was there, Curtis or, I was there with -

AL: Muskie?

LB: Muskie, Curtis, and the, what you may call the Democrats, because I'm a strong Democrat. And I remember once, I guess one of the personal director, Mark, what was his name, Mark Bernier, I guess he wanted to play a joke on me, he came in with Olympia Snowe. And he says, do you want to take a picture with Mrs., at the time she's a Mrs. Snowe, and I says, yes, but I don't want to be in the newspaper. Whatever you do, I'm a Democrat and I know she's a Republican and, you know, I'll be in hot water with the union if I go through with this, I says, I don't mind they're taking pictures but I don't want my picture in the newspaper. It was a little embarrassing, but still, I felt, you know, it was one way or another, darned if you do and darned if you don't.

So I, no, I've always been a very strong Democrat, and we used to have rallies and we, you know, passed leaflets or go around or be on the phone, on the phone banks, you know, calling people to go vote, and, oh yeah, very involved into, what did they call it? I can't remember what it was, but it politics anyway. Political Action Committee, anyway, whatever, I was involved in that. I enjoyed that, too. And there was quite a few people now, but they're all gone, they're all dead. They're all gone. It's so sad.

I had Rose (*name*) that was there for years as president, she's gone. There was Julien Cloutier that was there, he's gone. There was a good friend of mine, Priscilla Chasse, she's gone. And Lionel Langois, he's gone. You know, all of these people, I can't believe everybody's gone. Because it was so great, and we used to go to conventions, you know, with the union, the international, go to, I went to Washington, D.C., I went to San Francisco, and I went to Florida and Boston, New York, Detroit. Great. You meet an awful lot of people.

And you know the best of it which I saw? It was very integrated. You'd go there, there'd be just as many blacks as there were white and, you know, it was just nice. Because in Lewiston there's not too many black people. Now with the Somalians, yes, I mean there's quite a mixture. But at the time there wasn't, and in the mill, there were very, very few black people working in the mill. They were all white people, the majority of them French. Ah, now and then you meet an Irishman, but not too many. It was mostly French.

French speaking, too. And even today I s-. my husband doesn't speak French at all, I do, and I'll be in the pool and I'll be talking to this one and I'm talking in English and all of a sudden turn French and (*unintelligible word*). And this man that used to be a teacher, he said, I don't understand how you people, he says, you switch from one to another without even, you don't even know you're doing it, which is true, very true. But, the name of the game. Yeah, you're born French and I guess you stay with it until you die. So, that's it, eh?

AL: Well, when you went to, when you lived in Little Canada, did the people walk to the mills (*unintelligible phrase*)?

LB: Everybody walked. There was very few cars. And, you know, this is the reason today they have so many problems with alcohol, because in those days everybody walked. You went to church, you went to work, you went to school, you went, everybody walked. And even when you got to be a teenager or you went to dances, you'd walk. Even though sometimes you'd be, you know, in the twenties and you have a cocktail or two, maybe two, you'd walk back home, so there was no problem.

But today, that's what it is, the liquor. They're driving, they get into accidents. But in those days, everybody walked. Very, very few, very few people in my days had cars, very few. I think I was in my thirties before we had a car. I think when we moved here I guess I started driving. Before that I wouldn't drive, I wasn't, no, there was no cars. But working in the mill, it wasn't that much money, but eventually you could afford a car.

AL: And did you have, in that Little Canada area, did they have shops for groceries and things that you could walk to?

LB: Quite a few, yeah. There was, next door to us they had a shop, which was mostly a general store. And, yeah, they had, I mean on River Street, which is the first street next to the river, they had a store on one street, and then they had another one on Oxford Street, and then they had one on Lincoln Street.

But they were little stores and, you know what closed them down? The supermarket. The moment the supermarket opened up, you know, those large stores, they closed these places down. But it was nice because it was close by, but a little more expensive that you would when you went to the supermarket. Naturally, when they start coming in with lower prices that people went to the market, and these places were forced to close down.

Right next door to us. But, it was nice but at the time we were so poor we couldn't afford to go. You know, you didn't have no ten cents or a quarter to go buy candy or anything, we didn't have that money in those days. But today it's not a quarter, it's a dollar, huh? Today kids, they want a dollar, they don't want ten cents, they want a dollar or five dollars. The name of the game, that's it.

AL: Did your dad ever talk about his time working in the mill before he -?

LB: Not much, no, no, never said too much. Because I guess, I think he must have stopped before I was born, so I wouldn't -

AL: I see, so very early.

LB: Very early, yes, very early, because I don't recall him mentioning it. He was a loom fixer, as far as I knew, but as far as talking to the mill. But I had a brother that was a loom fixer, and the other one used to work in the card room at Bates, they both worked at Bates. But my sisters worked in the shoe shop.

AL: Did they like their jobs, your brothers, did they talk about it?

LB: Well, you know, to tell you the truth, (*unintelligible word*) daughter will ask me sometimes, did you like, did you enjoy working? I says, if you wanted the mighty dollar you had to work, whether you liked your job or you didn't like it, you had to work in order to get money. And the problem was, you wanted money to get the, whatever you wanted out of life. You wanted a house, you wanted a car, you had to work whether you enjoy your job or not, or enjoyed your work, you had to work for the dollar.

Well, at the time it was, honest to God, twenty cents and twenty-five cents an hour. But you needed the money in order to get anything out of life. So, but today they choose what they want to do, and they don't like this, they drop this, or they, which is good, good. Might as well, if you're going to work all your life, might as well enjoy what you're doing. But it's not everybody that did it. Many people I know, many would say, if I was rich I would never work in here. To each his own, to each his own.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about working in the mills, or growing up in Lewiston?

LB: You know, the best thing I think, that they did improve in their workmen's comp, you know? There were many accidents before, there were many accidents and there were many things that were in the mill that the union would force them into, you know, taking care of the people, make sure there was enough air coming in, or make sure that the floors were fixed and the bathrooms were clean. And, you know, make it a little more comfortable for the people working in there, whatever. I think there was an awful lot of improvement, from the time I went in until I went out, they had an awful lot of improvement.

And OSHA was around, anyway, so anybody didn't like it, they were all afraid they'd be reported, so. I think the company did their best to really, really picked it up. And one man that's been there for years and years and years, you must have heard is, what's his name, Fred Lebel. You've heard of Fred Lebel? Good buddy of mine, I worked with him for years, and very nice Joe, very nice Joe, I really got along well with him, very nice.

But at the time, I think, when I went into Bates in 1952 there was around about twenty five hundred people working there, and when I left there was about five.

AL: Five hundred?

LB: Five people.

AL: Oh, five people. Yeah, you were at the very, very end.

LB: Yup, I replaced until the end.

AL: Were there big shutdowns, or just gradual closings and cutting back?

LB: No, they had quite a few shutdowns, I guess. I remember way back, I was laid off a couple of times. Once I was out for about, oh, maybe seven months, eight months I guess. They had shut down, they did, that was in 1960 when my daughter was born, in 1960, I was out for about eight months I guess.

And then I was out again another time, I think three years later, '63, maybe for a couple of months. And then I was, I had enough seniority. You know, they went by seniority. If there was a, on a job, people with seniority, either, you know, the longest stay that you were there, you had your seniority, say, on the job, so they'd start by the youngest and up the ladder. So by the time I, by 1963 I had accumulated enough seniority to stay, I wasn't laid off after that, no.

But I enjoyed these layoffs, collecting unemployment and not working, it was great. But it didn't pay too much, you didn't collect that much, though. In those years I think you collected maybe twenty, twenty-five dollars, so you didn't go far with twenty-five dollars in those days. But, yet, things were cheaper than they are today. Today everything's so expensive.

And you know, the saddest part of it, you worked and you collect your Social Security, but you worked when the wages were so low that you can't get that much out of Social Security because your amount isn't that great. So, you know, today, wages are sky high so you get a better unemployment, although I think they're up to two hundred and two twenty five a week. Which is good. We worked all that

week for that, forty hours and then some.

And even the, you know, even during the war in 1943 I guess, '42, '44, I worked there when I was in high school, worked there in the summer time.

AL: How old were you?

LB: Seventeen, sixteen, seventeen. But that was during the war, they wanted people, you know, the war was from 1941 until '45, so at the time Bates mill was making, what was it, making sheets for the hospitals, you know, those crinkle sheets, white sheets for the hospital. And I guess they were working seven days a week at the time, because of the war, you know, they needed the material in.

AL: And they were short of people?

LB: Short of people, definitely, so many people gone into the service, yes, yeah. Those were the days. I remember the war, so then I hated this one going on. I'm against this Iraqi war. I was against this from the, a hundred percent from the beginning, so. You got to take what is, but you know, after seeing all these people coming home, these veterans coming home and being sick and being in Togus and, you know, they're crippled, they're handicapped. There are so many, I couldn't see the war, the war is not the answer, diplomacy is. Got a big mouth, you can use it. Right?

AL: Thank you very much.

LB: You're welcome. That's all?

(*Taping stopped, then resumed*).

LB: . . . Englishman that would run the city, but then all of a sudden I think, first I knew there were Frenchmen getting to be mayor and aldermans and -

AL: Was this in fifties, or?
LB: Yeah, in the fifties, I think so, yeah. In the fifties you started having a little more of these French people getting involved. Like today, you have Michaud that's in Congress, which is quite a thrill, to see him up there, really.

AL: Do you recall Ernest Malenfant?

LB: Yeah, oh yes, he was mayor of the city of Lewiston. You know, people used to laugh at him because his English was very poor and he had a hard time expressing himself. But he was outspoken, which was great. Whenever he'd see anything done in city hall that he didn't like, he'd come out with it. Whether he spoke good English or not, he let them have it.

And people resented the fact that he wasn't representing the city as a speaker, because he didn't have the power of speech. But by the same token, he was outspoken whenever he saw there was a wrong he would speak up. And people enjoyed it, they voted for him. So I guess, I really, I enjoyed him. I wasn't too old at the time, but I enjoyed him because even, whatever, whatever he said was great.

AL: Now, there was newspaper, a French newspaper, Le Messager?

LB: Le Messager, yes. You know, as a young girl I used to love it because my parents and, my mother didn't speak a word of English. My father had studied English to become naturalized here in 1920, and so they always had that newspaper coming in every day, which was great because you picked up your French and you stayed with it. You know, because you'd read it every day and whatever it was, you kept

it going.

But then all of a sudden they folded up because lack of subscription. I guess they went down so bad that they had to stop it, but it was great. Another thing they had, too, was French was the, on Sunday they always had these programs, on Saturday night they had this French program on the radio.

AL: On the radio?

LB: On the radio, yeah, on, I can't remember whether it was WCOU or whatever it was, but they had a two-hour program all in French, and on Sunday morning was the same way, they had these French programs. And even in the morning, I remember going to high school and my mother would put the radio on, and it was all French for about an hour, French songs, which is great.

AL: Do you remember the gentleman, Louis Philippe Gagne?

LB: Yes, definitely.

AL: Was he on the radio, or the newspaper?

LB: He was a reporter for the Le Messager; he worked for them. He used to have an article in the paper, they called it The Eye, and he was a reporter and he always had an article in the paper every day. Which, he spoke up, he was very outspoken, too, but he was very good. He was outspoken, and he was good for the city. He was mayor for a while, and very good. Those were the days, my dear.

And I've always been interested in politics or whoever's running, or what their platform is or whether I, you know. And it's ironic, because today, here I am, I raise up my kids, and I got a daughter that's very minded with more or less helping out people and being, you know, involved in people and programs, and I have a son that's more business like, we're there to make money. And (*unintelligible word*), how can they be raised together and have such a different view of point about life? What do you do when they don't make it, eh? You do what you can but, name of the game, that's it.

AL: Anything else that you think we should add?

LB: Put in? No, all I have is I had four kids. I had four kids, I had three daughters and one boy.

AL: Thank you very much.

End of Interview
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