SHOE WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE

Irene Harvey **SWOH#035**
(*Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu*) November 20, 2009

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Shoe Workers Oral History Project at Museum L-A. The date is November 25th, 2009, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. And today I'm interviewing Irene Harvey in Lewiston, Maine. Irene, could you start just by giving me your full name, including your maiden name?

IH: My name is Irene Cecille Noel Harvey.

AL: And where and when were you born?

IH: I was born in Lewiston, Maine in1944, October 23rd.

AL: And did you grow up in this area?

IH: I grew up on what they call Little Canada, which is River Street, right across the street from St. Mary's School, and which used to be the old Continental Mill.

AL: Right. And what were your parents' names?

IH: My parent's names were Anthony and Yvette Noel. My father was a shoe worker and my mom was a mill worker for awhile, but a stay-at-home mom after that, because she had five of us.

AL: Five children. Where did you fall within the children, younger or older?

IH: I'm in the middle.

AL: In the middle.

IH: Yes, and they all had black hair and brown eyes, and as you can tell, I have green eyes, and I was lighter in color. So I was the more quiet one.

AL: So growing up in Little Canada, can you talk to me about what that was like? That must have been a very busy neighborhood, lots of kids.

IH: Oh, it was wonderful growing up over there. The people of course were

predominantly French, came from Canada or wherever to work in the mills and the factories. It was just a wonderful neighborhood. Nobody locked their doors in those days, and kids played together. And it was a very, very clean neighborhood. People used to wash their sidewalks, their porches, I know, I had to use a brush to the porch every year. And most people were very, very friendly, and they were very, very hard workers. Most of them had big families. And even those who didn't had to work hard, because you didn't make much money in those days. My father's paycheck would be about thirty-five dollars a week, working in the shoe factory, when I was a little girl. That I do remember.

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

IH: My dad was born in the United States, but my mom was born in Canada. She came to the United States I think when she was about fifteen. So she spoke very, very little English. So, it was predominant, all French, because in school we only had English about an hour to an hour and a half a day, so everything was in French.

AL: And did your mother come with her parents, or on her own?

IH: No, she came with her parents, and first they went to Detroit, and then they came to Maine to work in the mills. And she came from a family of seventeen.

AL: Oh, my.

IH: And my grandmother was about four-foot-eight, weighed about ninety pounds, and you could eat off the floors, and she worked in the mills also.

AL: Seventeen children.

IH: Seventeen children.

AL: Did you have a chance to know her?

IH: Oh yes, I did. And whenever I gave her a Christmas card, or any kind of card, it had to be written in French. And I never lost my French. I still speak it fluent, and write it fluent, which is an asset.

AL: It is, and it's something that has been lost by a lot of the generations over the years. How are you able to retain it?

IH: Well my husband, of course we've been married almost fifty years, he doesn't speak French. He's Scotch, Irish and Indian, and I know there's French in there somewhere. But the oldest one, the one that's gone, he spoke it, and he took it all

through high school. And when he joined the service, he was the only one who spoke French on the aircraft carrier, so he never had to buy lunch or a beer. Everything was free because he was the only one who could interpret when they went to France.

AL: Oh, that's wonderful.

IH: But the rest, I had to teach them English so they could communicate with their dad, but I never lost my French. And most shoe workers were all French, but there were some that weren't, but they got along with the French just as good as anybody else.

AL: Which mills did your dad work in, I mean shoe shops?

IH: My dad worked at Lown Shoe till they closed, I think. Or close to it. He was a nailer, which puts the high heel onto the shoe. As a matter of fact, he made my wedding shoe, which I had to learn how to walk on. It was size three and a half.

AL: Wow.

IH: Things change.

AL: And so, what made you want to go into the shoe industry? Was it, your dad had worked there, or your friends all went, or?

IH: Most people worked in the shoe factories because – I did go to high school for two weeks, but I couldn't communicate that good. I was okay on paper but not orally, so I quit school without telling my parents. So when they found out, I was babysitting a family of five children for twelve dollars a week, doing everything else that went with being a babysitter, washing the floors and the laundry and all that stuff, so when they found out, they told me I had to go to work, if I'm not going to go to school. So I went to work to help the family, which helped, but I had to get a worker's permit because I wasn't of age yet.

AL: You were what, fifteen?

IH: Fifteen. So that was in 19-, let's see, close to 1960. In between '59 ad '60. And my very first job was at Lown Shoe, with a clothespin and a little piece of felt, they would stain the edges of the shoe, and the lady's name that was teaching me, I remember very well because her name was Irene also. So when that ran out, I went to Shapiro Brothers and worked there for quite a few years. I can't remember the amount of years.

AL: And you did stitching mostly.

IH: No, I did mostly, what they call the making room. Before the sole goes on, and you take the wrinkles out of the shoes, you know, because you weren't allowed to work on a machine till you were a certain age. Of course I lied about that too, so I was on a machine early. Predominantly, I did most anything that they wanted me to do, like shanking, which was putting the metal piece inside, underneath, you stapled it in. And bottom cementing was my predominant one, which you cement the bottom of the shoe before the sole goes on. And then I did plugging, which you get two cents for thirty six pairs, per rack. And it was with hot cement, with a little piece of, I don't know what you call it, but you have to put it on this little roller and stick it on to the bottom of the shank. And thirty-six pairs, you only got two cents a rack. So if you want to make money, you got to go, so you had a lot of burnt fingers.

AL: Oh, wow.

IH: And I did all kinds of other jobs. Finishing work, and making bows, and whatever needed to be done, you went. And the minimum wage then was a dollar five an hour. That I do remember.

AL: And that was at Shapiro Brothers.

IH: That was at Shapiro's. And I also worked at Clark Shoe. Over there I did bench work. Did some bottom cementing. Was there for a few years. And whenever a factory needed help and the other one was slow, they used to borrow you. So actually not too many people were on unemployment, because if one didn't need you, the other one did. If it's for a two week period, nothing changed, except they paid you. But if it was going to be longer than that, then you got done there, and you worked in another factory, wherever, because there were so many of them.

AL: So leaving one shoe shop and going to another wasn't like burning your bridges permanently.

IH: No, no.

AL: It was understood that there was supply and demand.

IH: If there was, that you were needed back, when it started over a certain period of time, you went back. Otherwise than that, you stayed where you were, got slow there, then you stopped working there and you went to another one. And then in 1964 I went to Falcon Shoe, and the plant was very young then. And I worked as a bottom cementer there also, which we made little kids' shoes, and it wasn't on a conveyor. I stayed there until I had my second child, then I had to leave, then my husband went in. And that was his first shoe factory job, which he was there for thirty-five years as a supervisor.

AL: Really?

IH: But I couldn't get back in for many years, because their rule was, husband and wife could not work in the same plant, because of benefits, and when it came to death, you had two missing instead of one. So when the owner married the computer programmer, or whatever she did at the time, the rule changed. So I went back.

AL: Imagine that.

IH: And I stayed there for quite a few years. As a matter of fact, I stayed there until they were going to close. And I got recycled, because my back was gone, because I also worked another job besides that. Most of us worked two jobs in those days.

AL: What did you do besides the *(unintelligible)*?

IH: I waitressed. I worked at Orlando's Restaurant for eighteen years, plus worked in the shoe factory. Did that at nights and on weekends. My husband also worked two jobs. We only had three children, but you didn't make much money, and it cost money. And I left there in 2004, on February 6th at a quarter of ten. And by then, I had been receptionist for about twelve, fifteen years, plus printed all the work on the tags, put in all the information, how many pairs, and what sizes. Also put in production for the cutting room. They recycled me. They didn't send me to school, really, I just was learning through the way she was teaching me, like *(unintelligible)* was going to be the main restaurant, and this was going to be the appetizer, and everything. And within weeks, I mean I was picking it up like a little sponge. And I stayed there until I got laid off in 2004.

AL: That's a long time.

IH: Yes.

AL: What was the management like at Falcon and Shapiro's, and the different places you worked?

IH: Well of course at Falcon Shoe, it was more high tech than it was at Shapiro's. We did a lot of stuff manually. I mean it wasn't on conveyor yet, but push racks and holes in the floor, and they'd put that monkey stuff, sawdust and cement and tried to block the floors. The atmosphere was better at Falcon Shoe because you didn't have as many fumes as you did at Shapiro's, because they had little blowers that would suck up the smell of the cements and stuff like that, while you were cementing the shoes. But it was very, very strong. It gave you a headache and nausea and stuff like that. But as the years went, more ventilation was there and you hardly smelt it, so you could

really whip them out. But at Falcon Shoe it was more, how would I say it, incentive work, because it was on conveyor. So if you did X amount of pairs per day, when over that, you got paid extra money. So you really wanted to push those little kid shoes out. But then they went into boys', then they went into boots, which was also known as Dunham Boot makers. Falcon Shoe also made boots for Browning, L.L. Bean, oh god, I can't think of all the names. Being in customer service, I should have. I did that too.

AL: So you wore a lot of different hats over the years.

IH: Yes, yes. Multitasking is what they call it.

AL: Yes.

IH: Somebody misses, you better know what they did, because you're going to be doing it. Which was good at Falcon Shoe, because if somebody got sick, you could step into their shoes, and somebody else could step into yours and vice versa. But to me, Falcon Shoe, one of the better ones that I worked at. I'm not saying Shapiro wasn't, because the Shapiro Brothers were very, very good to their people. But times were different. But Falcon Shoe had an owner, like he was your brother. He cared about his people. He really, really cared about his people.

AL: And who was that?

IH: His name was Ted Johansson.

AL: Yes, I've heard of him.

IH: He was a great, great man.

AL: I'd like to ask you, because just knowing you for a few minutes, you seem very outgoing. You must have had, or made a lot of friends over the years in the shoe shops. Did you have friends that worked with you that you socialized with?

IH: Oh yes, my sisters, my uncles, my aunts. My aunt was my floor lady at Shapiro Brothers. My uncle was my boss. And of course there was no favoritism, believe me. And I was the one to get mostly in trouble, and I had tons of friends, because I'm a chatterbox. And my sister that worked with me also, she's total opposite, very quiet. So whenever I got the whole gang going, I'd always stick her in there so she could get in trouble with me too. And the Christmas parties were awesome. I mean the closeness of the people were like, they would do anything to help you.

AL: The people who worked at the shops, very close.

IH: Yeah, and at Falcon Shoe also. It was like the neighborhood that I grew up in, it was like a neighborhood in the factories.

AL: Oh, that's really nice.

IH: And if you didn't know somebody, I was the kind of person to say hi, my name is Irene Noel, what's yours.

AL: What were the Christmas parties like? Can you describe that? Was it sponsored by the shoe shop?

IH: Oh no, we all brought in something to eat. You know pot-luck stuff thing, and sometimes they gave us an hour instead of a half an hour. And sometimes, some people would sneak in some libations. That's when I got older. But they would be very strict on that. But it was a wonderful time, and we'd chip in and buy a gift for the boss. Most of the time we'd hope, after the lunch that we had brought, and fed him so well, that he would let us go. Most of the time they did.

AL: Oh, that's nice. You had a lot of friends in the shoe shops, did you socialize outside of the shoe shops?

IH: Oh yes, definitely.

AL: Can you talk about what sorts of things, I mean was it gatherings with your kids, or going out on the weekend, or playing cards?

IH: We had this one group, we used to play cards at different people's houses on Friday night. And whoever's house it was supplied the lunch, because we'd play poker, or skat, mostly poker. And we did that for, I'd say, twenty, twenty five years. But people started going their own way, moving out of state, and first thing you know, your group of having two tables was down to one table.
AL: When the shoe shops closed.

IH: And then they started dwindling down and people had to go to school to learn to how to do something else. Like when I lost mine, the last time, I didn't know anything about being on unemployment, never did it. So in order to get any bennies, I had to go to school, so I did the clerical program. So I went to school for just a little over two years. And working all of my life, I was shocked that I could only receive a hundred and forty-three dollars a week. But like I said, it didn't make much money, so you didn't have much on the books. Because when I left Falcon Shoe, it had taken me I think fifteen years to make ten dollars and ten cents an hour, working in the office. Of course I started at five, so. And I didn't know anything, but I learned fast, and I loved it. I loved mingling with the vendors, and being French speaking when the orders came in from

Canada. The lady was having such a, you know, really trying hard, so then I started speaking French, and the rest of the office was looking at me, because we wrote it down then, then put it in the computer. Taking the order in French, they're all looking at me, what is she talking about. So then, when Canada would call back, they would ask for me. So that was a plus on my side.

AL: Oh yeah. Is there anything that I haven't asked you, that you think is important to add? People that you knew, maybe they passed away, that you remember, that stick out in your mind in the shoe shops?

IH: Whoever passed away, when you worked in the shoe factory, I mean, going to the wake, at the funeral home, was lines outside. Everybody showed up, because everybody was so close. Today, it's different. I like the closeness of then better than I like it now, because now it's dog eat dog, and it's piece work. And being a stitcher, I can't imagine ever doing that, because that's got to be the toughest thing there is when you're really pounding away to try to make a living. I mostly worked, I didn't want to know, if they told me I was on piece work, I automatically couldn't, I had no speed. But if they told me I was just on incentive like everybody else, I could flip out the work. It made me nervous, which most people are like that, but some people, they go. My sister was one of them. Of course she didn't like to talk as much as I did, but she concentrated on what she was doing. I did too, but I didn't do as much as she did. She had bigger paychecks than I did too.

AL: Now, you talk about being sociable, and people were very sociable, did people have a chance to play pranks, practice jokes, sense of humor, that type of thing?

IH: Oh, definitely.

AL: Do you have any recollections of - ?
IH: Oh yes, I do.

AL: Can you talk about some of those things?

IH: Well, being a bottom cementer, when you bottom cemented, it's called a filler, different sizes, filler, that you wipe up your cement with, and no drips, and you stuck it in the middle. Well, they told me, why don't you get in the box, and they were big, big boxes. I was short, I still am, but, so I got in the box. So the buzzer goes off to go to work, and the boss is saying, where's Irene. And nobody's saying anything, and I can't get out of the box because they closed it. And they closed it pretty bad because I had to start hollering because I was running out of air here. So guess who got punished for that one. Not them. I had to work an extra half hour.

AL: Oh my.

IH: Everybody was gone. But I did it more than one time after that too. And they'd pull pranks like, put a dead mouse on your bench. That was at Shapiro Brothers. And then you figure, I'm only fifteen and sixteen. Of course I'd scream and the boss would come, and nobody put it there, it went up there all by itself, and it killed itself on my bench. The kind of pranks they'd pull too. Or take your sandwich and glue it with cement on your bench, because you know, it was wrapped in, not Saran Wrap then, but - .

AL: Wax paper.

IH: Wax paper, and it would stick good. So we always used to go in a group to have lunch together, you know, a little corner to get away from your machine and stuff like that. Couldn't get your sandwich off. So I got smart, I just open it up and take my sandwich after that, then pick it up, and then bring it with me if it wasn't stuck to my bench. Kind of things like that.

AL: Right, oh, that's funny. Well, thank you so much.

IH: Well, you're very welcome. I wish I could Remember more.

End of Interview
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