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TRANSCRIPTION OF PAULINE LABBE INTERVIEW

May 13, 2005

Conducted by Alexis Grossman

00:00:00

This is an interview project with Pauline Labbe, for the Mill Workers Oral History Project, on May, 13 2005 in Lewiston Maine. I am Alexis Grossman interviewing. And it is ok that I record this?

Definitely

00:00:05

Could you state your name please?

Pauline Labbe

00:00:07

When is your date of birth?

April 1, 1942

00:00:08

Where were you born?

Right here in Lewiston.

00:00:11

What were your parents names?

Theresa and Leo Provencher. Very French.

00:00:17

And they were both French?

yup

00:00:18

Where was your father and mother born?

My mother was born in Canada in Sherbrook. And my Dad was born right here in Lewiston.

00:00:20

Did they work in the mills?

Um, my mom did, she worked there for 37 years. My dad worked in a shoe shop.

00:00:22

What kind of work did they do in the mills?

My mom was a doffer. She worked in the spinning room. They take off the bobbins and put in new bobbins when they are full. That was her first and only job. She was probably like 17 or 18 when she started. She worked there until they closed and then she went to work at a couple of other places, for a short time. She was at the Hill Mill.

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Is that the one you worked at?

Yes

00:00:30

Was your dad's job at the shoe shop his only job?

Yea he always did that, he was a sole layer in the shoe shop, for his whole life time.

00:00:31

Do you have any siblings?

No I am an only child.

00:00:34

How would you describe your family life while you were growing up?

Very good, my parents were very strict, my upbringing was very French. And my grandmother lived with us so. It was something they did back then a lot. My grandfather died and my grandmother moved in with us.

00:00:39

How would you describe your cultural heritage or ethnic background?

It was very family oriented, very French and very loud, we are very boisterous when we get together, and there is a lot of us to get together because most of my cousins, like 7, 10, 12, people in the family, so I was an only child and spent a lot of my time at my aunt's house, because I loved all the kids. That was my mom's sister. They were very close.

00:00:47

Where was your grandmother from?

She lived in Sherbrook. My grandfather worked on the railroad and he was gone like 6 days a week, and she was stuck at home with all the kids, she had 15 children. So was a big family, A very happy life being home with the kids like that.

00:00:52

What would be your ethnic identity?

French- Canadian

00:05:03

How do you celebrate your heritage today?

Oh yea, especially around Christmas time, we have tradition, at midnight we go to church, we stay up almost all night, we have toqailles (sp?), and all the French stuff and that is a big thing, it has always been a big part of our celebrating time.

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So, you speak French?

Oh year, I went to French school for 12 years.

00:05:08

Where did you go to college?

I did not go to college, I went to high school, St.Dom's. Yup, St. Peters and St. Doms.

00:06:01

How long have you been married?

43 years

00:06:02

How did you meet your spouse?

We met at the Hill. I was in the office and he was, as a matter of fact he worked with my mother in the spinning room. And he used to watch me come out at noon time, and tell my mother, I want to go out with that girl. But my mother did not want him to because he was just a mill worker. And she did want me to marry a mill worker. So my girl friend worked at the mill and she fixed us up. And we went on a blind date, half blind date, he knew me, I did not know him. And that was it, it clicked right then and there.

00:06:08

How many years did you know each other when you got married?

We knew each other 2 years.

00:06:09

When did you get married?

1962

00:07:02

Where did you get married?

We got married on Lewiston, at St. Peters, cathedral now. The reception was 300 hundred people. It was at Son's of Italy, its closed now.

00:08:00

Do you have any children?

Yes, we have three girls, we had a son but he died of SIDs when he was 5 months old.

00:08:01

What are their ages and names?

Ok, Cheryl is going to be 40 this summer, Kelly is going to be 38 and Kim is going to be 34.

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00:08:03

When did you start having children?

About a year after we were married. A little over a year when my son was born.

00:08:05

Did you stop working after you had children?

Well after, when he passed away I told my husband, I am never going to work again and have my children be in danger. So thank god he changed jobs after that. And we were able to do that. I stayed home and I was very happy to be home and raise my kids and raise them myself and see them grow up. I was very happy being home with the kids. I did not drive until I was 35 years old. When I think back on it, and how I did it, with three kids in the house and not driving. And being out here, this used to be called the country because there used to not be so many houses built up around here.

00:09:04

Did you ever go back to work?

Oh I did, after the kids grew up. I worked as a secretary at the Carpenter Union Hall. I worked in another office for a while and my last job I was doing greeting cards in the grocery store which I loved. And then I had a knee replacement and that took care of that. And now I am retired. Yea and we travel a lot so. We have been all over Europe, we've been to Africa, we are going to China now I guess, we've been to Spain, gosh I can't think of all of them. I think there are seventeen countries we have been to so far. We want to do it while we can we are both healthy, because who knows how long we are going to have our health.

00:10:04

Where did your children go to school?

They went to Holy Cross, right here, and my granddaughter goes there and my grandson will be going there. And then they went to St. Dom, all three of them. Cheryl went to college in Boston. I can't remember the name of it, it was a fashion designing school. And my middle daughter went to become an x-ray technician and my youngest one, she went to Boston also and came back here and came to University of Maine and got her masters and now she wants to get her doctorate. She's doing really well. She was the one we were most worried in high school, we were what is she doing, she is not going to graduate! She is working with little kids, kids with autism now. She loves it.

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00:12:06

Did they work in the mills at all too?

No, they did not work in the mills but during the summer time, they would work at SAPPI, where my husband works now, it's a paper mill. They worked there during the summer and made really good money to help them out with college and everything. Its in Skowhegan.

00:13:02

So, when did you begin working in the mills?

Right out of high school, yup my uncle, he worked there and got me in there. Back then if you had pull, that could get you in there. He was head of the Electrical Department.

00:13:05

Did you have any other family that worked at the mills?

Some of my aunts and uncles worked in the mills, and my mom.

00:13:08

What kind of work did you do at the mill?

I worked in the office at the Hill Mill.

00:14:02

What kind of qualifications did you have to have to work in the office?

You had to be a high school graduate, to work in the office, but in the mill it was different, I mean my mother only went through the second grade, and also it was a lot of people that dropped out of school that worked in the mill.

00:14:07

What of products did the mill make?

They wove the cotton and I don't know what they did with the cotton after that to be very honest with you, when it would leave out place, you know it had make something, you know it was so long ago. I think they might have made sheets and stuff like that. The blankets were made at the Bates Mill. There was the Bates, the Hill and the Androscoggin, three different mills close to each other. And they all did different things.

00:15:08

What was your experience like working there?

Well, it was wonderful. The people were really nice, yea I was there for like 6 years. It was good. Back then you were making good money when you worked there, you were making 2 (?) dollars a day. That was good, some of my other girl friends, there had other office jobs in different places and they were not making as much, so back then that was really good. Its weird to think about it now.

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What kind of hours did you work? Did you think they were fair?

8-5, yeah they were definitely fair.

00:16:07

Did you get paid for overtime?

Yes, and you worked over time twice a year, because you had to go into the mill and inventory all the bails. The bails of cotton and that was a messy job. It stunk so bad, that cotton gets stuck in your nose. It really is strong smelling. It was hard working in the mill. Most of it was piece work and they worked really hard.

00:17:01

Was it men and women that worked there?

Yes, and a lot of women worked during the war, that's when they hired a lot of women.

00:17:04

Can you explain what you did when you worked overtime?

We took inventory of the bails of cotton. They were in big burlap bags. They were about this high and you would have to go to the bail and oh my god cotton all over the place and you would have to slide down this tube to get to the bails and it was dark and musty and you would have to look out for rats and lots of gross stuff, so you were not too keen of working over time, let me tell you. We got paid though.

00:17:09

Where there mostly women in your office?

Yes, the managers were men, there were two men and all the rest were women. In my department I had the weave room to take care of. They count the picks, this is how they got paid, they count the picks that they fill, how fast they could work and that's what I would count and that's how I paid them. If you worked on third shift you could make 75 cents more.

00:18:08

What is third shift?

There were three shifts, there was the day shift, the evening shift, the mill ran 24 hours a day, and there was the third shift that ran from 11-7, and for working the third shift you could make 75 cents more. A lot of people worked this shift. My husband worked it for a while.

00:19:03

Was it mostly men that worked that shift?

No, it was women and men, the women worked just as hard as the men in there.

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Did one particular ethnic group hold one job more than another? Was there a big division between the ethnic groups?

Well I think the majority of the people were French. There were some Irish people. But if I go by what I remember, most people were French, very, very French.

00:20:00

When you say French do you mean French-Canadian?

Yes... Everyone spoke French in the mill, everyone spoke French.

00:20:05

Where there ever any conflicts between ethnic groups?

No

00:20:07

How would someone go about getting a particular job in the mill?

You would have to apply to the personal office and they would start you maybe as a sweeper or a minimal job, like piece work so after a while after someone quit or got sick you could apply for that job and do piece work. Piece work is where you get paid like I told you about the picks, how many picks you filled was how you got paid. Like my mother being a doffer, she was paid by how many frames she filled. How many of those she could do and how fast she could do them, the faster you work the more you get paid. It was helpful to have connections at the mills to get work.

00:22:04

Do you think the mills liked to hire family?

I do, if one of them was a good worker, it would reflect on them, when they come in.

00:22:09

Did mill workers ever become supervisors?

Yes, They usually pick someone, because you get to know the place pretty well, and they would pick someone who has been there for a while and have a bond to become a supervisor.

00:23:04

What were relationships like between workers? Between workers and supervisors?

It was good there was a lot of jealousy. One person would make more money than the other. That was a big thing. I remember my mother coming home and talking about that. We can't tell how much we make because we don't want other people to be jealous. And actually there was sexual harassment that was there, that was not even recognized. Between supervisors and workers. But I

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think that is everywhere, so. The bosses were sort of removed. They would come in once and a while and the workers would be like oh my god. This is in the actual mill. I remember my mother talking about it. But sexual harassment never happened in my office. It was very prim and proper. My boss wore a little bow tie. If you can picture that.

00:25:04

So, were there any other conflicts in the office that you can remember?

No, we all got along very well. We helped each other out, we were very helpful.

00:26:03

Do you remember from you or husband what the conditions were like in the mill?

They were tough. These people worked hard, these people earned their money, let me tell you. I remember my mother coming home being exhausted. It was very physical work. She was a tough lady. She is still alive now and she has had three hip replacements. And she is still going hard. She worked hard, that's what made her so tough.

00:26:08

Is she still feeling the effect of working in the mills?

I think she enjoyed it. I really do. It was a talent to her, always and I think, when she talked way back about her jobs, the mill is what she talks about the most. She never had any injuries from the mill.

00:27:08

What were the benefits like at the mill?

Well it was so different back then, we had health insurance. It was not expensive to go the hospital. I remember when I had my first baby, I think it was something like 79 dollars. Health insurance is not what it is like now.

00:29:05

Ok, well I have asked what it was like to work at the mill, but I am also interested in what the community was like back then, can you tell me a little bit about it?

Oh, it was awesome. We had Lisbon Street that had all the stores. The whole street had stores that were open and I mean people were always there, it was equivalent of having the mall. It was so much better than having the malls though. We used to go down there Mondays nights. That was the night that the boys would go cruising for girls. We would walk around. And Saturdays, we would go shopping all day. And I mean, I don't remember how many stores there were, but there were a lot of them. It was not what it is like now. There was everything from Sears, to Montgomery Wards, a lot of dress shops and different things, and people were so friendly and knew everybody. It was so different.

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00:30:05

Was it a very close-knit community?

Yes, definitely.

00:31:00

Did you know that you were going to work in the mills when you were growing up?

Not really, well I wanted to be an artist, I like to draw and paint. So when I graduated high school I wanted to go to art school in Portland, but my parents said it was much too far to go to school. And after high school I did not need very much more schooling. That's how they were thinking back then. So I did not really get to do what I wanted. My uncle got me the job and I should feel grateful that he got it for me, so that is how I got to work there.

00:31:08

What were popular things to do in Lewiston?

Back then, we all used to go dancing a lot. There were a lot of places to go. It's so different than now, it is so hard to find something to do. You have to go far to do anything now. Shopping and everything, there is only JCPenny's here now. It's sad to see it go down like that. Hopefully this rebuilding that they are doing will help.

00:32:09

So when did the mills start to go downhill?

It was in the 70s. Stores on Lisbon street started to close. They started with the mall. It is now the place to go shopping.

00:33:03

Where did people mostly live?

They lived downtown. It was beautiful. It was all French people. And it was very, very clean. You would see people sweeping the sidewalks. Pierce Street and all those streets were great streets to live on. I lived on Pierce Street. And it was a terrific street. It was the upper cross that lived there, Pierce and Bartlett and all those streets. It was all French people and very, very close. At night people would sit out on the porch and talk to each other. And now I would not want to walk down there.

00:33:09

Is that Little Canada?

Ok, Little Canada, that's when people would come from Canada, this is where they would get settled in, there was a Marcott Furniture down on Lincoln Street and they used to meet them and help them get an apartment. And they would pay like two dollars a week and these people would work in the mills for the people that got them their apartments. That was all very, very French. It was a little community. That different from Pierce Street. Now Pierce Street is all run down and it is awful. But back then it was very nice.

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What other social activities were there?

There was dancing, and a lot more restaurants. Downtown there were a lot of restaurants. A lot on Main Street. There was a little tea room where I used to have our special. The only thing that is still there is Luigi's . That and Sams' on Main Street, that's what you had for pizza. Now everything else is closed.

00:36:05

Did you socialize with the mill workers outside of the mill?

Yea we did, we would go out with some friends, we would go dancing with them and all go out to dinner. Stuff like that.

00:36:08

Were there a lot of community activities with the mill workers and mills?

Well the Arena was big popular and a big thing. We would go for hockey games, that was another big thing. There were parades, 4th of July, Memorial Day, there were lots of parades. In fact I was in one of them. I got to carry the banner. In the winter time they had the snow shoers that would come out. They would have a big parade. They came from all over Canada. With there outfits and clubs, there were three or four clubs in Lewiston. And they would have a huge parade. They would all come out on Sunday and go to mass at St. Peters church and fill up the whole church. That was a big thing, it was for the whole weekend, and they would have races and all kinds of festivities. The don't do that anymore.

00:40:02

Did the mills sponsor any social activates?

I think they did.

00:41:00

Where there any political organizations that you were involved in or what were the unions like?

The unions were a big deal, I remember the strike, the year I could not tell you. But it was a big deal, the mills were a livelihood for everyone. And near the mills, there were brick buildings that a lot of the mill workers lived in. One burned down and they tore the others ones down. But that was a big thing too, people lived right across the street from the mill and they would work there. Most people lived downtown. This house was all alone. It was considered the country.

00:44:08

Where you part of a church growing up?

Yes. I went to St. Peters and then Holy Cross.

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Was religion discussed in the mills?

No, Never.

00:47:00

Where there any ever ethnic conflicts in the community back then?

I remember hearing about it, but never actually seeing it. The Irish people lived in Auburn right across the river and the French people lived in Little Canada in Lewiston. There was conflict, I heard stories about it between the Irish and French.

00:49:00

Where you ever made to feel uncomfortable about ethnic identity?

No, not around here. There were too many French families, that would not happen.

00:51:05

How would you compare the ethnic conflicts that were present while the mills were running to the ethnic conflicts in Lewiston today?

I find it very similar because people were not excepted back then and they are doing the same thing with the Somali's. They history repeats itself and I think that it does.

00:52:06

How do you feel about the way Lewiston has responded to the growing Somali population in Lewiston?

Well I feel that as long as they come here to work its fine, but if they come here for just the welfare, that is not good. That's a tough one. My daughter lives in Georgia, and what I hear from her it ok, but I don't want to judge. I don't know.

00:53:05

Do you ever interact with the Somali population?

No.

00:54:09

What do you think about Museum L/A mission to preserve history of the mills?

I think that it is wonderful. I think it is terrific. I keep meaning to go down there.

00:55:05

If you could portray one thing about the mill life, what would it be and why?

It would be how hard the people worked in there for their livelihood and the struggle. The Struggles were so hard. Just walking through the mills, I was like, my god how can these people do this. There was a lot of tension in there, it

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was very difficult. The supervisors were right there, breathing down their necks. Being in the office I did not always see what was going on but hearing stories I would hear a lot.