MILL WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE

Ernest Lamontagne **MWOH# 037**
(*Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu*) March 29, 2006

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History Project. The date is March 29th, 2006, and today I at the home of Ernest Lamontagne in Auburn, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Could you start just by saying your full name?

Ernest Lamontagne: Ernest Lamontagne.

AL: And where and when were you born?

EL: In Canada, about thirty miles from Quebec.

AL: And what is your date of birth?

EL: December 2nd, 1916. And that's the day that I got off the train here in Lincoln Street, two years old.

AL: So your, you were born in Canada and your family, when you were two, decided to move to Maine?

EL: Yeah.

AL: Do you know why?

EL: Yes, he lost his job at the, what do you call that, where he was working for the war, for the, make shells. And my mother had an uncle here, and she wrote to find out if there was work, and he answered that, to come, there'll be work and a rent, he'll fix all that up. When we come in, we live on Ash Street, below the church there, St. Peter Church. And he didn't live too long, in 19-, I don't know when he died, I'm not sure about the year.

AL: We're talking about your dad?

EL: Yeah, he was sick, he work in the shoe shop, then my uncle was a wholesale fruit and vegetable, and beside that he got in real estate, so he got my father to work on real estate, which he work only a couple year, but made as good as in the shoe shop. And we had a car, for the real estate, and my mother said, you go and take people on Sunday and, on a farm, and they go there and just to pass their time, and I stay home. So he kind of choose the way that he would spend his Sunday.

And we went to Canada, that was in 1924 I think he bought the car, and we went to a 45th anniversary of my grandfather, and two or three time we went to Canada. And one time, there for that anniversary, he bought some firecracker to celebrate, and during the night he have the firecrackers going, and people from out in the country, we were in the village, but, they came down, find out what was going on.

AL: So you got to know your relatives in Canada even though you moved to Maine.

EL: Yes, I already, this year I spend a week in Canada. My son, he has a store, during the winter period there's a slack time, so his wife went with the two kid to Florida, and he in his turn, he took me to Quebec and Montreal for a week. We left on Sunday, we came back on Friday. And we saw a lot of related that we used to visit when, when it was more, and during the summer, that was the first time in the winter. It was in the, they say that it's not snowing in March, they pile the snow in Quebec up to the roof of like the second floor. They open to get in, and they throw the snow on the lawn, wherever the, it's awful what they have. And in the street, they clean one side for a sidewalk, but the other side they pile up the snow, like when the plow goes, to the telephone pole there. It's all piled up, and some places it goes up as high as the second floor.

But it was nice, clean. The only thing, it was a little slippery. Like in Montreal, we went to the north part of Montreal and that was, you had rain or, melt the snow or whatever, it was slippery. Well, they clean the driveway, on the asphalt and, and I don't remember seeing any sand like here. We had to watch where we were going.

AL: Now, how many children were there in your family, how many brothers and sisters did you have?

EL: I better count. Two brothers and, yeah, two brother and two sister. There's one at (*unintelligible word*) and one in California, and the brother, they passed away.

AL: So what was Lewiston like when you were growing up, in the '20s and the '30s? I mean in terms of what it's like today?

EL: I can't, the teen years when I was young, I used to go and pass the paper, French paper. And I had my own customer. Not like now, that everything, with the *Journal*, everything goes to the *Journal* and they're responsible. So I had to go from Lisbon Street where the paper was (*unintelligible word*), to almost the end of Park Street, maybe two or three paper I deliver that way, then I go way up on Blake Street and Pine, I deliver a few paper. And on Oak, I remember Oak and Blake, I had a customer that, I don't think I had thirty customer, and I had to travel all that. One cent a paper.

AL: Was it *Le Messager*?

EL: Yup, yup. I still have a bag to put the paper in, you know, when you put the paper and you go wherever you have a customer, and you take a paper from the bag, and it's marked *Le Messager*. Sometime I'll find a place to give it to.

AL: Now, you said your dad died fairly young?

EL: Yeah.

AL: Were you still a child?

EL: Nine years old. And I was the oldest.

AL: You were the oldest.

EL: Five kids, and I was the oldest.

AL: How did your mother manage?

EL: She had two of her sister that came to live with her. Then she had a roomer for another, so she put an ad and she had that woman until, well, I don't know when, how old she was, but she was fifty five

when she married. And my mother was working only at home, she never did go to work like for a salary at a factory or, she work at home all the time. And her sister would help in, like doing the dishes, preparing meal, they would help. Then at the table, when we kind of get excited, the kids, she say, my aunt would say, at the table they grown up talk.

AL: So when you were a kid, what would you do for fun after school?

EL: Well, I had like a business. Beside the paper, that I let go, I went and build a camp where the, what do you call that, the, bakery, oh, Italian bakery on Bartlett Street, I had a camp right there before they build the road that goes up to Pleasant Street, and I had chicken, and they got to be a hen, I had a partner with me, and his mother was a friend of my mother. They came out of the same place in Canada.

And we got, one day somebody stole a chicken, I was evaluating at twenty five dollar. So we start up with a rabbit, build cage and get the camp bigger. On Lisbon Street, where the, at the end of Canal there was a railroad track going across Lisbon Street to Lewiston Bleachery, and there was a building there with, it belonged to some carpenter that, it was their headquarter like. And it burned, so everybody would go and try to get the wood that could use for the house. We used the, there was, it was popular to have a wood stove in the house, so I went and got some wood and brought it home.

Then there was a lot of sawdust that cave in and that didn't burn. So we dig in that, and we find there was a hardwood floor, so we thought that that would be good, like making the roof of our camp, I called that a camp, but a hen house or a chicken. And so we fixed that up. And then the bottom, we put a sub floor, then we put, they had some tin barrels at the Bleachery, I think they use it for caustic, so we took that apart and straightened it out and put that on the floor. Then we put another floor of maple hardwood that would, we put the best we could, you know. And the roof was the same thing, we put the hardwood for the roof because we found a good size floor out there, it was in an office, I guess, and put that tin on top. And it was not like an ordinary house, it was like a box. We put it, and it went like this. It was not with, I don't know how you call that, over, the roof was not an over, was just like a box.

And there was a place on Oxford Street where they had a lot of window, and we went and find out that we could have a window for twenty cent, a huge, bigger than that, but a little, so we brought the, we find some money to get the window and we brought it there and made the opening. And then we had to put some screen, so, and bar, steel, you know, pipe, that we flatten the end so we could make a hole and put a nail. And we put the bar to protect, make it harder if somebody want to get in.

Then we had a chicken coop, so they couldn't get in close to the window, you know, they have an idea of breaking or something. And we left the chicken coop, although we didn't have any more chicken, but that was a protection so they couldn't get. But the mistake we made is we put the door on the corner, and a person with a bar could move the two-by-four, the whole, so that the spring lock, the door would open. So that's how they got to steal the chicken. We made a mistake.

So I pass most of my time doing that. Then later I was reading, I think it was a salesman magazine they call it, there was a lot of job that you could make. Like I had one going from store to store, and display like a razor blade, there'd be a display of razor blade, and the could hang this on, anywhere in the store. And I got some nuts, too, like in a beer, barroom, beer joint there, I had a metal, a holder, you could put different kinds of little bag of nuts, and it turned on itself so you, it was easier for a customer to find out what they gonna have. And I didn't sell much, but.

And at one place, I got gypped. I was showing the men some of the thing that I had with me, and he said, leave this there and come in back. Looks like he wanted to talk. Then when I went back, I'm not sure now if I look for what I left, or if I forgot to. Anyway, I find out that I was short of a display razor blade. And I went and, he didn't know what was, he didn't see anything. And so I got gypped of a dollar, because it was worth a dollar, ten cents, a little package of razor blade. I remember the name, Famous.

But it was more like a pastime than -.

I saw a fella that had two stores later in life, and he had a variety of stuff, like you find in five and ten or something. And he did that for a living, but I was, I was interested in getting it big, but I didn't get it big, I quit and went to work in the mill.

AL: Now, how old were you when you started working at the mill?

EL: I don't know if I was nineteen?

AL: And which mill was it?

EL: The Bates, and which room was when I started, I can't, oh, I know now, before they put the material to weave they have to make a big warp, or make a spool. Well, I was working in that room. And I left school, I was going to Robert Business School that they had, and I went to work I think two weeks, a fella broke his leg, and he was a boss, so they took the one that was doing the job I had on the third shift, and they put me on the third shift. And they, the fella enough I guess to do the boss job, fill the order and all that. Then I didn't stay. Something happened, I don't know if he came back.

And not long after that I was called back again, so I worked a little longer that time until they, they move the room, they change it, bought some new machine I suppose, and they change the way that they were working. And I went out for that time, and I work in a shoe shop, and one time somebody offer a job my brother, and they find out after that he was going back to school, and they wouldn't give him the job. So I told my brother, you go and work, I was, at the women's shoes there, the, for the heel, the inner sole, they split it. And it's one piece, and they split it, only that, and they glue it and come to the heel. And I was getting that rough, or whatever little job. I had to buff, I had to buff big cases before. I think I was the first one to, when they open a package of, they buy that from somewhere else, I used to put that in that machine and buff it. It was a roll about that.

And so he said that he'll try to get that job, and I told that to the fella that I was working with, so he had a friend and he went ahead and asked the boss, which I didn't, I guess I didn't hardly know the boss, and he got the job and my brother was left without a job. So during that time I was working, I took the job at the Bates there, that was, I can't think what, I think, yeah, that was rayon weave, I was working in the rayon weave.

And I don't know what the first job I had, but there was a job, every time they weave a certain roll of the rayon, they cut it and I had to clean the reed, you know, and there was some little lint that got stuck on some, you know, some dust there accumulate, and it got caught in a thread, on the yarn, and I took off the reed and it was all full of thread that goes, and I back it up and I put all the harness, I put the, that together, and put the screwdriver to hold it temporarily, and I have the little brush, brought that closer, and then with the reed there, I lift it up and the, all the stuff, the waste, it went through and if some of it didn't go I helped push it through. Then I put the reed back in place.

And, oh, I had a can of cleaner that would take off the rust, you know, if the reed would get rusty it made a, made some lint, unwanted. So I put it back, and they go back and weave, and when they were ready, they had woven some long enough there to go on the roll there, they take it off, and there's a man that does that job, he take it off and put another roll to roll the woven thing on it.

And so I was done for that job, and a way to, the thing is that I had a lot of time on my hand, and sometime I would see a boss talking with another, and it looks like they were talking about me, I was just waiting. And they, the weaver would have an idea, if I didn't have any work where I was, well they could look and sometimes they just wave at me or, I would go.

Oh, I come back to the time that I had a friend that, he had a job that, the store was going to close. So he found a job at the *Messager*, the French paper there, so he took that job. And I said to my brother, said, maybe I could go and ask them if they had an opening for a fella, just temporary until they really close the door. They were going to close, but they were selling merchandise until the day that they were going to close the door.

So my brother, during that time he had a job at LaVerdiere –

AL: The drug store?

EL: Yeah, and it was the same thing, LaVerdiere was going out, and so I say, I'll go and find, to work part time at that, I don't remember the name, that store, and then I'll make an excuse so you can come in and you have a little experience, you work at LaVerdiere, which it was going to close. It was on Main Street. And so that worked fine, he got the job. And so, I don't know what happened after that, I can't think of it.

AL: Now, at some point you were at the mill as a carpenter.

EL: Oh yeah, that's -

AL: That's the job you held for most of the years?

EL: Oh, I don't think so, but the last part of it. You see, I work that time like where they made warp, and I work on the night shift. I don't know, maybe two or three months, I don't know what, I didn't work long. Then when I went back to take the job of, my brother couldn't get because he was going to school, I got a job in the weave room and that's where I started, and I work on that little job that I clean the reed there. Then they had a opening for people to learn to tie, from the weaving machine to the new warp that they put in, they did that by hand.

They take a, they fix it, so they're sitting down, and this is the loom, and this is the warp, the roll. And you take just a little bit of hand, there, and you make a knot and you put that like a, what they call a thing there, the, a harmonica, you know?

AL: Oh, harmonica?

EL: Is that what it is? There's a little string that you, your piece of metal to your lip, and the little space, spring that you push with the, oh, harmonica is the word. Oh, that's not, that's another. I'll make one, it's made like this, and up here there's a, you, well I can't make it, but you put your mouth here, and this piece is loose and it's tied here, and it's flat, and up here there's a little thing there, and you move it. You never saw that?
[Ernest is describing a "Jew's Harp", sometimes also called a "mouth organ"]

AL: No, I'm going to have to ask one of my musical friends to tell me what's that called. That's neat. Oh, wow.

EL: And, well we have, but they hold it, we have a piece of metal about that shape, and this would be hooked to your shirt or your belt, I don't know, and you would take about this, you know, the end goes this way, we'll say you take about this much and you make a knot, and you push it in there and it, this one is closed, it hold, because the knot is underneath it, and this is a flat, like my finger, and it, you take the first hand and you do the same thing on the other side, and you bring it up here and you can put some powder to help, and you pull it and you twist it at the same time you break it, you break it, pull it out and up, and you twist it. It's not a very good knot to tie, but that's the way. And you go, and as you come along you back up to get some more. It was a long, a long process to tie.

AL: Yes, so you learned that when it was new.

EL: I was going to learn that, and they got a machine. So they asked me if I, because I asked to learn the hand tying, and so I was put on the second shift doing the machine. Then, the machine was not electric then, you had to turn the wheel to make it, and it make a figure eight knot, they call, and it cut it when the knot was done. There was some little scissors that, just about that big I guess, that, the cutting and the holding, there was a holding and cutting, and it twist to make the knot. So when you put that, you put the warp, or a new one on the weaving, and you put a comb they called, with all the end that goes in it, and you put, on the comb you put a stick, you close it there with the glue. And the loom itself, it's all loose when you fix it, the machine, you do it in three. The loom was not, we'll say, compared to this it was this wide, the weaving. It was rayon like they use in casket, you know. So I learned that and I did it for a while and -

AL: Can I ask you something? Was that at the Bates Mill or the Hill Mill?

EL: That was at the Bates Mill. And when I told you that they change the machine, all that, I didn't remember but that was for the weaving machine that they were bringing, the 500 weaving machine that they, well, they called it Number Three weave. And that, I stayed there until the closed, and I would help when, we'll say that it was five or six weaver for the 500 loom, well they let some weaver go out, when they were closing, and they tried to get the weaving concentric, close together, so that they wouldn't have to walk for nothing. So I had some work, they took off some looms that were, where they were closing at the other one, and they, when there was room in that section, the one that they closed there, I would transfer it, I would tie it, so that they can finish weaving it. And that's when that weaving closed. And the year I don't know.

AL: Now, you were like about twenty-five years old when WWII started.

EL: Yup.

AL: Did you, were you able to stay at the mill and work, or did you go to the, go to war?

EL: I went to Africa, Italy.

AL: And what branch of the service?

EL: Medical.

AL: In the Army?

EL: Yeah, and evacuation hospital, hospital up on the, in the field there. And sometimes we were lucky, we had buildings, but we didn't stay long. We had tents.

AL: Now, during the years that you worked in the mill, did you ever get involved in some of the social activities, like bowling or the hockey team?

EL: No, no, I don't think so. The only thing that was different from other people there, it was the way I had to work. I would work on the second shift, and I go in at three o'clock, and I look at the board where they put our work, you know, to, so they have their turn as, the weaver stop a loom to put another warp on, they go and mark it, and while the, if there's some work, I would go and do it. And if there was no work, and there'll be one, we'll say, at six o'clock maybe, about, and that would be the only one until eight o'clock or something, well, I would go after eight, so I can do that one, and if there's some other one coming out. And sometime I would go, I think it's nine o'clock the last, the latest I go. Anyway, I would

stay sometime all night, and we'll say, four o'clock, we'll say, in the morning, I go home. There was no more work.

The next day I come in, there's a lot of work, and I work four hours the night before. Well, what I did after midnight counts for the next day, so when I go in, if I have work I work four hours, I can work only four more hours, because we'd have to be paid time and a half. So I would have to go home, even if there's work. So that's, that was a catch. And that made my life different than others, because I never knew if I would be sleeping or if I would be working.

AL: Hold on, let me turn the tape over.

End of Side A
Side B

AL: We are now on Side B. And, talk to me about what your thoughts were about working in the mill all those years. Did you enjoy working in the mill?

EL: Yes.

AL: Some of the things you liked? And what were some of the things you didn't like?

EL: I guess I got used to, and the, I was piece work and that kind of push me to do things fast. Like, I would work four hours and my shirt would be all wet, I had another shirt to put on, I go and eat a little, and I kind of fix myself to the job. It's different than another job where you go and work eight hours and, every day you know when you go in and you know when you go out. But I got to be, and the pay, most of the time was pretty good for there. It was more than a weaver, piece work. And the thing is that when they had a fine yarn, they could put more yard on the beam, and I didn't have as much work. Then when they had the bigger yarn, I had more work. And if they, when, at first I didn't change the warp on the loom, there was a person doing that, and we had enough work I guess.

But after, when I came back from the service, I don't know if I had that by myself. I think when I came back, I don't know if I did it right away, the two job. It take as much time, the one job as the other, but you got paid less doing the job of helping changeover. So it didn't, and if I, if I had some work I could leave some changeover, there, because I was in the mill, it helped to produce more, and at the same time I don't waste any time so I'll have only the tying that pay a little more. So I just mark that I had, like if I get in, the fella is working on tying and he has another one ready to work, so when the shift change I go to tying right away, the other one there, fix one up.

AL: What was the air quality like in the mill?

EL: It's humid. They have sprinkler that gives a certain humidity. And the noise is not as, the other, where they made the sheet, it take more power to go from one end to the other, so it make more noise. When it hit the other end there, it make a noise, and the metal, too, there's a ball there that shoot the pick, it make, to me it make more noise. But it's noisy.

AL: Can you talk about injuries that happened at the mill, did people get hurt often on the machines?

EL: Not often. I got hurt one time.

AL: What happened?

EL: That was weaving, I mean carpenter, that was, a fella wanted a piece, he had a sample of wood and he wanted to, a piece of that, we'll say about that long. And, but I say that I have some I can give

him that's already made there, I just have to cut the length. Oh, no, I want that one. So I go, I don't know what I did, but I guess in the first place I didn't fix the saw so that it be high, or maybe it was a little higher, I don't know what I did. And I just put the piece of wood, and one of it fly away and my hand went in and the three finger, this one it don't show, but this one is, and the nail. And they work, they doctor did that in the mill office. I didn't go to the hospital.

AL: No, not the hospital, they did it all right there.

EL: Yeah, well they had a nurse all the time, and if the doctor was not there they called him, and I suppose he was available most of the time. So, some other one, he got hurt, too, but I can't remember.

AL: That's okay. Are there any stories that happened at the mills that stick out in your mind, during the time you worked? Or anything I haven't asked you that you think is important to add?

EL: You got me there, eh?

AL: I just don't want to miss anything about your memories and experiences.

EL: Some, well, more I think, more I get -.

AL: Now, did you have children as well?

EL: Yeah.

AL: How many did you have?

EL: I have three boy, that's my wife there, she died a year ago. There's some children, they're all there.

AL: So you had three sons, and any daughters?

EL: No, that's it.

AL: Three boys, okay.

EL: Yup, that's it. There's one, this one, he owned Paint Plus, it's a store where they sell carpet, on Hampshire Street, you know? He's the youngest son. The other one, and that's his younger daughter, that's his older daughter.

AL: Well great, thank you very much.

End of Interview
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