

**MILL WORKERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
LEWISTON-AUBURN, MAINE**

Noel Morrell
(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

MWOH# 030
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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the Mill Workers Oral History project. The date is March 9th, 2006. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and this afternoon I'm interviewing Noel Morrell at his home on King Avenue in Lewiston, Maine. Could you start just by saying your full name?

Noel Morrell: Noel Richard Morrell.

AL: And when were you born?

NM: December the 25th, 1928.

AL: A Christmas baby.

NM: Right.

AL: And where were you born?

NM: In Waterville, Maine.

AL: Is that where you grew up?

NM: No, I grew up here in Lewiston.

AL: Okay, your parents from Waterville, or where were they from?

NM: Well, they were Aroostook County, and they moved here to Lewiston and Auburn. My grandfather was a paper and wallpaper hanger, so my mother and my father, actually it's stepfather, were here also. I was brought up here, gone to school here.

AL: And what was Lewiston like at the time you were growing up in the '30s and '40s?

NM: Oh, they had quite a few people from Canada, oh gee, they had trainloads come down on Lincoln. Lincoln Street, there's a truck, you know, I don't know how many people got off. They had housing on Canal Street, big apartment buildings. The only bad thing was they all had to share one bathroom. Oh yeah, on one floor. But they hired in, they come down, they were guaranteed a job.

But here's the thing, in my opinion, the company paid them and then they in turn had to pay the company back for the rent, so they didn't lose anything. But it was nice, it had nice people, the people were very nice.

AL: Is that the area that you lived in?

NM: No, I lived on Blake Street at one time, and then I moved onto Oak Street in Lewiston.

AL: And what did your parents do for work?

NM: Well, my mother was working at the St. Mary's hospital, in the nursing quarters. She was like a chambermaid, and for years she was there. I hate to say it, but she asked for a raise, I told her, I says, hey, you been working there over five or ten years, I forget what it was, I said, you're entitled to a little extra, I believe. So they fired her. Oh yeah, the nuns were running it and so they said, I'm sorry, but you're not worth it, and all this and that. She was a deaf mute and she only had one arm so she was handicapped, but they were good enough to hire her. But a doctor put in a word for her, Dr. Gaudreau, and that's how come she was working there.

AL: So, now when did you go into the mill?

NM: Oh, shoot, I got out in 1952, I must have went in there in 1952 and I, well, I was home on a sick leave and they called me up and says I was all done. But they were dismantling the mills, eventually they closed down. Two Chinese men -

AL: The Tang brothers.

NM: Right, what they did when they bought it they were bleeding it, so the bled it all for what it was worth and then they closed the doors and that was it.

AL: And that was in the '90s?

NM: Yeah, I think so, in the '90s.

AL: So you said you said you started working at the mill in 1952?

NM: I got out in '52, yeah, I would say at least '52.

AL: And what did you do at the mill?

NM: I was running an offset press, 11/15, that's the measurement of the press, printing press. And Dick Ricker was my supervisor, I know, he was there, then also Lou Thompson, he's gone now, but he had a heart problem, but he was in the one on Locust Street, then they transferred him up to where I am, and so I was working on Canal Street and he stayed with me and we worked for, oh, a few years, and then he passed on. Well, when they closed the mill he was out, I was out. But he retired before they closed the mill, so he was lucky.

But to him it was an investment. In other words, he could draw Medicare, not Medicare, Social Security retirement so, you know, he didn't lose anything, but he figured it was cheaper to do that rather than to work through. And then, you know, get bounced out or whatever like I did. But I don't regret it, they treated me decent, Dick Ricker treated me decent. I got all of my holiday pay, I got my sick leave, vacation pay, two weeks I think. Well, wait a minute, I had three weeks, because the number of years, you had more vacation to you. I got that. But I was satisfied with it, at least, you know, it was better than nothing. So I got that and that was it.

AL: So tell me about your job, what did it involve?

NM: I was printing forms, in plant printing forms. You know, different departments in the mill, the Bates Division now, not the one on Locust Street, had different forms you had to fill out, in the office they had different forms. Well, I reproduced, made reproductions, and a lot of times they come up with a new form, you could put that on a press. Oh yeah, big equipment.

AL: Now, Bates also put out publications, like *The Spinner*. Did you -?

NM: No, I didn't have anything to do with that. They went to Twin City Printery I think, or someplace else, I'm not sure where. But I just, strictly the forms is what we did, me and Lou Thompson. That was a good number of years ago.

AL: Now, I understand over the years they had different social activities associated with the mill?

NM: Oh yeah, they'd have a party, ten year awards for people that, employees that had been there at least ten years, you'd get an award, you'd get a small little pin. But at one time, though, they were giving out nice watches, but that was for thirty or forty years or something like that, it was a good number of years. Then they did away with that because they were closing down I guess, you know, the finances wasn't coming in and so they didn't want to lose out.

AL: I understand they had a hockey team, and -?

NM: Yeah, Bates Mill had a hockey, right, you're right. But they only had it for a few years and then they just disbanded because there wasn't enough interest. But they had it on, next to St. Peter's School, there was a yard there, it was open, open air more or less. Then they finally disbanded and that was it. And then they, we used to have a bowling league, the Bates Mill.

AL: Did you participate in that?

NM: Oh yeah, I love bowling so, candlepin bowling on Canal Street, right on the corner there of Canal and what is it, next to the post office, the one on the post office street, well right on the corner there they had a bowling alley and everything. And we used to have a league going every year. We did it for a few years. Oh yeah, it was a lot of fun.

AL: Did you get to meet people that worked at the mill that you didn't really work with day to day?

NM: No, yeah, the people on the bowling team were people that worked in the mill but in different departments, so we didn't know who they were, you know, somebody just signed up and then at the end of the year you'd have a banquet and then you'd have a trophy, you know. They spent the money that we drew in, we paid, you paid so much for a string and so much for the membership, you know, and at the end of the year everybody was awarded a prize. It was good.

AL: You mentioned Dick Ricker that you worked with, and Lou Thompson.

NM: Right, Lou Thompson and I were employees. Dick Ricker was a supervisor.

AL: Right, right. Were there others that you worked with at the mill?

NM: Lebel, he was a short little man. He was a tremendous football player in high school. He became president, and then president, I guess he was still president when they disbanded the mill.

AL: Fred Lebel?

NM: Fred Lebel. He could really run, and he was hard to stop. I can remember seeing him when he was back in high school, and after that he got promoted and promoted and eventually, oh yeah. He offered me a job as a supervisor in one of the mills on, the Bleachery Mill. I don't know what it was, but I said, no, I didn't want to take because I, you know, I have an idea (*unintelligible phrase*) and I wouldn't like it. I liked printing and I liked what I was doing.

AL: So did the office in New York ever contact you for -?

NM: For anything? No. They did, I had a supervisor, oh shoot, what's the hell, I can't remember his name, he was a supervisor for a good number of years. He graduated college, went to WWII, he came back and, he was a go-getter. He didn't, he asked for a raise locally, you know, at the Division, and they wouldn't give it to him. So he went and he got a hold of somebody in New York, went over their head, and he finally got what he wanted. But he was all right, but I'll never forget it, though, he says, oh yeah? So he went over to New York, and he knew somebody down there. Well, he originally was from New York, I think, or he'd been there a few years so he knew his way around and then he knew the company, and he's met these big boys, you know, the president, vice president and all that. So he finagled his way in.

AL: Do you recall any strikes at the mill?

NM: Yeah, there was one strike, and I worked in the office and it was, you had, they couldn't stop you from going in. But oh yeah, it was a big deal, but we were nonunion. In other words, I worked in the office, and I worked for the Bates Mill but I had no connections with any FIL [*sic*], the CIO or whatever, so we used to cross the line back. And it didn't last too long, they settled right after that. And I think it was, they were asking for an increase in the wage, and I think they were asking for health benefits, and so the package passed through and it was all right, no problem after that.

AL: Is there anything I haven't asked you about your time in the mills that you think is important to talk about?

NM: Yeah, one time I was working overtime. Listen to this, I was working overtime in my department, so after everybody had gone home, the boss, Ricker and everybody else left, so I worked and I put in my hours, and I was getting ready to go home. But the night watchman came through and he saw me, and well, you know, we knew each other, working, but he locked the door in back of me. In other words, when he went out he locked the door, which he was supposed to do, but I was still in, I had no key. So I had to go out through the window. So I went out through the window, I figured a way out, so I went out through the window and I went and told him at the gate. He says, oh yeah?

The next time, the next day I came back in to work, the screen was on the window so I couldn't get through. I said, you son-of-a-gun. He says, well, I was supposed to do that. I says, yeah, but you didn't lock, if you hadn't locked the door I could have got out, I says, next time, I don't have the key. So they (*unintelligible word*), right below us was a lot of bedspreads in boxes, cartons, all lined up, in different styles and everything, price and everything, and so that's why they locked the door, to make sure that nobody walked off with some of it. So I got mad at him and I told him, you son-of-a-gun. He shouldn't have locked it. But he wasn't thinking, you know, it's one of those things. But I had to figure a way to get out.

My wife thought I was out drinking or something, she called the police department, he hasn't showed up, (*unintelligible phrase*). And the cop says, well wait a minute, are you sure? Yeah. He didn't stop for a beer? No, he never done that. And so apparently when I showed up she says, well, I called, I says, for crying out loud, call him back up and tell him I'm home. So she called him back, and he says, what did I tell you? He started laughing, he says, it's all right, ma'am. Oh boy, that was something.

AL: Now, how, when did you retire, or stop working at the mill?

NM: Well, I stopped working at the mill, what, Mom (*calling to his wife*), come here. My memory's gone, I had a stroke on the right side and since then I, when did I stop working at the mill? Oh, no, when I stopped working. Yeah, when they fired, not fired me, they laid me off, they were doing away -. Nineteen something, because I was working at the jail after that.

Mrs. Morrell: Eighty-five? Eighty-three, in '83 your mother was (*unintelligible phrase*).

NM: Right, but she was eight, ten years there, so, yeah, about '83. Then I went from there, I had a hard time at my age, I was over fifty, trying to retire, get working so I could get retirement.

Mrs. Morrell: But there are a lot of places you could have taken to court, because they said because of your health. He never was sick, never in his life.

NM: Pioneer Plastic was what she's talking about.

Mrs. Morrell: Not only Pioneer Plastic. The one on -

NM: Oh yeah, down on, oh.

Mrs. Morrell: Lisbon Road, there, the old Lisbon Road, it's closed now, there's another place. And there was three place, they refused you.

NM: Yeah, because of my age.

Mrs. Morrell: Because he was fifty-nine years old.

NM: I was over skilled, over skilled in that particular line so they wouldn't hire me for anything. I don't know, and the employment office was on Lisbon Street at the time, and the guy started giving me a hard time because I couldn't find a job. I says, look, they won't hire me because of my age. I'm ready to retire, close to it, I had only, what, five or -

Mrs. Morrell: He was fifty-nine, yeah, you were fifty-nine then. And then you went to work for Wards and they closed down.

NM: They closed down (*unintelligible phrase*).

Mrs. Morrell: And then he didn't have a job.

NM: But then I went to (*unintelligible word*).

Mrs. Morrell: So then he, my cousin is a sheriff, Lonnie Gagne, that's my cousin, so he says -

NM: I went to work for him.

Mrs. Morrell: . . . you were in the Marines? You got experience, he says.

NM: As an MP, you know, the police, policemen, yes.

Mrs. Morrell: So he was hired there until, for six years, and then he retired, which is '93, you retired, yeah.

NM: Right, so that's the end of that one.

AL: So you didn't, you weren't at the mill at the very end when it, but you were there when they started downsizing a lot.

NM: Oh yeah, downsizing, oh yes. I wasn't the only one, there was a lot of other people that got

downsized. But that was because of the two Chinese guys, they gradually bled, started bleeding it out.

AL: And I'm interested because the Tang brothers bought the mill after the employees tried to -

NM: Buy it out.

AL: Buy it themselves?

NM: Right.

AL: Now, did you participate in that?

NM: No, I was let go before, I was home on sick leave. They called me in and says, you're all done. Basically, I mean, what it was, I went back and pick up my personal things that I had, and so that was it.

AL: Now, when you were growing up in Lewiston, how large was your family?

NM: I was the only one, no brothers, no sis, no.

AL: And what is your wife's name?

NM: Elizabeth, Elizabeth Ann.

AL: And her maiden name?

NM: *(Unintelligible phrase).*

AL: So she, did she grow up in Lewiston?

NM: No, she was born in Canada but she came here, and then I met her and, a good number of years together and, well, we finally got married.

AL: Well great, thank you very much.

*End of Interview
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